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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 1 February 2023

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:59]

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is portfolio question time. The first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. As ever, if members wish to ask a supplementary question, I invite them to press their request-to-speak button—or, if they are joining us remotely, to place “RTS” in the chat function—during the relevant question.

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill

1. Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any assessment it has made of the potential impact on Scotland’s relations with its closest European neighbours, including regarding trade links, of the United Kingdom Government’s Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. (S6O-01836)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): The Scottish ministers remain fundamentally opposed to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which aims to deliver the UK Government’s divergent and deregulatory agenda with respect to the European Union. The UK Government has not shared which of the EU laws it intends to reform, repeal or preserve, and its own impact assessment has been branded by the Regulatory Policy Committee as “not fit for purpose”.

European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič said at the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in November last year:

“divergence means more friction and less trade—simple as that.”

We know that trade with our neighbours is growing at a slower rate due to Brexit, with businesses now facing an array of different obligations to sell into international markets. The bill risks adding to that burden and leading to a lack of the business certainty that is needed in order to work, plan and trade effectively.

Jim Fairlie: We have just passed the three-year anniversary of Brexit, and it is clear that those three years have brought nothing but chaos to Scotland’s economy. The Tories’ Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is set to make things worse and hurt Scottish producers and consumers. What action is the Scottish Government taking to cushion the blow of the so-called “Brexit freedoms” for our society?

Neil Gray: The Scottish Government is working at pace to identify devolved retained EU law and to co-ordinate the effective and consistent management of the secondary legislation that will be necessary to stop essential devolved laws being lost should the bill pass. However, that is a significant undertaking, and it impacts on officials’ ability to dedicate time to otherwise urgent issues that affect the people of Scotland, such as the energy and cost of living crisis.

The bill should be withdrawn completely. The Scottish Government has recommended that the Scottish Parliament refuse consent to it, and the Scottish Parliament has also called for it to be scrapped. Stakeholders from the various sectors say the same.

The Scottish ministers will do whatever we can to protect Scotland from the UK Government’s damaging deregulatory policy agenda, but legislation such as the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 demonstrate the limitations of devolution in the face of a UK Government that is determined to undermine it. The best way to limit the damage to our economy and to our society is by Scotland becoming independent and a member of the EU.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I was going to say that I agree with everything that the minister said—until his last few words. Nevertheless, I think that he is right about the damage that the UK Government is doing to the economy, industry and our way of life.

Has the minister done any assessment of the parallels with independence? I have asked that question repeatedly, but I have been unable to get an answer. We are still feeling the consequences of breaking up the European Union, which we were in for 50 years. We have been in the United Kingdom union for 300 years, so breaking that up would be much harder. Has the minister done any assessment of what that impact would be?

Neil Gray: The opportunities of independence are absolutely clear, and they are laid out in the various policy papers that we have started to set out and will continue to set out. As I have offered to Willie Rennie and others on previous occasions, I would be more than happy to sit down and have

a conversation about the benefits that will come to Scotland from independence and rejoining the EU.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn, and question 3 was not lodged.

Scottish Government Meetings with European Delegates

4. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what was discussed in official meetings that took place on 4 October 2022 between the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture and various European delegates. (S6O-01839)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Details of Angus Robertson's visit to Paris last autumn have already been published on the Scottish Government's website. The visit, which included the unveiling of a plaque at Les Invalides to commemorate Scots who have lost their lives fighting in France, involved meetings and engagements with a range of French ministers, partners and stakeholders to pursue and augment a range of policy, cultural and trade and investment priorities.

Liam Kerr: I have a response to a freedom of information request that reveals that one of the things that were discussed during those meetings with the European delegates on 4 October was the claim repeated by the cabinet secretary that Scotland has 25 per cent of Europe's offshore wind potential. In the absence of the cabinet secretary today, can the minister tell me when officials first advised the cabinet secretary against using the 25 per cent claim, on the basis that it was poorly evidenced?

Neil Gray: Obviously, I was not at the meeting that Liam Kerr has spoken about, so I do not know about the veracity of that, or, indeed, the context of the conversation. I do know that Angus Robertson met Secretary of State Boone and that she was interested in Scotland's energy offer and how we promote further engagement around sport. He also met Secretary of State Mirallès, who is eager to explore ways in which we include young people in remembering those who have died in times of war.

If Liam Kerr wants further information on that, I would be more than happy for my colleagues to look to have a discussion with him at another time to ensure that he has confidence in that scenario.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): As a committed European, I am reassured that the Scottish Government continues to value the importance of our relationships with our European Union neighbours. What next steps is the Government taking to continue the closest

possible relationship with the European Union over the coming year?

Neil Gray: I thank Fiona Hyslop for that important question. Maintaining close relations with the European Union, EU member states and other European nations remains a key priority for the Government. We are committed to working with EU partners to support and deliver the priorities of the EU presidencies, including the current Swedish presidency. We are also committed to continuing to align with the EU where appropriate and as far as possible, and in a manner that contributes towards protecting and advancing standards across a range of policy areas.

We have been steadfast in our determination not to allow Brexit or the United Kingdom Government to diminish those commitments. We will continue to do all that we can to be an outward-looking nation, holding firm to our shared European values, pursuing shared goals and priorities.

Levelling Up Fund (Culture Organisations)

5. Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on culture organisations in Scotland of the United Kingdom Government levelling up funding. (S6O-01840)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Although the funding that has been received by individual projects is welcome, the Scottish Government fundamentally disagrees with the principle of the UK Government making decisions in devolved areas. Levelling up was supposed to replace European Union support but has fallen drastically short.

The levelling up fund operates in Scotland using the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which means that it cuts across devolved policy. It is administered in a piecemeal manner that is not always in line with the Scottish Government's wider strategic aims, creating fragmentation and confusion for our local authorities and partner agencies.

Siobhian Brown: I, of course, welcome any funding that has been given to Scottish organisations, but I agree that this is a matter for the Scottish Government, as the UK Government does not appear to even know what "levelling up" means. Has the Scottish Government received any clarity from the UK Government on what the regulations are for the levelling up fund and on how it foresees them impacting devolved issues?

Neil Gray: No. The fund overlooks Scotland's unique economic needs. It is incredibly

disappointing that applications from some of Scotland's most deprived areas have been unsuccessful, and that our rural communities have also lost out.

The UK Government promised that Brexit would bring a simpler, more streamlined funding system to support regional economic development. Thus far, the new system delivers less money for projects, decreased powers for devolved Governments and more bureaucracy and delays for regional partners.

In bypassing the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom Government has introduced policy incoherence and duplication into the devolved system. It is failing to ensure that its interventions align with regeneration policy here in Scotland.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The question was about the impact on culture organisations in Scotland. When it comes to the actions of the Scottish Government, the real danger to the future of cultural organisations in Scotland is, of course, the Scottish National Party-Green Government's 10 per cent cut to Creative Scotland's budget, which endangers the future of 60 of our cultural organisations and 5,000 jobs. Will the minister now reconsider those planned cuts to Creative Scotland's budget?

Neil Gray: The major threat to cultural institutions in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK is the UK Government cutting back on the Covid recovery funding and not getting a grip on inflation and spiralling energy costs, and Brexit, which is making it more difficult for our organisations to be able to recruit the talent that they need. That is not just an isolated issue here in Scotland; it was raised at Prime Minister's question time today, when a Conservative member of Parliament questioned the Prime Minister about cultural organisations and spending in England. I will therefore take no lessons from the Conservatives about how to run cultural organisations in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged.

Census 2022

7. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when it will start publishing information collected via Scotland's census 2022. (S6O-01842)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): National Records of Scotland is currently consulting data users to ensure that census outputs are accessible and

provided in a format that meets the needs of census data users. The consultation was made available to users on 12 October 2022 and, since launching, National Records of Scotland has received responses from users in central and local government, academic institutions and charity organisations as well as users responding in a personal capacity.

Once the consultation closes, NRS will review all responses and finalise plans for publishing census outputs based on the feedback received. A summary report will subsequently be published on the Scotland's census website. Census data collection phases concluded in the autumn. As previously noted, NRS plans to publish the first census outputs approximately one year after conclusion of the census data collection phases. The first outputs will be rounded population estimates at national and local authority level, by age and sex.

Edward Mountain: As a veteran, I welcome the fact that last year's census included for the first time a question on former service in the armed forces. What action will National Records of Scotland take to assess and publish that specific information and how will the Government use it to fulfil its obligations under the armed forces covenant?

Neil Gray: Obviously, we will look at the information that comes through the census, as would be expected, and across Government we will assess that data. In respect of the armed forces, I know that my colleague to my right, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, will look at that with keen interest.

Creative Scotland

8. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting Creative Scotland. (S6O-01843)

I note my entry in the register of members' interests regarding the Barn at Woodend, Banchory.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Creative Scotland, as a public body, receives significant support from the Scottish Government. The published level 3 budget for 2023-24 includes £64.2 million for Creative Scotland and other arts. That covers support for regularly funded organisations, youth music and community-based culture projects. The Scottish Government will continue to work with Creative Scotland to identify barriers to immediate and long-term recovery of the culture sector.

Alexander Burnett: Creative Scotland has been forced to use its United Kingdom national

lottery reserves to maintain regular funding, following Scottish National Party cuts. Angus Robertson justified the use of reserves by saying that the Scottish Government faces difficult funding decisions. However, in a letter to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee last month, he insisted that the Scottish Government

“does not make funding allocation decisions by reference to reserves.”

Which is it? Can the minister confirm what will happen when the reserves are bled dry and organisations are left without long-term support? Those organisations include Deveron Projects in my constituency, which recently wrote to the Scottish Government detailing the real impact that these devastating cuts will have on its future.

Neil Gray: Deveron Projects received £110,000 via that route recently. We understand the difficult situation across the culture sector. There is an inflationary challenge, which is also being felt by the Scottish Government, and we have had to take difficult decisions. We feel that it was the right thing to do to ask Creative Scotland to utilise its national lottery reserves this year, as that will maintain regularly funded organisations' funding.

The discussion at the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee regarding the use of reserves was about the funding of arts organisations, as opposed to public bodies. The situation regarding Creative Scotland as a public funder is different. We have provided Creative Scotland with more than £33 million over five years to compensate for generally reduced lottery funding. However, against the backdrop of continued impacts of Covid, public spending constraints and the cost of living crisis, we have had to make difficult choices to live within budgets. We are doing all that we can to protect Scotland's culture and historic environment to ensure that our diverse and world-class cultural scene and rich heritage continue to thrive.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's continued support for our creative industries during a turbulent economic time. Can the minister tell us what the financial impact is of the UK Government's decision to end Covid recovery funding abruptly? Does he agree that that has placed an additional unwarranted strain on Scotland's creative sector?

Neil Gray: I agree that many of the difficulties that are facing the creative sector are as a result of the UK Government prematurely cutting Covid recovery funding, despite the Scottish Government warning against that action. We will continue to argue that the UK Government should take a different approach to public finances in order to

ensure that sufficient support is made available to Scotland's cultural sector.

However, the challenges that we face are not unique to Scotland. As I have said, we heard at Prime Minister's questions today that Conservative members have concerns about cultural organisations and spending in England. We would encourage the UK Government to come forward with the support that is necessary and required for cultural organisations so that the Scottish Government is, in turn, able to do likewise and support our fantastic cultural heritage organisations to a much greater extent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture.

Justice and Veterans

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is justice and veterans. I encourage members who wish to ask a supplementary to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question, or to type “RTS” in the chat function if they are joining us online.

Legal Aid Fees

1. **Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any benefits to the structure of legal aid payments from the agreement on Scottish court legal aid fees between the Scottish Government, the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association and the Law Society. (S6O-01844)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): Legal aid fee schedules are complex and the reforms will simplify the current structures and support the court recovery programme. The changes will be implemented this April.

In solemn cases, the structure moves away from the current hybrid payment model and extends the use of inclusive or block fees, resulting in easier billing, reduced administrative costs and faster payment of accounts to solicitors. In summary cases, the reforms simplify the summary criminal fixed payment arrangements so that full payment can be achieved in the majority of cases via a single all-encompassing fee. The reforms will also reverse many of the fee changes and complexities that were introduced by regulations in 2011. In both solemn and summary cases, simplification reduces the scope for abatement of accounts and subsequent negotiation to seek additional payments.

Paul McLennan: I hope that the new structure of criminal legal aid fees will lead to swifter resolution of cases. What will the agreement do to address the backlog in court cases due to Covid?

Elena Whitham: The reform package encompasses a number of fees across solemn and summary cases. However, the Scottish Government was specifically asked to look at section 76 fees, for early resolution of solemn cases, and at the summary core fee. The average total payment in a section 76 case will increase by more than 60 per cent, and other cases that are resolved prior to trial will increase by more than 15 per cent. By supporting early resolution in appropriate cases, the reforms will reduce the number of cases for which trial diets are fixed, which will assist with the court recovery programme and tackle the backlog of cases due to Covid lockdowns.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): In response to the legal aid package that was announced by the minister, the president of the SSBA said:

“the package isn’t really going to address the fundamental issue, which is the recruitment and retention of new staff in the legal system.”

Given that we have lost about a third of the solicitors who are doing legal aid work and that 60 per cent of young solicitors are actively seeking to leave the profession, we are looking down the barrel of a recruitment crisis. What is the minister’s response to that?

Elena Whitham: I understand that representatives of the profession have spoken a lot in recent years about the increase in fees. The Scottish Government is clear that that is not the only way that we should look at the problem. I have indicated to the Faculty of Advocates that I have a keen interest in working with the entire sector to address those issues. We plan to meet with the Law Society and the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association to begin that process this week. We also have to think about widening diversity in the sector, and the Government is actively participating in and pursuing that.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It is important that solicitors are paid adequately to keep performing the important work that they do to represent people and keep the wheels of justice turning.

There is a shortage of local legal aid solicitors. In mainland Scotland, legal aid solicitors are reluctant to take on clients in Shetland, citing the current levels of legal aid funding and prohibitive travel costs. I understand that that has been the experience of some constituents who have faced domestic abuse. One constituent told me that the current legal aid system now only provides “justice you can afford”. Would the minister say whether that is justice at all, and does she recognise the problems facing those who are seeking justice and cannot afford legal representation?

Elena Whitham: I am acutely aware of that situation. Although we cannot compel individual firms or lawyers to take on legal aid work, I want to pursue that matter closely because of the nature of the issues that Beatrice Wishart has raised, including domestic abuse. I will be happy to write to the member as that unfolds.

Water Safety (Winter Period)

2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to promote safety around iced-over bodies of water during the winter period. (S6O-01845)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): Recent tragedies have illustrated how important this topic remains. The Scottish Government funds Water Safety Scotland throughout the year, winter and summer, to support and co-ordinate water safety campaigns that have been designed and delivered by our expert partners, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the Royal Life Saving Society and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. That recently included issuing clear and consistent advice about staying safe around frozen lochs and rivers. Water Safety Scotland is also working with partners to deliver an ice safety workshop, which will be delivered directly to schoolchildren, but will also be available for general use.

Fulton MacGregor: In December, everyone across the country was horrified to hear about the tragic events in Solihull during the cold weather. During the same period in my constituency, a man fell into the iced-over Monkland canal while trying to retrieve his dog. Thanks to the incredibly brave and quick actions of two young girls, Emily Deas and Lauren Campbell, all are safe. Will the minister join me in paying our respects to those who were bereaved in Solihull during such an impossibly difficult time, and praise Emily and Lauren for their selfless actions in Coatbridge in December? Can anything else be done to get as strong a message as possible out to people to never step on to an iced-over body of water?

Elena Whitham: I join Fulton MacGregor in paying my respects to those who have lost their lives, and I extend my condolences to their families and friends.

Regarding the incident at Monkland canal, I can only express my gratitude and relief that Mr MacGregor was able to report a positive outcome. I also commend Emily and Lauren for their swift actions.

Tragically, as reported by Water Safety Scotland, many past incidents have involved attempted rescues of another person or a dog that is in trouble on or in frozen water. Water Safety

Scotland and partner organisations such as the SFRS publicise expert advice and I urge people to take it on board. It centres on the warning not to venture on to frozen water. The ice might appear to be thick, but it can quickly become thin and crack. If anyone sees someone else in trouble, the recommendation is to contact emergency services quickly and try to reach the person from a stable position with something like a rope, pole or buoyancy aid.

The Scottish Government has included an additional £60,000 in this year's grant to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents to reinforce its contribution to water safety in Scotland and the support that is given to partner organisations to get that message out and promote the work of our drowning prevention strategy. On 1 March, I will chair the next meeting of the water safety stakeholder group, at which this issue will be discussed.

Crime (Pets)

3. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures are being considered to tackle crime involving pets. (S6O-01846)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government understands that crimes involving family pets can be upsetting and traumatic for the owner and the pet itself. We take all crimes, including those against pets, seriously. There are wide-ranging laws currently available in Scotland to deal with anyone who commits a crime involving a pet. Those include theft and robbery as well as a range of animal welfare offences such as animal cruelty.

We fully support law enforcement agencies taking effective enforcement action to deal with any offences involving pets as they consider necessary in any given case.

Maurice Golden: Ensuring that the law treats dogs as living beings instead of property is one of the aims of my proposed dog abduction bill. It would mean that those who abduct dogs would receive punishment based on the harm that they cause to a dog's welfare and the impact on the dog's owner, which can be considerable, given that many people regard their dog as part of their family. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that welfare-led approach is the right way to tackle dog abduction?

Keith Brown: The first thing to say is that the Scottish Government will consider Maurice Golden's proposed member's bill as and when he formally provides further detail of his plans, including if and when he introduces the bill to Parliament.

In relation to Maurice Golden's point about taking into account the welfare of the animal and—I think that he has previously made a point about this—the value of that pet to the family, there is no evidence that I am aware of that shows that courts do not take those matters into account. There is certainly no prohibition on the courts taking those matters into account.

We have a very good track record when it comes to how such cases are dealt with. Just under half of such crimes have been detected. Three years ago, the number of such crimes involving pets was 48. Two years ago, it went up to 60, but it came back down to 48 in the most recent year for which we have records. The dogs have been recovered in two thirds of those cases.

Therefore, we feel that the issue is dealt with effectively at the moment but, as I have said, we will wait to see what Maurice Golden proposes in his bill and will take a view on that at the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has not been lodged and question 5 has been withdrawn.

Police (Mental Health Training)

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what specific training is provided to help serving police officers deal with members of the public who have mental health issues. (S6O-01849)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): Police Scotland is one of the first police services in the United Kingdom to implement mental health and suicide intervention training for all officers, from probationary constables up to the rank of inspector, which benefits the workforce and the communities that they serve.

In addition, as first points of contact, staff in C3—command, control and co-ordination—division receive training in risk and vulnerability assessment, and staff who work in custody suites receive mental health awareness training.

Kenneth Gibson: An increasing number of people who come into contact with Police Scotland have mental health issues. Following on from last year's publication of "The Vision for Justice in Scotland", can the cabinet secretary update us on how the Scottish Government will also work with partners to improve the mental and physical health and wellbeing of people who come into contact with the wider criminal justice system and, indeed, of those who work within it?

Keith Brown: The Scottish Government recognises that mental health services face significant pressures and the impact that that has on other services, including policing. We are

working with partners across the health and justice sectors to address those issues. In addition, in 2023-24, we are directly investing £290 million in mental health support and services. That represents an increase of £252 million from the updated 2022-23 budget, which followed the emergency budget review. On top of that, we have provided £250,000 over three years to fund trauma specialists to develop a framework for training staff to create a more trauma-informed and trauma-responsive justice system.

I am glad that the member mentioned the issue, because it is one of the most important aspects of the justice system, although it probably gets fewer headlines. If, at the end that period, we are in a situation in which training has been undertaken by people across the justice system, in all its different agencies, and people have been informed as to how to provide a trauma-informed response, that will be one of the biggest achievements of our vision.

I have made a commitment that justice ministers will receive such training. I have already received training in that area, and I am sure that I will receive further training. We want it to be recognised, right across the system, that people who interact with the justice system will often have suffered trauma, and that we must not add to that trauma.

I thank Kenneth Gibson for his question on a very important area.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Further to Kenny Gibson's questions, Scotland's under-pressure police officers have become in some ways the de facto emergency mental health service, which can add to their own mental health pressures.

I have spoken to friends and families of officers who have taken their own lives and those who have survived suicide attempts, and they would like to know what the Scottish Government is doing to help to prevent more police suicides.

Keith Brown: I have said that the arrangements that I have mentioned are also beneficial to police officers. From previous answers that I have given in the chamber, Russell Findlay will be aware of the specific support that we provide to police officers. In addition, we are supporting the development of enhanced mental health pathways for those who are in distress or in need of mental health support. One of the pressures on police officers, as Russell Findlay rightly identified, is in knowing how best to deal with people with mental health issues when they present to the police and not to become further traumatised by that.

Action 15 of the Scottish Government's mental health strategy is a commitment to fund 800 additional mental health workers, to increase

capacity in key locations where people might need help the most, including police custody suites. By the time we have met that commitment, we expect to have 958.9 whole-time equivalent mental health posts across the piece.

We are providing additional support and capacity to police officers to help them to deal with an issue the incidence of which has, admittedly, increased over recent years, and to ensure that they are able to draw on the resources of the health service as well.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Mental health practitioners train for years. They are experts in their field. However, as has been mentioned, increasingly, we rely on police officers to help people with poor mental health, even though—despite the training that the minister has highlighted—they are not the experts. Are we not letting those police officers down by failing to have adequate services elsewhere?

The cabinet secretary mentioned the provision of 800 additional professionals to help the police service. Where are we with that? How many such professionals do we have embedded in the police service, so that they can work alongside the police to help people with mental health issues?

Keith Brown: In emergency department settings, we have 35.6 whole-time equivalent posts in police custody suites. Police Scotland has been a key national partner in the development of the innovative distress brief intervention—DBI—programme, which gives front-line services a new option for supporting people who present to them who are in emotional distress, but who do not require emergency clinical intervention.

For the member's information, as at 30 November 2022, the DBI programme had supported more than 36,000 people since its launch in 2016. Referrals to it from Police Scotland account for 9 per cent of that figure. Up to June 2022, a total of 1,238 Police Scotland staff had undertaken DBI training.

I should also mention the redesign of the urgent care programme, which is relevant in this context.

In relation to the member's question about where we are with the 800-plus figure, because that goes across a number of portfolios, I would be happy to write to him with updated information.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 comes from Stephanie Callaghan, who joins us remotely.

Electronic Monitoring (Non-violent Criminals)

7. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on expanding the use

of electronic monitoring for non-violent criminals. (S6O-01850)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): Since the Management of Offenders (Scotland) Act 2019 was passed, the Scottish Government has procured a new national contract for provision of electronic monitoring services, and we have now commenced the vast majority of the act. On 17 May 2022, through the act, we commenced two new policy uses: allowing electronic monitoring to be used as part of bail and allowing it to be used as part of community payback orders at first disposal.

Progress continues to be made towards expanding the use of electronic monitoring across a broader range of licences and community orders. In the past few months, we have seen a record high in the number of individuals who are being electronically monitored in Scotland.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the cabinet secretary for that helpful answer; it is good to hear about the progress that is being made.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that reducing the number of non-violent offenders who are imprisoned has helped to reduce disruption to children and families who are negatively impacted emotionally and financially, and that we must continue to make progress in this area?

Keith Brown: I certainly agree that shifting the balance between custody and justice in the community must be one of our key priorities. To do so, we must ensure that the relevant community justice services are available, consistent and of high quality. That reflects a discussion that I had with the Criminal Justice Committee this morning.

Although funding for community justice services is constrained by the current economic circumstances, we have continued to protect the community justice budget. Additional funding of £11.8 million was provided in 2021-22 to bolster capacity and support recovery from the pandemic. This year, that figure has increased to £15 million, which includes specific investment of £3.2 million to support bail assessment and supervision services. We are directly supporting an increase in the provision of bail supervision. Such services are now running in 30 local authority areas.

In total, we invest around £134 million in community justice services. That will be maintained next year as well.

Victims of Violent Crime (Support)

8. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it provides support to victims of violent crime in the pre-trial period. (S6O-01851)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): Victims of violent crime are supported in different ways during the pre-trial period. The Scottish Government funds a range of victim support organisations, both generally and for specific crime types. Those organisations are able to engage during that time and to provide practical and emotional support. In addition, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service provides the victim information and advice service.

Emma Roddick: The cabinet secretary will be aware that section 24(5) of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 sets out the standard conditions for bail, which include the condition that the accused

“does not behave in a manner which causes, or is likely to cause, alarm or distress to witnesses”.

Does he agree that, where the accused and the victim of a violent crime live in the same building, that condition seems impossible to fulfil, which fails victims? Will he meet me to discuss the matter further?

Keith Brown: I am happy to say that Emma Roddick raises an important issue on behalf of one of her constituents. I hope that, in turn, she will appreciate that I cannot comment on the specific decisions made in the criminal courts.

In general terms, I add that there are powers for the court to consider further conditions—as they are termed—of bail, which are designed to help compliance with the standard conditions. Further conditions can include things such as an accused person having to change address if the court deems it necessary.

In addition to that, although, as I said, I am not able to publicly comment on individual decisions taken by the courts, I am happy to meet Emma Roddick to understand more about the individual case that she has raised.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): One of the ways that we can support victims is by properly enforcing bail conditions and breaches of bail. Bail-related offences are at a 10-year high—one in four bail orders granted will go on to be breached.

Victim Support Scotland says that:

“victims often feel as if they have to police the bail conditions themselves.”

Which bit of the Government’s forthcoming Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill will deal with those concerns and make sure that bail conditions are properly adhered to and that breaches are severely dealt with?

Keith Brown: We are replaying some of the discussion that we had this morning. I mentioned the fact that I think that if we can get the conditions

under which bail is approved on to the terms that are proposed in the bill, that in itself can help to reduce risk, reduce offending while on bail, and reduce reoffending at the other end of a custodial sentence. We are taking that forward.

As I mentioned in response to a previous question, it is also true to say that we have increased this year, and will increase next year, the resources to local authorities, which are often the bail supervision authorities looking after that. Yes, we have more to do, and we have to ensure that that increases.

However, as I also said this morning, it is also true to say that, in order for us to meaningfully judge conviction rates for those on bail, we have to compare them with the conviction rates for those who serve a full custodial sentence or who are remanded in custody in order to make sense of how that affects the situation.

Regardless of that, we of course have to try and minimise the number of convictions of those on bail. The track record on the resources that we have put in, given the general financial circumstances last year and next year, shows that we are very serious about doing that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Electoral Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07721, in the name of George Adam, on electoral reform consultation. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

14:38

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I thank the Presiding Officer for us being a wee bit quicker than normal such that I got my cardio workout for the day making it to the chamber in time for today's debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you will know that it is follow-on business.

George Adam: Indeed—that is why I came down with such haste to make sure that I was here.

Today's debate on the Scottish Government's proposals to further modernise elections in Scotland is an important one, and not only because of the impact that it may have on the Scottish Parliament itself.

In recent years, this chamber has made many significant changes in relation to Scottish Parliament and Scottish local government elections. Those changes include extending voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds and to all foreign nationals with leave to remain who live in Scotland—an act that has protected the rights of European Union nationals in our elections despite Brexit. We have also ensured the safe running of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election during the pandemic, and moved from four to five-year terms.

I believe that there is scope to consider further important improvements to electoral law. The Government's electoral reform consultation, which runs until 15 March, highlights several areas for discussion. Those include how we can increase active participation in elections by underrepresented groups, such as young people and foreign nationals.

We also seek to deliver on the undertaking between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party that is set out in the shared policy programme

“to encourage more people to register to vote, to stand as candidates and to remove the barriers some people experience so they can vote independently”.

We are committed to improving accessibility in elections and removing or reducing barriers where they exist in order to ensure that all our citizens have the opportunity to exercise their fundamental

democratic right to vote independently and in secret.

Some proposals will spark more debate than others. The purpose of the consultation is to gather views from as many people and organisations as possible. Our intention is to bring forward legislation ahead of the next scheduled Scottish Parliament election.

I will now outline some of the detail in the consultation.

On accessibility, the existing law specifies that a “tactile voting device” be provided to support voters with sight loss. For reserved elections, the United Kingdom Parliament has recently modified that requirement to allow a wider range of support to be provided by returning officers. That is to be informed by Electoral Commission guidance to ensure that suitable support is always available.

It is clear to me from what I have heard and seen, both in my time as an MSP and in this ministerial role, that there is a need to improve. I wish to go further in the ways in which we assist disabled people so that all voters can be confident in casting their votes independently and in secret. We are working closely with key stakeholders, such as RNIB Scotland, to explore solutions to support people in exercising their right to vote.

On candidacy, the consultation explores the idea that everyone with voting rights should also be able to stand for election. In 2020, voting and candidacy rights were extended to foreign nationals resident in Scotland with indefinite leave to remain in the UK. There are now two main groups of people who can vote in Scottish Parliament and local government elections but who cannot stand as candidates. Those are 16 and 17-year-olds and foreign nationals with time-limited leave to remain.

The consultation therefore seeks views on whether 16 and 17-year-olds and foreign nationals with limited leave to remain living in Scotland should be able to stand in devolved elections.

There is always a range of views whenever age limits are discussed. The extension of voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds is considered by most to have been a success. That is certainly my own strong view. The University of Edinburgh published research last month highlighting how that extension of voting rights has resulted in a long-term increase in turnout among young people. For anyone with an interest in protecting and enhancing a functioning and vibrant democracy and engagement in politics, that is surely something to celebrate.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am sure that the minister is very pleased that—I presume—we have lots of time for interventions.

In addressing the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds, does the minister accept that there is a difference between their being able to vote and their being able to stand, for example, for the Scottish Parliament? Does he also agree that the focus of 16 and 17-year-olds will perhaps be on education?

George Adam: I believe that we should at least discuss whether 16 and 17-year-olds, or anyone who has the opportunity to vote, should at the same time have the right to have representation and be a member of a council or local government. As I said, this is always a passionate debate, and people on both sides have opinions on which way to go. My own belief is that this is about the idea of 16 and 17-year-olds being candidates and possibly changing the vibrancy of this place. Should someone ever be elected as a 16 or 17-year-old, we would need to have mechanisms in here to support said individual, because it would be a culture shock for us and for them. At the end of the day, I look forward to seeing what Mr Kerr has to say when he submits to the consultation on the issue. It will also be interesting to see what everyone else has to say.

It is undeniable that a decision to extend candidacy rights to 16 and 17-year-olds would be a powerful expression of the Parliament’s confidence in and respect towards young people. The purpose of the consultation is to seek views and I especially welcome and invite debate on the issue.

The consultation also raises a couple of questions on voting rights. I am proud that our franchise is based around people who choose to make their life in Scotland. It is one of the most generous sets of voting rights in the world, with people from any country with a legal right to live in Scotland potentially eligible to vote. Excluding short-term visitors, asylum seekers are now the main group of foreign nationals aged 16 or over living in Scotland without voting rights. The consultation paper therefore asks about voting rights for asylum seekers.

The paper also seeks views in relation to a small group of people detained on mental health grounds in the context of conduct contrary to the criminal law. The question is whether any change is needed for that group following the recent extension of voting rights to prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or less.

A number of other issues in relation to standing for election are discussed, including the publication of the addresses of candidates who act as their own agents at local government elections and the provision of freepost mailings for candidates in said elections.

The paper also considers a number of points in relation to the administration of elections. There

are some quite technical questions on the scheduling of elections and the scope for polls to be postponed in the event of exceptional circumstances, such as a pandemic. Those points stem from direct experience in election planning over the past few years and are intended as an opportunity to future proof our system.

The consultation covers arrangements for parliamentary oversight of the Electoral Commission's activities in relation to devolved elections. Although funding for those activities is provided by this Parliament, Westminster currently performs most of the oversight on devolved elections. The consultation therefore explores a greater role for the Scottish Parliament in that.

On Boundaries Scotland, the approval process for boundary recommendations is covered. That includes seeking views on the most appropriate role for the Scottish Parliament in the consideration of boundaries.

As we all know, returning officers play a vital role in ensuring the smooth running of elections. Since 2011, they have been assisted by the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. That has proved to be a significant success. The advice, support and directions issued by the EMB's convener proved invaluable during the pandemic. The consultation reflects on the role and structure of the EMB and seeks views on options for developing its role. Interestingly—I cannot say that word, but it is an interesting point—the Welsh Government has recently consulted on the creation of an EMB in Wales and has directly drawn on the positive experience in Scotland.

I will address the impact of the UK Elections Act 2022 in Scotland. Exactly one year ago today, the Parliament refused consent for application of that act to areas within devolved competence. I said then that there were some aspects that needed further consideration and the consultation explores those points.

On some issues, I am sympathetic to adoption of certain Elections Act 2022 measures. Those include changes in relation to campaign finance, undue influence and the intimidation of candidates. However, I would very much welcome the views of consultees and members. I am sure that we had discussions about that when I went to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee previously to discuss these issues.

On voter identification, I remain strongly opposed to the developments made for UK general elections. Voter ID risks significant voter confusion and has not been introduced in response to any clearly identified problem. Few

people accepted the rationale that was set out by the UK Government or approved of its plans.

Although voter ID does not apply to devolved elections, it will add additional responsibilities for returning officers and polling staff in Scotland at UK parliamentary elections. That underlines the need to avoid elections to the UK Parliament being held at the same time as a devolved poll. We also have different electoral systems and franchises to consider. As a result, the consultation proposes a presumption against a devolved election being held on the same day as an election to the UK Parliament in the same area.

The electoral reform consultation covers several fundamental, technical and wide-ranging matters. I hope that members have found my outline helpful and useful. I look forward to the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's consultation on electoral reform, which seeks views on how to improve the process of taking part in elections for voters, candidates, campaigners, and administrators; welcomes that the proposals in the consultation include improvements in relation to standing for election, the accessibility of voting, the scheduling of elections, campaigning, and the administration and governance of elections; notes that views are sought on a range of measures introduced by the UK Elections Act 2022 and the impact they have on Scottish devolved elections, and encourages interested individuals and organisations to respond to the consultation and ensure their views are heard before the consultation closes on 15 March 2023.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Donald Cameron to speak to and move amendment S6M-07721.1. In reference to a point that Stephen Kerr raised, I confirm that we have a lot of time in hand and plenty of time for interventions. You have a generous nine minutes, Mr Cameron.

14:49

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Scottish Government's electoral reform consultation is a wide-ranging, detailed and important document. We welcome the opportunity to give our thoughts at this early stage and will support the Scottish Government's motion at decision time.

In many ways, we expect elections and voting to remain completely unchanged, so fundamental are they to our democracy and so used are we to them happening, particularly given our own involvement in the process as elected politicians. However, electoral policy is, of course, like other areas of policy in that it does not stand still. It changes as society changes and different challenges and opportunities present themselves. Rather like the processes of the Parliament, nothing should be set in aspic and preserved for

all time without us ever considering whether change or reform is needed.

In that respect, it is important to know that the consultation that we are debating will inform future legislation. As such, it is vital that we hear from as many people and organisations as possible and I hope that the Government is taking the necessary steps to ensure that that happens. The Scottish Conservatives look forward to reviewing the consultation responses when they are published in due course and our approach in a number of areas will be guided by those replies. We also await the explicit position of the Scottish Government when it eventually produces draft legislation. However, it is appropriate to give some initial and provisional views on the consultation's proposals.

There are several proposals in the consultation that Conservative members would, in all likelihood, support. They include the disqualification of candidacy for intimidatory or abusive behaviour; improving the accessibility of voting, as the minister mentioned; and the implementation of the recommendations from the Law Commission of England and Wales and the Scottish Law Commission on the restating of undue influence on voters. Although more detail is needed on all those proposals, they are undoubtedly important areas to review and legislate on.

There are, however, some measures about which we have legitimate concerns and I will go into them in more detail. The main proposal to extend candidacy rights for elections in Scotland to 16 and 17-year-olds and to foreign nationals resident in Scotland with limited rights is among the areas of concern. We have serious anxieties about those proposals.

On extending candidacy rights to 16 and 17-year-olds, the consultation document raises issues around the impact that long working hours and travelling to Edinburgh for parliamentary sittings could have, as well as the potential impact on education—a point that my colleague Stephen Kerr made. I am sure that we all wish to protect young people from other issues, most notably the intimidation and hate speech that we know those involved in the political process all too often experience. It is worth noting what the UK Parliament's Committee on Standards in Public Life said in 2017. It reported:

“A significant proportion of candidates at the 2017 general election experienced harassment, abuse and intimidation. There has been persistent, vile and shocking abuse, threatened violence including sexual violence, and damage to property.”

Added to that, there are the considerable dangers of online abuse that social media companies remain slow to tackle. I was desperately sorry to read this weekend of the

abuse that our colleague and my fellow Highlands and Islands MSP Emma Roddick—I see her in the chamber—received, which she described in *The Scotsman*.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am grateful to Donald Cameron for his comments.

I made the decision to stand after weighing up the pros and the cons and having seen the harassment that others had faced. Is that not our choice and a choice for young people to make for themselves, not for us to make for them?

Donald Cameron: I understand the member's point, but we have a responsibility to consider how the wider general societal impacts of decisions that we make and legislation that we might bring forward on candidacy can affect 16 and 17-year-olds as a cohort.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I hear what the member is saying, and I know that he is genuine in his concerns. However, I wonder why—I put this forward just as a suggestion—we could not dip our toe in the water, if you like, with that age group in the context of local government elections, as that would address his point about travelling to Edinburgh and long sitting hours.

Donald Cameron: I am grateful for the intervention, but I am slightly nervous, if I am honest, about using local government elections as a kind of test bed. I think that we just have to be courageous enough to debate the issues and to consult 16 and 17-year-olds on this.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am grateful to Donald Cameron for giving way. On the point that Graeme Dey raised, Donald Cameron will be aware that Highland Council recently had a full council meeting that lasted the entire day, so we should not have the perception that, somehow, local government does fewer hours than we do here. I speak as a former councillor and as an MP and an MSP. In fact, council meetings can last far longer than our debates in the Scottish Parliament.

Donald Cameron: Douglas Ross is absolutely right about what transpires in council chambers as well as what transpires here.

It is very important to take issues of harassment into account, particularly given the enhanced focus that we rightly place on promoting better mental health and wellbeing. That is why we have included in our amendment the point that

“the safeguarding of young people must be at the heart of any proposal”.

We also believe that, as our amendment states,

“any new measures that affect candidacy and voting rights should be subject to a full impact assessment.”

We hope that our amendment garners support.

George Adam: On that point, I probably should have said during my speech that we are happy to accept the amendment, because we take on board some of the issues and challenges that affect younger candidates in particular. As I said in my speech, we would have to ensure that it would be as safe an environment as possible for them.

Donald Cameron: I am grateful for that clarification and for the support.

On the issue of extending candidacy rights for elected office to those with limited leave to remain in the UK, there are again serious and legitimate questions about what would happen, because that would relate to individuals whose rights would be time limited. There are questions about what would happen if someone's leave to remain came to an end during their term of office for whatever reason and what the consequences would be in terms of resignation and subsequent by-elections.

Chapter 2 of the electoral reform consultation poses a question on the extension of voting rights to individuals who are detained on mental health grounds that relate to criminal justice. I believe that that is a potentially very dangerous proposal. As the consultation explains, that could include

“people who have been found guilty in a court of law of serious offences which may have resulted in lengthy jail sentences, if they had not been committed for treatment under the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.”

As a party, we remain robustly opposed to the extension of voting rights to prisoners, for well-documented reasons, and we would need very compelling reasons indeed to support some kind of different treatment for individuals who have been detained on mental health grounds relating to criminal justice.

Chapter 2 of the consultation also addresses voter identification. As the minister said, we debated the legislative consent motion on that about a year ago. We support voter identification to reduce voter fraud. Although voter fraud is fortunately rare, it does occur, and a lower conviction rate does not indicate the absence of a problem.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am sorry that this is a slightly delayed intervention but, on the point about prisoners and voting rights, does the member acknowledge that a cohort of any prison population is not convicted?

Donald Cameron: Absolutely, but that does not alter the point that I made.

Presiding Officer, I am looking at the clock and wondering about the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you have more to say, Mr Cameron, please crack on. [*Laughter.*] That is something that I rarely say.

Donald Cameron: I always have more to say.

We believe that, far from disenfranchising voters, the UK Elections Act 2022 brought in changes that are commonplace in many countries around the world. Voter identification has been backed by the Electoral Commission and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's office for democratic institutions and human rights, which says that there is a security issue without it. In addition, anyone without a form of identification will be able to apply for a new free photocard, and I believe that the Electoral Commission will also deliver national communications campaigns for voter identification purposes.

Chapters 3 and 5 of the consultation pose more technical questions around the scheduling of elections, campaign finance rules and the administration and governance around elections. We await the findings of the consultation in that respect and will take a view on those in due course.

In conclusion, I urge everyone with an interest to respond to the consultation. I sincerely ask the Scottish Government to think very carefully about the specific proposals to extend candidacy to 16 and 17-year-olds and foreign nationals with limited rights to remain, and the proposals to extend voting rights to individuals detained on mental health grounds that relate to criminal justice.

We on the Conservative benches will always support proposals that enhance our democracy and improve the legitimacy of our processes. With that, I close my speech and ask for support for our amendment.

I move amendment S6M-07721.1, to insert at end:

“; acknowledges that the safeguarding of young people must be at the heart of any proposal, and believes that any new measures that affect candidacy and voting rights should be subject to a full impact assessment.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Willie Rennie. You have a generous six minutes, Mr Rennie.

15:01

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer. This is a little bit of heaven for Liberal Democrats. We love nothing more than debating a good bit of electoral reform, so I might take more—much more—than six minutes, given all that I have to get off my chest.

In 1994, I toured the United States of America on a United States Information Agency-funded visit during the mid-term elections. It was the time of Newt Gingrich, for those who remember. He was in his prime with his contract with America agenda. That was before the tea party and Donald Trump and all those other incarnations.

We visited Jacksonville in Florida, where there had recently been boundary changes for the US Congress. I like a good electoral map. I went to the back of the campaign office and discovered that there was not just one map for that district but many maps, which covered several walls. I discovered that that was because the district was 400 miles long and, in some places, only one mile wide.

That was because there had been some electoral reform. The Republicans had engineered that district to connect all the communities with a majority of black people to concentrate the predominantly Democrat-voting population into one district, leaving the Republicans to win the neighbouring districts that used to elect Democrats. That was my first direct experience of gerrymandering, and I had not realised how extreme it could get.

Stephen Kerr: Does Willie Rennie also accept that Florida contains other warnings for us when we seek to tamper with our electoral process without due consideration and thoughtfulness, given the experience with hanging chads and electronic voting machines and everything that came with that?

Willie Rennie: The member forgot about pregnant chads—there were various forms of chad. Of course, that experience caused an enormous challenge for that presidential election and threatened what we might call the premier democracy in the world.

We had our own experience of that back in 2007 when, for the first time, we combined the council elections with the Scottish Parliament elections using a new voting system. I still recall seeing number 1s, 2s and 5s written in all the different boxes on the different ballot papers in all the wrong places. That really caused problems with the legitimacy of those elections. We have learned a number of lessons. The member is absolutely right that we need to be careful when we make reforms.

America's electoral system is subject to political interference. We have a more independent system, but that does not stop politicians setting the rules and policies, which others might describe as interference, too.

George Adam: The next time that the Boundary Commission considers such issues, it will be looking at our seats in Scotland, and it will be the

Scottish Parliament that will be making the decisions. Does Willie Rennie agree that we will all have to look at the issues with a level of maturity in order to avoid the potential gerrymandering that he spoke about?

Willie Rennie: Whether we can get maturity is one issue—

Graeme Dey: It will be the first time.

Willie Rennie: —but the system should certainly have a degree of independence and rigour.

I hear what the member says from a sedentary position.

In the Westminster Parliament, the Conservatives have changed the rules about the size of constituencies. That has been quite controversial. Many people argue that that will disenfranchise voters in more urban areas, which happen to contain more non-Conservative voters.

Some people say that the recent voter ID changes are designed to discourage people from voting who are less likely to have a passport or another form of formal identification. That would be disappointing, because we should be encouraging as many people as possible to vote. The claim that, somehow, there is, or could be, massive fraud in the electoral system is spurious.

I support votes at 16. I supported it when it was proposed for Scottish Parliament and Scottish council elections. However, equally, people on the other side of the debate have argued that such proposals are a cynical ploy to increase the number of people who do not vote Conservative within the voting population.

The point that I am making is that there are accusations about political interference, but we should aim for independence. The minister is right that we should approach such matters with a certain degree of objectivity in order to avoid those accusations and ensure that we maintain the credibility of the whole system.

The changes that are proposed in the Scottish Government's consultation are pretty limited in scope. Nevertheless, some of them are very welcome. I am particularly attracted to the proposal about providing a degree of anonymity in relation to correspondence addresses for council candidates. It is not fair to people, particularly vulnerable people, to have their home address published on the ballot paper, nor is it fair to have a headquarters in some far-away location. People should be able to provide a correspondence address that shows that they are local without needing to reveal their family home. Particularly during a period of political threats and intimidation, we need to have that anonymity.

I worry about the 36-year-olds rather than the 16-year-olds. We should be encouraging 16 and 17-year-olds to play an active role in public life. They have shown that they can play that role particularly well by voting in Scottish Parliament and Scottish council elections. Their engagement has been tremendous.

However, this country needs to settle the issue of when people are old enough to make decisions about their lives and the lives of other people. We need to get that clear because, to be honest, we are all over the place. Sometimes, it is 18. Sometimes, it is 16. I heard recently that it should be 25 in some circumstances. I do not think that it is sensible to have such a wide variety of ages. We need to have some settling on the issue, but I know that that is not easy, because we need to consider different factors in different circumstances.

I take the point that Donald Cameron made. To be honest, this Parliament is sometimes not friendly to anybody of any age. The hours that we have to endure are incredible. Therefore, we need to settle the issue of decision time being so variable, particularly for those who have family responsibilities. In recent years, we have made good progress on remote voting and remote speaking.

God, I have gone over seven minutes already—I can't half go on.

We need to extend candidate rights to 16-year-olds, but we should change the institutions that they enter to ensure that they are suitable for those individuals.

I love a good citizens assembly. It is important to try to engage the wider population in in-depth discussions, but we should not use citizens assemblies to kick more issues into the long grass. Too often, that is exactly what they are used for. I will give one example: council tax reform. This Parliament could not resolve that issue for 15 years. I have sat through numerous discussions and meetings of cross-party groups that have looked at the issue. To be frank, the Scottish National Party has never really been interested in changing the council tax system, despite its promise in 2007. Now, we have a citizens assembly, so we can kick the issue over there and leave it for the assembly to resolve, given that we are incapable of resolving it. Citizens assemblies should not be used for that; they should be used for finding real resolutions to issues that require wider engagement.

It would be remiss of me not to talk about proper electoral reform. We need proportional representation for the House of Commons. Every vote should count. We should put an end to terms such as “Mondeo man”, “Worcester woman”,

“Essex man”, “Holby City woman”, “Motorway man”, “Soccer mom” and “Workington man”. My party has come up with a new one: the “Surrey shufflers”, which are apparently people who move out of London into the suburbs. We should not be focusing on such narrow groups of people to decide our future Government. We should have votes on a proportional basis for everyone so that we can have a fair system and greater engagement. We should use the single transferable vote with multimember constituencies, but I will not obsess about that at all. However, it is important to have the change so that we can have a refreshed democracy. The country would be far better for it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We have a lot of time in hand, so we could happily continue in the vein that we have started in.

15:11

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate. I was keen to do so because I have a strong constituency interest, which will become clear shortly, but, first of all, I want to mention the section of the Scottish Government's electoral reform consultation that relates to improving the accessibility of voting. Comments and opinions are sought in relation to support that is provided at polling stations, and the consultation highlights people with sight or hearing impairments.

There were some concerns that UK changes resulting in tactile voting devices no longer being automatically provided at polling stations might be detrimental. The change at the UK level requires polling stations to provide “reasonable equipment” to make it easier for people with disabilities to vote independently and secretly. The UK Elections Act 2022 places a duty on the Electoral Commission to produce guidance for returning officers, which will include information on the minimum standards of equipment that should be available. The Scottish Government appears to be taking a similar approach. As long as those who wish to use a tactile voting device can still access one, that seems to be a reasonable direction of travel.

I welcome the suggestion that we should consider making digital voting cards available for people with visual impairments, but that will need to be developed over the longer term because of the practicalities, the costs and the development work that must take place.

Why do I mention those things? Important though they are, they might not be the burning issues at the heart of this afternoon's debate. I mention them because they relate to the accessibility of voting. We should always look at

such matters to ensure that the electorate can cast valid votes—that a person’s vote counts and is counted.

Unfortunately, in some elections, some people’s votes do not count and are not counted. I refer to the perennial issue of how we minimise the number of, and reduce the prospect of, rejected ballot papers. That was highlighted very well in the Electoral Commission’s report on the May 2022 Scottish council elections. That is where my direct constituency interest, which I referred to at the start of my speech, comes in.

The report is hugely positive, and I thank all those who were involved in delivering safe and secure elections last year for all their hard work and success.

However, although only 1.85 per cent of ballot papers were rejected at that election, that masks serious concerns about the level of rejected ballot papers in some council wards. Again, I go back to my constituency interest. The rejection rate for the Canal ward, in the Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency, which I am privileged to represent, was 5.64 per cent. In the previous local authority election, the rate was 5.36 per cent, so there was a pattern—it was not a one-off. Given that that ward’s rejection rate was three times the national average, we cannot assume that more voters will make their votes count next time round. Indeed, it might be that the same set of voters routinely do not vote in a way that allows their votes to be counted. If those votes are rejected, we might be perennially disenfranchising 5 to 6 per cent of my constituents who go to vote. It is our job—not just the job of voters—to get it right. At each election, voters are disenfranchised, with their having little idea that their votes do not count.

Stephen Kerr: Does Bob Doris agree that part of the problem for some of the electorate is that there are so many voting systems? There are certain sections of our electorate who are, to be frank, understandably confused about which voting method they are to use, no matter how big the posters are and how many leaflets there are. Having different electoral systems for every election is bound to be confusing for a substantial number of people.

Bob Doris: I thank Mr Kerr for that intervention. I am sorely tempted to say that if we get rid of Westminster elections, that would make matters considerably less complicated, but I am not going to do that, given that this is a very consensual debate.

Mr Kerr has a valid point. I agree that it is for us to get it right; it is not for the electorate to have to navigate a complicated system. Mr Kerr makes an important point.

The next four areas with the highest rejection levels have levels that range between 4 and 4.5 per cent. That is still more than double the national average. Sixty-four per cent of rejected papers were rejected because of a vote for more than one first-preference candidate—a series of Xs or 1s on the paper, or a combination of both, caused them to be rejected.

We know the risk factors, as Mr Kerr alluded to. Deprivation is a risk factor, as are unemployment, historical trends and multiple party candidates on the ballot paper. There is a predictability to some of this, but what we do not have is a coherent, structured strategy for dealing with it.

Voter identification and education may need to be tailored for each individual election—absolutely—but that work should be targeted to the areas that are most likely to have disenfranchised voters at elections and it should take place all year round, not just when there is an election on.

No one body has the statutory duty to ensure that that happens—not the local elections office or returning officers, not the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and not the Electoral Commission. That, I feel, is an issue.

Two councillors in the Glasgow ward of Canal—Jacqueline McLaren, who is currently also Lord Provost of Glasgow, and Allan Gow—have also highlighted those issues. They and I have previously met the Electoral Commission, and will be doing so again shortly, to progress some of those issues further. I should point out that the Electoral Commission is listening. It wants to look at what can be done locally, at a grass-roots level, to make sure that there is impartial, independent, grass-roots, community-led, good-quality voter information and education as a matter of course in areas where there is a high risk of rejected ballot papers and disenfranchisement. I commend the Electoral Commission for that.

However, I would like the Scottish Government to consider placing a duty, whether on the Electoral Commission or another body, to ensure that that happens routinely and strategically. The example that I gave was from a ward in my constituency, but there will be outliers in every part of Scotland. In every member’s constituency or electoral region, there will be one or two council wards in which the number of rejected papers is far higher or the turnout is far lower. It might not be an outlier to the extent that the Canal ward in my constituency is, but it will be an outlier in their area, and it will require attention. A statutory duty to tackle that issue should be placed somewhere.

I would welcome any thoughts from the Government on that and on whether the legislation

that will follow from the consultation could knit in some of what I am looking for.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention foreign nationals who are normally resident in Scotland but with limited right to remain in the UK. I believe very strongly that they should have candidacy rights. We need to make sure that we maximise the ability of all those who have chosen Scotland as their home to vote in elections and to stand for election. All Governments have issues with making sure that they embed people at the heart of democracy. The Scottish Government is currently consulting to ensure that people who have applied for leave to remain but have not had their immigration cases disposed of by the Home Office can have access to higher education for free. That is because those who are waiting longer than three years have no such right, and those who are over 18 have no such right. The Scottish Government lost a court case in relation to this, in which it said that the situation was deeply unfair—*[Interruption.]*

Bob Doris: I am sorry—does Mr Kerr want to make an intervention?

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): No.

Bob Doris: Apologies, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish Government is seeking to get its house in order to ensure that we are fair in relation to education provision in Scotland. We have to be fair, irrespective of where the power lies—at the Scottish level or at the UK level. Those who have chosen Scotland as their home should be able to vote in elections and stand in elections.

Finally, I strongly agree that those who have been found guilty of an offence involving the harassment or intimidation of politician candidates—or, more important, of campaigners who are out there giving their blood, sweat and toil only because they believe in something and who have the right not to be intimidated in the democratic process—should be banned from standing from election. Five years seems to be about right for that.

Thank you, Presiding Officer. I never thought that I would see the day when you would give me 10 minutes to speak in the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not entirely sure whether you will see that again any time soon, either.

15:21

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer,

“Yet if he should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him

out as our enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King”.

I probably need offer no explanation to you that those words are from the declaration of Arbroath of 1320. To me, our vote is our exertion of this day. The ballot box allows every one of us the privilege of expressing our view on the direction of travel that we wish our nation to take. However, to refer back to the quote, history has taught us that defining the defence of the nation and our freedom as resting solely on the shoulders of one chosen individual and one ideology is fraught with danger. Our democracy is rules based, and it rests on an accommodation of differing interests. That is what a healthy democracy promotes, and that is what the Parliament should promote. Its practices and procedures should facilitate that.

As if we need any reminder of the importance of defending our democratic traditions and practices, dare I remind members that Monday this week was the 90th anniversary of the coming to power of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany? I mention that because it is always good to be reminded of the fragility of our democratic institutions and practices. We should not consider ourselves to be unassailable, and we should not become complacent. We cannot afford complacency about what we should rightly regard as our birthright. We must all be willing to defend our democracy from the threat of people who seek to ignore or sideline the democratic process.

That is why I agreed with my colleague Donald Cameron when he described the importance of all of us taking a close interest in updating and revitalising our electoral process. We should have a total and uncompromising commitment to freedom of speech, freedom of thought and freedom to engage in the democratic process without fear or favour.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I appreciate and agree with the points that Stephen Kerr has made about the importance of defending democracy and its being our birthright. However, can he understand—I ask this honestly—the reaction that there is likely to be from people who do not have a passport or a driving licence and who turn up at the next UK general election only to be told that they do not enjoy such a birthright?

Stephen Kerr: I never have any concern about whether Alasdair Allan is making his point honestly and sincerely. However, there are a number of ways in which voters can obtain for no charge appropriate identification that they can use in a UK general election. I have no concerns whatsoever about that.

I am glad that the member agrees with me about the importance of defending our democracy in an uncompromising way. However, I think that

defending our democracy involves being prepared to look at updating democratic processes, which is why I, along with Donald Cameron, welcome the Government's consultation on electoral reform. There is a lot to consider in the consultation paper. In the time that I thought I had allocated to speak, I could not even begin to properly address all the issues, as it is a packed document. If I had known that we were going to have so much time for this debate, I would have come prepared with a list of things to raise—I am sure that I could look through the document and come up with some. I congratulate the minister—my old sparring partner—on the arresting picture at the beginning of the document, which I am sure that everyone would have noticed. I cannot address all the issues that are raised in the document, but I want to talk about some overarching—

George Adam: I am not sure that that is a compliment.

Stephen Kerr: It is a compliment. I was not using “arresting” as any sort of pun.

Our democracy needs good people, men and women, to stand for public office, which is what I would like to major my remarks on in the context of the consultation paper. Right now in Scotland, many good, qualified people would never consider putting themselves forward for public office. People have said to me, “Why would you want to be a politician? Why would you want to put yourself and your family through all that?” I would wager that many people have said the same to colleagues in the chamber. There is also the old canard that someone who wants to be a politician should be banned from ever being able to be one.

The theme of engagement underpins the Scottish Government's consultation: engaging people to make it easy for them to become candidates and to actively engage in the local and national democratic processes. The document is all about engaging our fellow Scots to make our democracy accessible to them and to make the opportunity to vote and stand for election available to them. Many good people in our nation who have a desire to stand for election are refusing to do so because of intimidation. Many voters are turned off by the viciousness and the vitriol, and they do not engage in the discussion for fear of retribution. It would be easy for us to blame that on social media, but I can tell you that it is not just a social media phenomenon. We would be kidding ourselves if we think that that is something that is limited to the virtual sphere.

George Adam: My intervention is similar to the one that I made on Mr Rennie. Is it not down to members in the Parliament to show leadership in how we conduct ourselves in the chamber and how we interact with one another? This debate is a perfect example of how members of the public

would probably want to see us interacting with one another, instead of the usual argy-bargy that we tend to have. *[Applause.]*

Stephen Kerr: I respect the fact that some members of the minister's party have applauded that, but I do not. Robust debate is central to the functioning of a vital democracy. In Scotland, our politics has become nasty, which is where we increasingly go wrong. It is quite possible for there to be a full-on battle of ideas, as there often is in the chamber, without the nastiness. There is no way on this planet that, because I disagree with Graeme Dey, he is somehow my enemy. We need to take that attitude out of our politics; there is too much of it in our politics today.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Awareness is important in politics. Perhaps Mr Kerr might reflect on that, not just in his speech in this debate but in his contributions in future debates.

Stephen Kerr: That is an example of what I have just been talking about. If a member of the Parliament cannot stand up to the robust presentation of views that they disagree with, then my goodness me, have they chosen the right path by being here? The member's intervention deserves some study, because that is exactly what is wrong with our politics.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): One of the things that we need to be cognisant of in the chamber is the need to use respectful language that is carefully constructed to convey respect for our colleagues. Do you agree that we need to use respectful language in the chamber?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And that we need to speak through the chair?

Stephen Kerr: Absolutely, but on no account should that become a byword for us having to agree with one another. The people of Scotland do not send us here to agree with one another. They know full well that they are voting for us because the views that we hold replicate what they believe and they expect us to stand up for those things when we speak in the chamber. The idea therefore that the only way in which the Parliament functions or our democracy flourishes is by us all agreeing is, I am afraid, a busted flush. That is not going to work. What works is when we can have a full-on debate about ideas on which we profoundly disagree with one another without the personal vitriol and nastiness. It is just not required.

I am beginning to test the Presiding Officer's patience on time and, of course, I have so much more to say.

I will draw on the experience that many have us have had on this side of the chamber. When we see political banners that say “Tory Scum Out” or “England Get Out of Scotland”, it is difficult to read

those banners in any other way than that they are intended to harass and bully opponents. Anyone who stands behind such a banner does not seek to engage with issues or have a robust debate and settle the issue with the vote; they stand behind those banners because they wish to cause intimidation and fear. Such a thing is bigotry and it has no place in modern Scotland.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief. The debate is very interesting, but I think that we probably need to get back to the topic.

Alasdair Allan: I beg your pardon, Presiding Officer. I do not disagree with the member's assessment of some of the banners that he is talking about. However, in the interests of completeness, he will be aware that many of us on this side of that particular debate experience bigotry and intimidation from people of an extreme view on the other side.

Stephen Kerr: I am not disputing that, and that is why I said that I was going to relate my point to the context of the people who sit on this side of the chamber. If we can all agree that that sort of thing is something that we should all condemn and stand against, that is progress in the context of the atmosphere and environment in which politics is conducted in Scotland.

I am not going to make my way through my speech, which is surprising because I thought that we had at least half an hour in hand, but there we go. I am obviously not getting that half an hour. I will just conclude by saying that there is a growing number of people in the country who are the don't-knows. When pushed, it is not that they do not know, it is that they prefer not to say because they do not want to be hassled. That should concern us all. Beyond the negative political culture, other issues are dissuading people who want to be part of the change that they believe Scotland needs to see from putting themselves forward.

I will save the rest of my comments for another speech on another occasion, if I can ingratiate myself with my party's chief whip. The issues in the consultation document deserve careful thought and consideration, especially the idea of throwing 16 and 17-year-olds into what I have been describing. We have a duty of care and a safeguarding responsibility to 16 and 17-year-olds.

In conclusion, the Presiding Officer will be pleased to hear, electoral reform is vitally important, but let us not kid ourselves on that electoral reform in the context of the chapters and headings in the minister's consultation paper alone will improve participation in the democratic process and change the culture of politics in

Scotland in the way that I detect we would all like to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. I will just add for the record that it might be wise for Mr Kerr not to assume that any particular precedent was being established today in terms of speaking time.

15:34

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): First, I want to make a wee mention of those people who are not here. Although this is an important debate and I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to it, it feels odd to be discussing electoral reform and enhancing our democracy on a day when the public gallery is empty.

I make clear my solidarity with the workers who are on strike, who are upholding democracy not only by making their voices heard on their pay and working conditions but by picketing in a week in which workers' rights and the right to strike are under threat from the UK Government.

I was one of the first people to benefit from Scotland's progressive attitude towards electoral reform—I voted in the 2014 independence referendum, before being denied a say, the following year, in who my member of Parliament would be in the 2015 Westminster general election. I had mixed feelings at the time, but I am now certain that extending voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds, who were later given the right to have their say in Scottish elections, was the right thing to do. They have had that right for a few elections now. First, the world has not burned and, secondly, we are seeing a real impact in political inclusion and activity among that age group. At the moment, I might be the only one to have been given that right who is in the Scottish Parliament, but many more are councillors and activists who are making a difference to their communities.

Although they are not in my party, some of those people are councillors in Highland Council, where they frequently make a difference to the diversity and quality of debate there. I enjoy taking a wee cross-party interest in watching the efforts of Molly Nolan and Colin Aitken from Willie Rennie's party, particularly as there is a lot more opportunity to find common ground on local issues.

I think that the experience of a young person getting elected to any body, whether a council or Parliament, would be very different when they do not stick out like a sore thumb and they have some colleagues with similar experiences.

There is quantitative evidence, too. Recent research by the University of Edinburgh and the

University of Sheffield shows that those who were given the right to vote in 2014 are more likely to continue the habit of voting into their 20s. With young people being one of the least registered groups, the expansion of voting rights is worthy work in getting folk who are my age and those who are younger more interested in politics, because they now have a real stake and a real voice, and the same vote as anyone else.

It only makes sense for the right to stand as a candidate to be aligned with that. It is important for folk to remember that that is all that we are talking about here—the right to stand. If that right were extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, people would have the right to vote against 16 and 17-year-old candidates, although I sincerely hope that they would find a better reason to do so than on the basis of age alone.

It is a shame that we have heard comments that amount to saying, “They should be in school.” That is not a comment that I ever heard when I was working for Deliveroo or in retail as a teenager. Outwith that, it was a case of, “Get a job—pull your socks up,” and members of my family reminding me of the age that they were when they got a paper round or went to help their parents at work. Young folk can make decisions for themselves. Discussion is all very well and debate is necessary, but let us try to stay away from paternalistic comments that veer towards condescension. If someone can vote, why can they not be allowed a platform to speak their mind and promote their ideas as well?

I am glad that we are taking other progressive steps, such as building on the work that was done through the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020, which extended the right to be a candidate to many of those people who are not in Scotland by accident of birth but who have chosen to make this place their home. The consultation paper discusses whether that right can be extended even further, to those with limited leave to remain.

The consultation also looks at how wider support can be offered to disabled voters. I was glad to hear the minister make specific reference to that commitment in his opening remarks. Disabled people know how important it is that we have folk representing us at all levels of government who have relevant personal experience or who, at the very least, value and make sure that they listen to lived experience. That becomes far less likely if disabled people are prevented from voting for or against candidates and parties that fail to do so simply because they are disabled.

A particularly niche suggestion that is made in the consultation but which I am a fan of relates to the discussion around addresses and alternatives being printed on the ballot paper. I have been an

election agent and my own election agent at a previous address, and I know all too well the dangers that that presents to candidates. Council candidates should not have to publish their address on the ballot paper, but the current alternative—printing the words, “Address within X council area”—is not good enough, because those words mean very little to many of my constituents, especially those who vote in Highland Council elections. Our local authority is the largest in the country. It is not only the seventh most populated council area in Scotland but one that covers an area that is 20 per cent larger than Wales and which makes up 11.4 per cent of the whole of Great Britain. A voter in Wick will want to know whether their candidates have an address in their ward, the neighbouring Caithness ward, Inverness or perhaps even Kilchoan, which is a drive of over 200 miles away. The suggestion that printing the words “Address within X ward” be added to the existing two options will be a very welcome one for many whom I represent.

I hope that all fellow electoral nerds will take an interest in the consultation and share their thoughts, and that council candidates who take to Facebook, Twitter and SNP branch meetings after elections to whinge—quite rightly—about issues with the ballot paper or the relationship between Boundaries Scotland and the Scottish Parliament will take the time to put that in writing, because those are the things that we need to hear.

15:40

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank the Scottish Government for bringing forward this debate. Previously, I was a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, and this topic was discussed in that committee at length over a few sessions. Bob Doris will remember that. We also had a few meetings on the topic with the minister.

The consultation seeks to deliver on the joint undertaking by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party, as set out in the shared policy programme, to increase voter registration and promote active participation in elections by underrepresented groups, including young people and foreign nationals, as we have heard. I am glad to hear that there is cross-party support at this stage regarding the consultation, but I know that we have slightly different views, which I will touch on.

The Scottish Government led the way in 2017 by lowering the voting age to 16 to give young people a choice. I believe that, at 16, people should have the right to vote. We have had a debate on whether 16 and 17-year-olds should be able to do that. We have all met, and discussed and debated issues with, members of the Scottish

Youth Parliament. Some of the discussions that we have had—such as at an Alcohol Focus Scotland event just last week—have been absolutely fantastic. Those people would add to the value of the Scottish Parliament. I hope that we can agree on that.

Stephen Kerr: Paul McLennan has made a very good point. There are lots of forums and platforms—not least the Scottish Youth Parliament—in which 16 and 17-year-olds can have their voices heard, and their views are received with respect. That underpins the concerns that I might have about 16 and 17-year-olds standing for the Scottish Parliament. There are other forums.

Paul McLennan: There are other forums, but I still believe that they have the right to make their views known in the Scottish Parliament. I know that issues relating to 16 and 17-year-olds have been raised. I will come on to them.

Internationally, Scotland has among the world's most generous and inclusive arrangements for voting and candidacy rights. Many democracies extend voting and candidacy rights on an equivalent basis, with two or more countries agreeing to give them to each other's nationals. The Scottish Parliament does that on a unilateral basis, which gives those who have chosen to make their life in Scotland the right to participate in our democracy.

On expanding candidacy rights, the consultation raises potential issues relating to 16 and 17-year-olds, such as exposure to online intimidation and hate speech. It also raises potential issues around working time in the Parliament, which, as we know, can occasionally hold us late. That means that 16 and 17-year-olds might need to stay away from home. I am glad that Donald Cameron's amendment mentions young people and that the Government supports it. That is an incredibly important point.

Donald Cameron: I want to build on the comments that have been made by Willie Rennie and Emma Roddick on the differential between the age of 16 and the age of 18. Obviously, there are some things that people cannot do in Scotland until they are 18. There are obvious things—they cannot drink or buy cigarettes, for example. Does Paul McLennan think that the age of 16 should be applicable across all areas, such as voting and purchasing cigarettes or alcohol, or is there an argument for being able to do different things at different ages?

Paul McLennan: Donald Cameron has made a very good point. I think that that needs and merits a debate. It is not just about voting rights; it is about other policy issues, as well. Willie Rennie made a very important point about that. The issue

of 16, 18 and 21-year-olds merits a discussion, but there are other policy areas that we need to look at in more depth.

I want to move on to the subject of people with limited leave to remain in the UK holding elected office. That raises a number of issues. Obviously, one issue is that, if their leave came to an end when they were in office, the person would have no choice but to resign. It has been estimated that the cost of a local government by-election is £50,000.

The UK Government amended legislation to show that filling an elected post in local or devolved government is not considered to be employment for the purposes of immigration rules and that conditions restricting employment do not affect the ability to undertake such activities.

The first question that is asked in the consultation is whether 16 and 17-year-olds should be able to stand in both Scottish Parliament and local government elections, Scottish Parliament elections only, local government elections only, or neither. From my point of view, they should be able to stand in both Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

Similarly, the second question asks whether foreign nationals resident in Scotland who have limited rights to remain in the UK should be able to stand in Scottish Parliament and local government elections, Scottish Parliament elections only, local government elections only, or neither.

I will move on to talk about disqualification. In the study that was carried out by the Electoral Commission on the 2022 Scottish local government elections, 44 per cent of candidates stated that they had suffered threats, abuse or intimidation. The Scottish Government's view is that those who harass or intimidate elected representatives should be subject to additional sanctions that reflect the impact of the offence on the democratic process.

Specifically, if an individual was convicted of certain offences and the court was satisfied that the offence was aggravated by hostility towards a candidate, an elected member or campaigners who were campaigning on behalf of candidates, the court could give a disqualification order of five years in relation to standing for or holding an elected office. The consultation asks whether that would be a suitable sanction. That is an incredibly important point. We heard Stephen Kerr say that we all need to do things in a more respectful manner.

I want to talk about a few other areas, including the publication of home addresses. We have heard that candidates have to provide their home addresses to returning officers, but those are not

made public. Emma Roddick touched on the issue of making home addresses for agents publicly available. Of course, during local elections, some candidates might act as their own agents. I agree with Emma Roddick's point and support her views. The Welsh Government has already made changes in that regard.

One of the most important parts of the consultation, which has not really been talked about, relates to increasing registration. The Electoral Commission produces an accuracy and completeness report on the registers of Great Britain every four years. The latest report estimated that 17 per cent of eligible voters in Scotland—between 630,000 and 890,000 people—are not registered, or are not correctly registered, at their home address. That is the equivalent of everyone in the city of Glasgow not being able to vote. Between 630,000 and 890,000 people are not registered to, and therefore cannot, vote.

There is also a split in age groups: 68 per cent of people between the ages of 18 and 34 are estimated to be registered to vote, whereas 92 per cent of people who are aged over 55 in Scotland are registered. We need to make sure that many more young people and other voters are eligible to take part in our democracy.

Bob Doris: Does the member agree that those issues are particularly prevalent in areas of deprivation, which also have low turnout? As I said in my contribution, there is a higher rejection rate in relation to spoilt papers in those areas. There is a triple disenfranchisement, so we need to take those issues forward in a strategic fashion.

Paul McLennan: I agree. The figures are produced at national level, so there are not figures for local areas, including those of multiple deprivation. More work needs to be done on that. We discussed those issues in the committee. The minister might want to comment on them, as we should perhaps do something in that regard. That is particularly important.

We touched on the accessibility of voting. One of the options that is being considered is the possibility of there being companions for people who need help when they are casting their votes. The Scottish Government is minded to increase the number of voters whom a companion can support in a Scottish election to five. That would be an improvement.

The Scottish Government's suite of measures are aimed at increasing the registration of voters and, potentially, helping younger and foreign national voters to take part in our democracy. The consultation also looks at the increasing levels of abuse that we suffer as politicians and what sanctions we can put in place to deter such abuse.

I encourage all members to publicise the consultation, and I encourage members of the public to take part in it.

15:48

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, which, at its core, is about making our democracy fairer, more inclusive and more transparent. The Government's consultation touches on a number of different areas of electoral law and proposes several possible changes.

How candidates are treated when they are on the election campaign trail has always been an issue, but it has become more prominent in recent years. As MSPs, we know personally how divisive political campaigns can, and have, become. Many of us have personally experienced harassment or intimidation at some point during our political careers. Even for people who are fortunate enough not to have encountered that type of behaviour, we know that it is far too common in elections for all levels of government.

It is therefore right that we consult on whether the provisions of part 5 of the Elections Act 2022 should be replicated for elections that are held in Scotland. That would ensure that anyone charged with certain offences, including hostile behaviour towards candidates, campaigners or elected politicians, would be disqualified from holding any elected office of their own.

It is important to consider whether additional sanctions for those who intimidate candidates or elected politicians would be effective in encouraging more people to stand for election. I hope that the responses to the consultation will make it clear whether that is likely to be the case.

Perhaps the most significant single change proposed in the consultation is to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to stand in Scottish elections. Our amendment speaks about safeguards for young people being at the heart of the proposals. It is clear that there needs to be a balanced approach to the issue. We have heard about the enthusiasm that such individuals have for the electoral process, but we also have to take on board how volatile things could be for some of that process. Balances and checks need to be in place to ensure that they are safeguarded.

It is right to be open about our system of democracy, but we must also ensure that participation is possible. In the case of 16 and 17-year-olds, wellbeing must be considered. For example, I have spoken about the potential harassment and intimidation that candidates might encounter in all types of elections. When the target of such intimidating behaviour could be a 16-year-old candidate, is it fair to ask whether they should

be allowed to be put in that position? Is it fair to put them, their families and their compatriots and friends at risk? Someone who is young and active has the enthusiasm for it all and is normally surrounded by individuals who give them that enthusiasm. We do not want that to be removed.

Willie Rennie: I am sympathetic to the points that the member makes. I have spoken in the chamber about violence in schools, but I do not propose to abolish education. I would far prefer to have a better political environment so that 16 and 17-year-olds can enjoy the rights that we have rather than restricting those rights because of the environment.

Alexander Stewart: Willie Rennie makes a valid point and I thank him for his intervention, but safeguards need to be in place. We would have to ensure that there were safeguards. He talks about education. There should be safeguards for individuals in an education establishment. If there is a breakdown at present and people are at risk, that seems to be where it has happened. We would need to ensure that safeguards existed and that they were advanced and endorsed by us and organisations that represent and support 16 and 17-year-olds.

Bob Doris: I was inspired to intervene by the idea of safeguards. I suppose that a political party that put forward a 16 or 17-year-old as a candidate would also have a duty of care and its own assessment process. It would be interesting to know what other safeguards Mr Stewart thinks would be worth while to enable us to have cross-party consensus about 16 and 17-year-olds having candidacy rights. That could get us all in the one place on the matter.

Alexander Stewart: There have been discussions at party level about what could be put in place. Those should be expanded during the consultation. We should also get views from 16 and 17-year-olds because, if there is to be a consensus, it is important to take on board their feelings and views. The consultation provides an opportunity to widen the scope and talk through what might be possible.

Given the risks that the proposals might pose to young people's wellbeing, it is essential to have a full impact assessment that can be discussed. I suggest that we do that.

Improving voter engagement more generally should be a key aim of the consultation. The proposal to extend existing mail-out rules to local elections, which would allow each candidate to send one freepost letter or leaflet to their potential voters, is one way in which engagement could be improved. We know that voter engagement tends to be lower in local elections, and that is reflected clearly when we look at turnout statistics. The

previous two Scottish local elections achieved turnouts of 46.9 per cent and 44.8 per cent. That compares with 55.8 per cent and 63.5 per cent for the previous two Scottish Parliament elections. Addressing such disparities will take time, and they will not be solved by any single measure. Allowing wide engagement from all council candidates is the most effective measure. It is important that the Government considers views on that carefully.

The public have a huge interest in the rules regarding electoral boundaries. It will be important to ensure that any changes in that area not only are transparent and fair but are seen to be so by the public. We have all seen the accusations of gerrymandering that accompany changes to electoral boundaries. It is therefore clear that the issue is of great interest to the public, and it was quite important that the Scottish Elections Reform Act 2020 removed ministerial discretion from the boundary reform proposals that were made at that stage. That led to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee having a greater role in the boundary reform process in 2021, when it rejected two proposed reforms to local government boundaries.

MSPs still have the final say on reforms to their own constituencies and regions, with all the potential conflict of interest claims that that might create.

George Adam: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Alexander Stewart: Of course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief, minister.

George Adam: Does Mr Stewart agree with what I said earlier to Mr Rennie? This will be the first time that we will be doing this as a Parliament, and there needs to be a level of maturity even if, for talking's sake, the Boundary Commission comes back and changes the boundaries of the great town of Paisley. We all have to look at the situation with a level of maturity that is good for the voting public, not just for ourselves.

Alexander Stewart: The minister makes a valid point. We have an interest in the process, but so do the constituents who live within those boundaries. Communities do not like being ripped apart or being added to areas with which they feel no affiliation. Public trust is very important to the whole process.

The consultation touches on many aspects of our democracy, and it is not possible to do justice to all of them in one debate. We have seen that by the amount of time that we have had to speak today.

In conclusion, wherever there is an opportunity for positive reform to our electoral practices, Conservative members stand ready to listen constructively. We await the Government's final proposals in this area, and we hope that transparency, fairness and the safeguarding of young people's wellbeing will be at the heart of the reforms.

15:58

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): True democracy requires equal access for all when it comes to voting, standing for election and remaining in office. Electoral reform is vital to achieve that, and I commend the Government for its ambitious plans and look forward to reading the consultation responses. Scotland has been progressive in previous reform. Extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds has built a generation of committed and well-informed voters. I welcome the collegiate nature of today's debate and the minister's opening remarks. Although I did not agree with them all, I have enjoyed the contributions and debate so far.

Currently, 45 per cent of the members of the Parliament are women. That is progress, but significant improvement is required in some areas. I have spoken in the chamber before about challenges that I face as a woman in politics, and I would like to use this opportunity not to get into the finer points of the proposals but to raise the issue once more, and contribute to a conversation on mitigating some of the barriers, both through the current reforms and into the future.

That is because there are barriers against women in politics across national and local government, from sexist abuse to caring responsibilities or the need for childcare, and from demanding and unpredictable schedules—as has been mentioned today—to low pay in local government, to name but a few.

Historically, politics has been dominated by men and, according to Engender, that has led to men being considered the default figure in politics. Globally, we see young women leaders not being taken seriously. When Jacinda Ardern and Sanna Marin met on official business in New Zealand, journalists asked whether the reason behind the meeting was their shared age and gender. Would such a question have been put had they been male prime ministers? I do not think so.

We need to reduce barriers to women not only standing for office but remaining in politics. Studies show that women are more likely to leave elected office sooner than their male counterparts. Often when they do so, they return to constituency-level voluntary work. Men, on the

other hand, are more likely to move on to other professional political roles.

Local government is a key pipeline into national politics. I probably would not be in Parliament today if I had not stood for election to Stirling Council in 2017. However, research shows that the typical councillor in Scotland is an able-bodied white man in his fifties.

There are many barriers to women entering politics, and some are more difficult to address than others. In their report "Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women", Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50 recommend increasing councillor remuneration as a key step toward making standing for local government more tenable for women. The reform that we are discussing offers an opportunity to do so—one that I think we should take.

Alexander Stewart: Remuneration is very important. Before I came to the Parliament, I had the privilege of being a councillor for 18 years and, during that time, remuneration was a massive issue. I believe that the issue prevents younger and female candidates from coming forward. The remuneration that councillors receive is not enough to allow them to carry out other roles and responsibilities if being a councillor is the only thing that they can do. The role of councillor does not take up a short time; it can be even more lengthy than the job that we do here.

Evelyn Tweed: I completely agree with the member. Remuneration is very important, and we need to consider it further, for young people and for women. There is also the point that a lot of people think that being a councillor is a part-time job, but it just is not. Members who have been councillors, including Mr Stewart, will know that it is a full-time job. To do a councillor's job well, it has to be done full time.

Stephen Kerr: Does the member think that the time has come for us to consider reform of local government? I know that that is not part of the consultation that we are debating but, in a way, the member's comments—with which I agree—lead us to a point where we have to consider the number of councillors, the number of councils and their functions. Is it time that we look at that again?

Evelyn Tweed: That is a good point well made, but possibly that is for another day.

As a councillor, I ran surgeries in far-flung and remote places—which Mr Kerr will know, as he knows the size of the patch that I work. I would turn up to empty halls that had no mobile signal, with my location widely advertised, and basically I did not feel safe. When I raised this with the council, its response was to ask whether my husband knew where I was and if he would notice if I did not return. That was not quite the response

that I was looking for. It would actually have been funny were it not so serious. That is a barrier to women running and staying in local politics, and it needs to be seriously looked at by councils.

I am not saying that all councils are the same, because I have heard from others that they get very good support but, locally in my case, I did not. When I asked male colleagues for help on that point, I was not given it. I do not know whether that was because they felt that it was not manly to ask for such support, but we definitely need to look at that. I look forward to seeing how the reforms will put in place support to encourage women to stand for office and stay in office.

Engender also calls for quotas to ensure gender parity among candidates. That remains a reserved matter, but I call on the Government to continue to raise the issue with Westminster, to share the benefits that such measures bring and to make a case for the devolution of those powers.

The reform also offers an opportunity to shore up protection for candidates, which we spoke about earlier in the debate. Generally speaking, women are significantly more likely to experience harassment and abuse than men, and that risk only increases in public-facing roles. Women in politics are under scrutiny from the press and face abuse, online and offline, over their personal lives and their appearance. That risk is even further compounded for minoritised women, with women of colour, disabled women and members of the LGBTQ+ community experiencing disproportionate levels of abuse and harassment.

In the current reform of the legislation around intimidation and beyond, we must take the gendered dynamics of intimidation and harassment seriously. How can we expect more equal representation if we cannot ensure safety?

We have an opportunity in Scotland to use the reforms to show that we value diverse voices and that everyone, regardless of age, gender, race or disability, has a place in politics. It is an opportunity that we must take.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Graeme Dey is the last speaker in the open debate.

16:06

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): As the minister's immediate predecessor, I took two electoral bills through in the previous session of Parliament. I recall that, during the passage of the second of those, which set the terms for the conduct of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, I acknowledged that we had by no means reached the end of the road as far as electoral reform was concerned. Therefore, I am pleased to note the

consultation on the topic and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

My abiding memory of that second piece of legislation—the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Act 2021—was the cross-party consensus that we were able to build around it. Of course, the pandemic had focused minds but, even allowing for that, the tenor of the process was overwhelmingly constructive, despite the fact that, for some, the prospect of the election proceeding was less enticing than it was for others.

Sadly, this session of Parliament has been—unnecessarily—a more confrontational beast than the previous one. However, I am heartened by the tone of today's debate and I live in hope, not least because, as the minister alluded to, we as politicians cannot escape our responsibilities when it comes to encouraging increased voter registration and active participation. Nor can we kid ourselves that our actions cannot and do not have a detrimental impact on both.

The image of politics at UK level has been badly tarnished in recent times, and I suspect that that has turned even more people off voting. At Holyrood, we have not suffered from anything like the same kind of issues, but we nevertheless need to be mindful of the nature of our discourse here and how it is reported and perceived. We cannot, on one hand, commit to encouraging greater involvement in the political process and, on the other hand, act in a way that at least some of those whom we seek to bring inside the electoral tent find off-putting.

Although we might all draw a bit of encouragement from our record 63 per cent turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, we should not forget the resources that were committed to boosting postal vote participation. In his ministerial foreword to the consultation, George Adam references underrepresented groups, including young people and foreign nationals, and he is right to do so. However, as politicians, during election campaigns, we have all met swathes of individuals who would not be covered by those headings but who simply never vote, let alone contemplate standing for election at any level. We need to consider how we engage those folk, which is where I am coming from with my point about us, as politicians, setting the right tone.

Turning to the content of the Government's consultation, we need to be completely open-minded on reform. At the same time, we should not rush to make changes for the sake of it or just because we think that something needs to be done. I am not suggesting for a moment that that is what the Government is doing, but I am reminded of a legitimate discussion that we had

during the passage of the elections legislation in the previous session of the Parliament about the accepted electoral advantage of council candidates whose surnames place them in the early part of the alphabet and, therefore, of the ballot paper.

There were people who outright and from the outset favoured randomisation. We could see the attractiveness of that at face value but, when we looked at the very large number of ballot papers that would have to be issued to ensure that no bias of another nature might inadvertently come into play, we realised the challenges. That should not be an excuse to dismiss what, at face value, is a reasonable suggestion, but it illustrates the need to interrogate the pros and cons of any significant electoral change that we consider.

We have made progress in recent times on expanding voting and candidacy rights and now, logically, the question arises whether 16 and 17-year-olds should have the right to stand for election. I admit that I am torn between the arguments for and against but, on balance, I tend to believe that there is a case for dipping our toe in the water in the form of local government elections. However, in keeping with my point about listening to all the pros and cons, Douglas Ross's point about the workload at council elections, Donald Cameron's amendment about safeguarding and Willie Rennie's views about the Parliament needing to reflect the electorate that puts it here are all valid and need to be considered.

On whether individuals who have been found guilty of harassment or intimidation of politicians, candidates or campaigners should lose the right to stand for election for five years, I have no qualms. I absolutely support such a measure, not least because of the deterrent effect and the spin-off benefit of hopefully encouraging people to stand who might otherwise not stand when they read of court cases involving the abuse of, and threats to, political representatives. Let us face the fact that there are, sadly, far more of those occurrences than attract publicity. Anyone who believes that such behaviour is acceptable has no place in elected office.

Other proposals, such as those on the publication of the home addresses of candidates who act as their own agents or the listing of which council ward a candidate resides in, require a little bit more consideration.

On chapter 2 of the consultation and the proposals on increasing registration, the fact that 17 per cent of eligible voters in Scotland are not registered or not correctly registered at their current address is concerning. I am all in favour of considering processes to improve that position, but I go back to my earlier point that, if people do

not wish to register or do not see it as a priority to re-register when they move house, that is a reflection of the importance that they place on voting and we politicians need to reflect on that.

There is much more in the consultation, which is as comprehensive as one would hope, that I wanted to address, especially in relation to the accessibility of voting and absent voting, but I confess that, at the point of preparing the speech, I expected to be far more constrained in the time that was available to me.

However, I will comment on Willie Rennie's speech. It was typically humorous and memorable on two counts. First, I think that I heard him say something positive about the concept of independence. Secondly, in a surely similarly unique occurrence, we had an eight-minute speech from Mr Rennie on electoral reform and not a single mention of the F word—federalism. I know that he will take my comments in the spirit in which they were intended.

I will finish on a positive note: I have every confidence in the ability of this institution to debate and shape a set of electoral reforms that we can get behind and that will improve the processes and the landscape in Scotland. The debate has shown that that is possible. I look forward to it happening.

16:13

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have enjoyed the richness of the debate this afternoon. We have had longer speeches and better debating. It has been more friendly, less combative and constructive. It is a lesson in what we should do in the Parliament and we should learn from it. The only weakness of the debate is that some members of the Parliament, who I am sure could have added to the debate, are missing.

Elections are the foundation of a thriving democracy, so I welcome the debate and the opportunity to consider where our electoral system can be fine tuned. Every member in the chamber can speak with experience not only as a voter but as a candidate and MSP. That has led to a wide-ranging debate.

Before I pick up on the salient points that have been raised, I will talk about my concerns about lowering the voting age to 16. Despite what many people in here might think, I can remember back to 1977: Baccara, Supertramp, Fleetwood Mac, Carly Simon, 10cc, the Sex Pistols and The Clash were all great bands. Presiding Officer, I will let you decide which track from those bands summed me up, if not all of them. Suffice it to say that, at that stage, I was no more ready to do what I am doing now than I was to fly to the moon.

Planning law, equalities and local government finance were not matters that I knew much about or, frankly, cared much about. Finding sufficient finance to go to the pub for a few pints and to play darts, which I often won, was critical as, indeed, was trying to make myself look 18, which I was clearly not. It might well be that, at the age of 16, I was not representative of my country, but I guess that I was representative of my age and my friends.

What is more, my lived experience was truly limited. It was not until I had lived that I gained experience. Living as a soldier, I learned of conflict and leadership, and later as a surveyor, I came to fully understand industry and finance, which was critical in allowing me to do what I am doing now. It was only then that I can honestly say that I had an informed and balanced opinion.

Emma Roddick: I appreciate the point that the member is making about experience, but we often talk about the lived experience that is represented in this chamber, and for many of us, a lot of that happened before the age of 16. Does the member appreciate that it is not the same for everybody and that there is more to life experience than reaching a specific age?

Edward Mountain: I absolutely accept that, but I am sure that the member will also accept that many people come to MSPs as their final port of call when they have a really serious problem, and they look to those MSPs to give them some guidance and a way through the problems that they face. Not everyone has faced those problems previously. It is only later in life, when we have seen such problems and how people have dealt with them, that we can know the best way to deal with them. There is a balance to be struck there.

I now turn to the subject of the debate. I always like to try to agree with the minister when we meet—he does not seem to think that that is the case. However, let us start with the things on which we agree: I agree that there should be more participation of voters and more accessibility, and I also agreed with some other things in the minister's speech.

The reform of the electoral system should be evolutionary not revolutionary, and it should encourage engagement, as Donald Cameron made quite clear in his speech. He expressed concern about abuse—as many members did—and I will pick up on that. Abuse is a concern for everyone, but such abuse should not be allowed to discourage participation.

I was also interested in Willie Rennie's speech—there is not much that anyone cannot learn from Willie Rennie when it comes to elections and photographs. I agree with a lot of what he said: we should encourage participation,

but we should question at what age a young person can do something because we are completely all over the place when it comes to drinking, marriage and elections. Perhaps the Parliament should look at all that more closely.

I have listened to Bob Doris speak eloquently in committee, and I take my hat off to him because he speaks clearly about the need for accessibility and to reduce the number of rejected ballots. It is a thread of thought that I have heard from him before and I am behind him in trying to achieve a positive outcome on that. I was also pleased that he said that he supports a ban on people who abuse people who are standing for election.

I absolutely take Stephen Kerr's points about protecting democracy. I gave 15 years of my life to doing that, and I think that we all have a duty to do that in everything that we do. I agree with him about encouraging voter participation, and I agree with his point that the Parliament should be about the battle of ideas not a battle between people. We forget that so often.

Emma Roddick came up with some salient points about diversity and engagement. I note that she is less concerned about people aged 16 standing than I am, and I agree that we may disagree on that. However, the other point that she made about the danger of showing candidates' addresses is something that we should be concerned about, and I like the idea of stating that a candidate's address is within a particular ward rather than showing their actual home address.

Paul McLennan spoke eloquently about concerns over working hours in this chamber for young people if they were allowed to be elected. I think that that is a problem. He also spoke about abuse of candidates and said that 44 per cent of candidates had faced abuse, which is not something that we should be proud of. In addition, he spoke about the importance of getting voters to register, and I agree totally with him.

Alexander Stewart spoke about the need to ensure that elections are fairer and more inclusive, and I agree. He also spoke about abuse. I will give an example because I think that it is a shame on us and we should all stand against it. In 2014, my son came back from Afghanistan, having served seven-and-a-half months with the Afghan police in Helmand—not a great posting. He came back to help me in an election campaign and ended up being head-butted by a person in Inverness, as he stood between my wife and that person. It was completely unacceptable, and we all have stories like that. I make no excuse for people who do such things—I do not care which side they come from. We should all stand up against that behaviour, and that is why I believe that Alexander Stewart is entirely right to say that anyone who does such things should be disqualified from public office for

a period. I would be stronger and say that they should be disqualified for a long period, because I think that such behaviour is unacceptable and brings Scotland into disrepute.

Evelyn Tweed spoke about looking forward to the consultation. I agree with her, and we need to encourage people to engage with it. She also spoke about the importance of reducing barriers, especially for women, and I agree totally with that as well.

Anyone who stands up in this Parliament to say that they disagreed with this would have to be a strong person, but I think that we undervalue our local politicians. We not only undervalue but underpay them—we expect them to do a huge amount for very little. I very much take the point that, in most cases, it is a full-time job for those who do that work and do what their constituents ask; we should do more to respect and reward them.

Graeme Dey and I often have good arguments. He is a strong parliamentarian and I agree with what he said about the fact that politics should be about the conflict between ideas and not between individuals—that was reflected in many of the speeches this afternoon. I also agree with him that we should encourage people by maintaining our standards here at the highest possible level, to show that that is what we expect everyone else to do. We used to call it leading by example.

In conclusion, electoral reform should not be rash or rushed through—indeed, electoral reform should be done thoughtfully and cautiously. We need to be mindful that the effect of the proposed measures might be the opposite—and sometimes adverse—of the one that we had intended. What is more, I believe that changes must result in good legislation, based on informed and knowledgeable debate. None of that can be sacrificed as we seek to become more inclusive.

I do not think that anyone has ever accused me of being wise beyond my years, but I am wiser for my years, and that is something that we should consider. The Scottish Conservatives will await the outcomes of the consultation and we encourage everyone across Scotland to engage with it.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call George Adam to wind up the debate.

16:24

George Adam: Normally, when a minister gets up at the end of a debate like this and says that it has been a good debate, it is written down for him to say so. However, on this occasion, it has been a very good debate. You have been encouraging, Presiding Officer, and we have talked about the

big ideas and how we go forward. It has been done in a manner that is fitting of this Parliament.

How we conduct ourselves is really important. A lot has been said in the debate about abuse, particularly of politicians. As I have said in a number of interventions, I think that we are the starting point—it is about how we in this Parliament conduct ourselves and how that is transmitted out in Scotland. It is not about neutering debate or making it less passionate or robust; it is about the language that we use, how we conduct ourselves and how we put our point across.

Mr Kerr said that I always do that with a smile and a bit of humour, but I normally find that that is disarming enough to ensure that we get through a debate in such a way that we can debate the issues, while treating one another with respect and showing the people of Scotland that we are the heart of Scottish democracy. That is important for us all.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister take an intervention?

George Adam: Yes; I was going to mention Ms Hyslop.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the minister think that words such as “lickspittle” are probably inappropriate for use in the chamber?

George Adam: There are quite a lot of terms that have been used over the past few months that should not have been used in Scotland’s Parliament. The Presiding Officer has pulled me up on a number of occasions for some of the things that I have said. As Ms Hyslop said in her earlier intervention, it is about how we look at ourselves and how we interact. We need to look at ourselves and ask whether we are part of the problem in relation to some of the abuse that is going on externally.

Edward Mountain: Does the minister agree that, in having this debate, we have proved how important it is not to have set-piece skirmishes in this Parliament, and that debating things properly, as we have done this afternoon, with more generous time limits allows arguments to be developed, which would be a good starting point for reform in the chamber?

George Adam: I have already said that we have had a good debate today. We have debated the ideas and the subject matter, which, in itself, is important.

At the end of his speech, Edward Mountain said that it is about a “battle of ideas”, which I have already acknowledged. I would also say that, in 1977, when he was 16, I am guessing, I was in primary school, although I do not want him to feel bad about that. I think that he is doing himself a

disservice, though, if he does not think that he could fly to the moon—I am sure that NASA could use an ageing astronaut.

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): William Shatner.

George Adam: William Shatner has already been in space.

Mr Mountain believes that 16 and 17-year-olds should not be considered when it comes to voting because they are all different. However, he talked about life experience and Emma Roddick made the point that that is the important thing. Some 16 and 17-year-olds have experienced completely different lives and have skills that are completely different from those of others. By the time that they get to that age, they might have lived through things that others have not. They might have the lived experience to serve in a place like this or on a council. To me, that is the important part of the debate.

Donald Cameron also brought up the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds and the question of whether those in mental health institutions should have the vote, which we are consulting on. With regard to the Tory amendment, any change to the law in relation to 16 and 17-year-olds would be accompanied by a full assessment of the potential impact, which will be included in an equality impact assessment and a children's rights and wellbeing impact assessment, both of which would be published when a bill is introduced in Parliament. I hope that that puts Tory minds at rest in that regard.

Willie Rennie mentioned that, when he was out and about in the United States of America, he saw some gerrymandering of boundaries at close quarters. As I have mentioned throughout the debate, this Parliament will be looking at its boundaries when the Boundary Commission for Scotland makes its submission. We must have a level of maturity to deal with that and consider what is best for the public rather than for the elected members.

Willie Rennie: I completely agree with the minister. Would he consider a boundary review along the lines of what was achieved in America and perhaps link North East Fife with Paisley? *[Laughter.]*

George Adam: Presiding Officer, you might or might not know that Mr Rennie went to what was then Paisley College of Technology, which is now part of the University of the West of Scotland. Once someone has been to Paisley, they can never leave, because it is the centre of the universe. That is why Mr Rennie wants to bring Paisley back to his home in Fife.

Bob Doris talked about accessibility during elections, and I hope that we have put his mind at rest with some of the plans that we have for that. When I was a councillor, I was made the council rep for the Renfrewshire Access Panel. Nobody knew what it was, which shows how well-attended it was and how many engaged with it. The panel is for those people who had problems with access. Basically, I went in to get people involved in the process. It went from a room of angry people who wanted to have a go at the council to a room of people who were engaged and wanted to be involved with the process. That is what this consultation is all about—trying to engage people and let them be part of the process to move things forward.

Bob also brought up the duty of the Electoral Commission to consider rejected ballots. I might consider exploring that further with him because that is an important part of our democracy.

During a debate when we are all agreeing with one another, Stephen, my old sparring buddy, still managed to fall out with somebody. That is an incredible talent.

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely did not fall out with anybody. The Presiding Officer was not in the chair at the time and she needs to know that as a matter of fact.

George Adam: I have never heard anybody except Stephen Kerr mention the declaration of Arbroath during a debate on electoral reform. Who knew that he was a closet nationalist? During his speech, he gave us a history lesson. He also mentioned voter ID. We will not agree on that so I will move on.

Another thing that Stephen Kerr brought up was how we should have a robust debate, but I make the point that we—myself included—have to be careful with our words. We can all get excited in the heat of debate and say something that we possibly should not say. However, at the end of the day, we need to lead by example.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, let me just stop you for a moment. I know that we are having a consensual debate, but I remind members of chamber etiquette. That is all that I will say at this point, and I hope that it will be enough. Please continue, minister.

George Adam: I think that I might have used first names on about three occasions in my contribution.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, my comments were not directed at you.

George Adam: I am always feeling guilty, Presiding Officer, because I always want to do things by the book.

Emma Roddick brought up the fact that she voted for the first time during the independence referendum in 2014. That is quite incredible—that woman is now a member of the Scottish Parliament, having voted for the first time in 2014.

Ms Roddick would be the first to say that this has been a challenging year and a half for settling into Parliament, but, as I have said previously, it is up to us and to this institution to ensure that the Parliament represents everyone in our communities. As the youngest member of Parliament, things have been difficult for Ms Roddick, but she has made some important points, particularly those about disabled voters. I hope that I have explained how we will go about looking at those issues.

Paul McLennan mentioned the need to engage with the public to ensure that the voting register is up to date. That is an important point to bring up. We must ensure that everyone feels the need to register so that they can get involved in all elections.

Alexander Stewart again brought up the question of who would want to be a politician or get involved in politics. I do not believe that every 16 or 17-year-old wants to be involved in an election, but I was a member of the SNP at 16. Might I have wanted to put myself forward? I might have been an arrogant enough young man to think about doing that. Am I happy with the way that things have worked out and am I comfy in my skin? Yes. That goes back to what Edward Mountain said about lived experience. For me, it was a bit different; others' experience will be entirely different, too. I am comfortable with the way that things have worked out for me.

Young men and women might be watching today or thinking that they want to get involved in the process. Surely, that is to be commended. The University of Edinburgh's recent findings on 16 and 17-year-olds voting shows that we have managed to engage with young people and that they will vote in future elections. That is a good thing. We must ensure that anyone who is voting also has the right to be involved in that election. I think that should be our way forward.

Evelyn Tweed talked about gender quotas. I agree that this Parliament has evolved during my time here—45 per cent of members are female. It is only right that this place should represent Scotland's public. Much of what we have discussed today shows that. Some of the flexibilities that the Parliament now offers—such as remote working or the pilot of proxy voting that we are running at the moment—may have made it a wee bit easier for everyone to look at a career in politics. However, there was also talk of intimidation and things that happen during elections. We must all be very mindful of that.

What can I say about my predecessor, Graeme Dey? He reminded everyone that, as the then Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, he took through not one, but two election bills, adding that he did so during a pandemic.

Graeme Dey: No pressure.

George Adam: There is no pressure there, whatsoever. He also said how consensual that all was. Today is a perfect example of how consensual we can all be.

Mr Dey was the last SNP speaker in the open debate. We managed to get through a whole election debate without anyone bringing up the issue of council election ballot papers or talking about alphabetical order. As I always say, people are always a wee bit sceptical of me. I must declare an interest because my sister, Jennifer Adam, is a councillor. Last year's result was accepted by all. I have not been looking for any way to change ballot papers, mostly because the technology for randomisation or any other way that we might go forward is not ready at this stage. I am not willing to take a risk that might mean people start to doubt the results of elections. However, I know and accept that there is an issue, and I am willing to talk to everyone regarding how we can move forward.

This has been a good debate. I have enjoyed it. We have big ideas about how to move forward and I encourage members to promote the consultation as widely as possible. I look forward to continued engagement on the subject during the consultation process. I will leave it there and thank everyone for their contributions.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the electoral reform consultation.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:37

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions—S6M-07746, on committee remits, and S6M-07747 on the office of the clerk.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

(a) the remit of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee be amended to—

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, with the exception of matters relating to rural land use, wildlife crime and animal welfare.

(b) the name and remit of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee be amended to—

Name of Committee: Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Remit: To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands; and on matters relating to rural land use, wildlife crime and animal welfare falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport.

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on Monday 8 May 2023.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on those motions will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

16:38

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

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.38 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:38

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-07721.1, in the name of Donald Cameron, which seeks to amend motion S6M-07721, in the name of George Adam, on electoral reform consultation, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is that motion S6M-07721, in the name of George Adam, as amended, on electoral reform consultation, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's consultation on electoral reform, which seeks views on how to improve the process of taking part in elections for voters, candidates, campaigners, and administrators; welcomes that the proposals in the consultation include improvements in relation to standing for election, the accessibility of voting, the scheduling of elections, campaigning, and the administration and governance of elections; notes that views are sought on a range of measures introduced by the UK Elections Act 2022 and the impact they have on Scottish devolved elections; encourages interested individuals and organisations to respond to the consultation and ensure their views are heard before the consultation closes on 15 March 2023; acknowledges that the safeguarding of young people must be at the heart of any proposal, and believes that any new measures that affect candidacy and voting rights should be subject to a full impact assessment.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-07746 and S6M-07747, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that—

(a) the remit of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee be amended to—

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, with the exception of matters relating to rural land use, wildlife crime and animal welfare.

(b) the name and remit of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee be amended to—

Name of Committee: Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Remit: To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands; and on matters relating to rural land use, wildlife crime and animal welfare falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport.

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on Monday 8 May 2023.

Heart Month 2023

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07161, in the name of Paul McLennan, on heart month, February 2023. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated.

That the Parliament recognises that February 2023 is heart month; understands that ischaemic heart disease is still the single biggest killer in Scotland and that British Heart Foundation Scotland estimates that 11,000 people in East Lothian and 700,000 people in Scotland are currently living with the effects of heart disease; further understands that British Heart Foundation currently funds £53.1 million in ongoing research in Scotland across 10 universities in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews and Stirling, which is 54% of publicly funded cardiovascular research, and notes that British Heart Foundation Scotland's priorities for heart disease services in East Lothian and across Scotland are to tackle heart disease risk factors, ensure timely and equitable care, and improve the collection and use of data.

16:41

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted to be opening this evening's members' business debate on heart month and I thank colleagues for attending tonight. February is heart month 2023.

I thank the British Heart Foundation for the briefing; there are a few key messages that it wants us to emphasise today. First, it asks us to do what we can to promote fundraising for the lifesaving research that the BHF undertakes. I will touch on that later.

Secondly, the British Heart Foundation is asking the public to learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation, with its new online tool, RevivR. For context, there are around 3,200 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests in Scotland each year and the survival rate is just one in 10. Performing CPR and using a defibrillator can more than double the chances of survival in some cases of cardiac arrest.

I have been involved in football coaching for many years and I have, sadly, seen two or three players die as young as 14, 15 or 16 years old. If there had been CPR or people who were aware of cardiac arrest and how to deal with it, those players might have survived. Every minute without CPR and defibrillation reduces the chance of survival by up to 10 per cent.

RevivR is a free online training course in which people can learn CPR in 15 minutes using just a phone and a cushion. The tool gives feedback on CPR technique and teaches the signs of cardiac arrest and when to call 999. It includes a step-by-step guide on how to use a defibrillator. I know

that many of us will have learned that on first aid courses that run over a period of time, but RevivR is a really simple way to learn CPR that can be done at home in just 15 minutes.

I will give a bit of context by sharing some figures on heart disease from my constituency. In East Lothian, 11,000 people are living with heart and circulatory diseases and 1,800 people have been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, which I will touch on later. Twelve thousand people have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, 750 have been diagnosed with heart failure by their general practitioner and 770 people have a faulty gene that can cause an inherited heart-related condition. In East Lothian, 27 per cent of adults are living with obesity and 16 per cent of adults smoke.

The British Heart Foundation is the largest public funder of cardiovascular research in Scotland. BHF Scotland is currently funding research worth over £53.1 million across Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Stirling and St Andrews. That funding contributes an estimated £80.6 million in gross value added to the Scottish economy and supports almost 1,900 jobs.

Last year, along with a few other members, I had the pleasure of visiting BHF's Edinburgh research centre at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh. If members are interested, they should speak to BHF Scotland—I am sure that it would take them to visit the nearest centre.

BHF Scotland is also working as part of the non-communicable disease alliance Scotland to improve Scotland's health. In 2021, nearly 53,000 deaths in Scotland were caused by non-communicable disease, which equates to 83 per cent of all deaths. Estimates by the British Heart Foundation suggest that around one in five of those deaths is directly related to alcohol, tobacco, weight and obesity. I know that the Scottish Government is currently working on all those issues.

This morning, along with Gillian Mackay and Dr Gulhane, I met the NCD alliance Scotland. Along with three other colleagues, we will be meeting the alliance monthly to discuss policy issues. NCD alliance Scotland is a coalition of 19 health organisations and charities that are campaigning for action to reduce the ill health and death that are driven by health-harming products including alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks. Ill health and disability caused by tobacco, alcohol, weight and obesity are estimated to cost the Scottish economy between £5.6 billion and £9.3 billion every year. NCDs are estimated to cost the national health service £1.6 billion every year and the disease burden for NCDs is set to increase by 21.3 per cent by 2043.

I also thank Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland for its briefing, which raises important issues. Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland is Scotland's largest charity supporting people living with chest, heart and stroke conditions. Last year, it supported 13,000 people through its advice line, community support services and stroke nurses. It also has a hospital-to-home service to support people who are living with heart conditions from the moment that they leave hospital. Again, I know that that is something that the cabinet secretary has raised on a broader basis.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I commend Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland for the work that it does in community sports outreach work. It does that in my constituency with walking football for many people who are stroke survivors and have heart conditions. I have seen the transformative nature of that work in the communities that I serve, although I have to say to Mr Yousaf that both my knees are now gashed because of it, which might put waiting lists up elsewhere in the system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr McLennan.

Paul McLennan: I was going to touch on that subject. One of the key things that CHSS also mentions is that it facilitates 110 peer-support groups that provide emotional support, connection and advice to more than 2,800 people. It also talks about the groups that Bob Doris mentioned, so it plays a big part in the community.

I come back to the hospital-to-home service. It exists to support people as soon as they leave hospital, which is incredibly important. CHSS estimates that that service could support 38,000 people with chest, heart and stroke conditions each year if it was available in every health board. I have already mentioned that CHSS facilitates peer-support groups.

I also thank the Stroke Association for its briefing. Risk factors for stroke are similar to those for heart diseases.

I want to touch on atrial fibrillation, which I mentioned earlier. I will call it "AF" for ease. AF is a condition that causes an irregular heartbeat and raises a person's risk of having a serious stroke. More than 105,000 people in Scotland have been diagnosed with AF, and it is estimated that around 35,000 people in Scotland are living with undiagnosed AF.

AF makes a person five times more likely to have a stroke. People who are diagnosed with AF have an individual stroke-risk assessment to make sure that they get the right treatment and advice. Strokes that are due to AF tend to be more serious, with more damage to the brain and worse long-term effects, so people with AF are offered

any treatment that they need to reduce the risk of stroke.

An estimated six strokes are caused by AF every day in Scotland. In East Lothian alone, around 1,800 people have been diagnosed with AF. In a recent poll that was carried out by the Stroke Association, 67 per cent of people said they had never checked themselves for AF. When testing themselves, 79 per cent of people said that they found their pulse straight away or within a few seconds. It is easy to do and everyone should be doing it.

I want to close with a personal story. Two weeks past, my mum experienced numbness in her left arm and hand over the weekend. She phoned her general practitioner on the Monday and was seen that day. She was referred to the stroke clinic on the Wednesday—it was thought that she had had a mini stroke. She was booked in for an operation to remove a blockage in her neck the following Tuesday, the operation took place on the Wednesday and she was back home on the Thursday. She was diagnosed, referred and had the operation all within 10 days.

We have a fantastic national health service that we should be proud of. Let us make sure that we talk about the fantastic work that goes on every single day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

16:48

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague and friend Paul McLennan on securing this members' business debate, and I associate myself with his praise for the British Heart Foundation Scotland and for Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland.

As Paul said, February is heart month. The heart is one of the most recognised symbols in the world, from the Greek philosophers, to I "heart" New York, to video games. The heart represents our strongest emotions, both positive and negative, and our needs: it represents love, fear, pain, health, lives.

The heart is our body's power supply—without it nothing works. Electric pulses that are created by your heart supply energy to every organ in your body. If that power is switched off—if the heart stops—blood and oxygen no longer flow and the person starts to die.

Everyone in this chamber, I am sure, will have experienced the loss of a family member, friend or colleague due to cardiac arrest. Many of us, too, will know the relief of having a loved one survive. It is those experiences that lead us to try to make a difference, and to help more people to survive.

That is exactly what Mull and Iona Community Trust has done by investing in defibrillators. It has secured funding, sited defibrillators at strategic locations on the islands and appointed volunteer guardians, of whom there are 37, to check them monthly.

Research suggests that there should be one defibrillator per 1,000 people in rural areas. That equates to three defibrillators on Mull. However, the area of Mull is five times that of Glasgow, where a defibrillator every 200m is suggested, and it has around 600,000 visitors a year.

The survival rate for out-of-hospital cardiac arrests—of which there are around 3,200 in Scotland every year—is only 10 per cent. To put it starkly, every minute without cardiopulmonary resuscitation and defibrillation reduces the chance of survival by 10 per cent. With such statistics, members can understand why the Mull and Iona communities have worked so hard to increase the number of defibs on their islands.

To create such a network requires a lot of funding. People have raised money, and businesses in Argyll and Bute have worked with community councils to enhance the network of defibrillators. For example, Scottish Sea Farms has installed accessible defibs at its facilities and, when Cruachan's iconic dam and underground power station played a starring role in the television series "Andor", the Drax Group provided funds to help to create a rural defibrillator network.

However, something very simple could be done to boost the number of defibs across the country and ensure that our rural areas and less-affluent areas have access to them. It is, simply, to remove VAT from them. I have written twice to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to request that that modest proposal be considered. I very much appreciate the cross-party support for that request, and the support from a number of organisations, including St John Ambulance and community councils throughout Scotland. I hope that Westminster takes note of the Irish Government's decision to remove the 23 per cent VAT levy from defibs on 1 January this year. The Irish Heart Foundation described that as

"a victory for common sense".

I hope that the chancellor can have a heart and do the same.

I and others will not be giving up; the issue is simply too important. However, in the meantime, as Paul said, the British Heart Foundation Scotland is asking us to do two things: first, to ensure that defibs in our areas are all in the Circuit—that is, the national network of defibs that has been created by the BHF with the ambulance services for quick access to help to save lives—

and, as Paul explained, to learn CPR with the BHF's new free online tool RevivR.

This February, I urge everyone to think of hearts not just on Valentine's day but all month; in fact, I urge everyone to think of hearts all year.

I found a haiku by the American writer Eric Overby that feels like the appropriate way to conclude my contribution:

"My heart beats with you,
Love runs red throughout my veins,
Making me alive"

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give a gentle reminder and repeat the Presiding Officer's earlier comment about informality: members need to use surnames as well as first names. I think that the minister may have led you astray in the previous debate.

16:53

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Paul McLennan for securing the debate and congratulate him on doing so. It is timely and very important.

The figures in the motion highlight the devastating effect that heart disease can have on communities throughout Scotland. The numbers are stark, and they demonstrate the huge challenge that we face.

It is important that we take note of the work of the British Heart Foundation over the past 60 years and vital that we thank it for its significant contribution. It has been instrumental in countless life-saving discoveries. Its research has contributed to the first United Kingdom heart transplant, the development of pacemakers, the use of clot-busting drugs to treat heart attacks and the roll-out of genetic testing for inherited heart conditions. It is the largest independent funder of research into heart and circulatory diseases in Scotland, and it is currently funding more than £50 million of research in Scotland. That research is entirely funded by public donations.

Last year, I had the pleasure of visiting the team at the BHF shop in North Berwick in East Lothian. I met Jonathan Roden, who is British Heart Foundation Scotland's policy and public affairs manager, and Patricia Prentice, who is the North Berwick store's assistant manager. I had to rush off before buying something, so I pledge today that I will go back and make a purchase with Patricia and her team. I will say that there was a queue, before the minister chides me for that.

At the shop, I heard that volunteers are the bedrock of the work that the BHF undertakes and of the vital success that it has had with the funds that it raises. It was a reminder of the very positive experience of volunteering. As well as helping

good causes such as the BHF, volunteering is a great opportunity to meet new people, gain new skills and help the environment by giving unwanted items a new lease of life, so I encourage people across East Lothian and the south of Scotland to take up the volunteering opportunities that are available with the BHF.

I want to raise the important issue of sudden cardiac death. Sadly, our Parliament has first-hand and recent experience of that. Last year, David Hill, a friend and colleague to many of us, sadly passed away while representing this Parliament in Dublin. He died playing rugby against the Dáil and the Seanad. He died playing a sport that he loved. What is particularly devastating about the condition is the way that it hits families such as David's out of the blue with no warning. Some 80 per cent of people who die from it present no symptoms beforehand.

I take this opportunity to mention David's family. Since his death, they have raised thousands of pounds to support the charity Cardiac Risk in the Young through a music event in Dumfries—"A Day for David". There will soon be an annual rugby match between Holyrood and the Dáil at which the teams will compete for the David Hill memorial quaich, and there will be opportunities throughout the day to raise money for CRY.

We need to do more on that issue in Scotland, and I hope that the minister will consider how we might explore that. Every year, 600 young people lose their lives due to sudden cardiac death. That is 600 families who are left mourning the loss of a loved one. That is why I invite the minister to agree today to establish a national strategy for the prevention of sudden cardiac death in the young. If he is unable to do that today, is he willing to meet me and CRY to hear more about the subject?

Not only do these deaths devastate all the people who are connected to the person who dies but we lose the potential that that young person had and wanted to bring to the world and our society. All the skills that they had are lost and all the good things that they would have contributed are left undone. It is a problem that we face as a society and one that we can fix if we put our minds to it.

Once again, I thank Paul McLennan for securing today's debate.

16:57

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Paul McLennan on securing this important members' business debate. The subject is incredibly close to my heart, if members will excuse the pun, and the reason is my mother—my ma, Violet. She was an incredible woman. She took no prisoners in life, and she was

upfront, honest and authentic. She was very funny, with quite a dark sense of humour. Her wit was as sharp as her mind, and she could wipe the floor with anybody in a quiz. She was a very politically active and aware woman who was an activist for Scottish independence and feminism way back in the 1960s. She loved rock music. I came across old pen pal letters of hers in which she was adamant that the Rolling Stones were far superior to the Beatles, which is perhaps a debate for another day. Most of all, her love of Elvis was what shone through. We had that in common, and it was a connection that we adored together.

That connection was lost almost 23 years ago, when she died suddenly of a heart attack aged only 49, alone and at home. A doctor discovered her while doing their rounds as she had called them and said that she did not feel quite right. If she had called an ambulance or if the symptoms had been escalated as an emergency, perhaps she would still be here now, but I can only speculate.

I will be 48 this year—nearly the same age as she was—and I wonder how far we have come in preventing this kind of devastating loss. I certainly do not want my fate or that of any other woman to be as abrupt and sudden as my mother's.

Until recently, heart disease was the biggest killer of women in Scotland—it has now been overtaken by dementia—and I am still surprised to see how many people do not know that utterly shocking fact. Why do we still assume that heart disease and heart attacks are a men's problem? The British Heart Foundation published a report called "Bias and Biology", which was a welcome move to understand the underlying issues that might answer that question. There were five calls in the report, and I am delighted that the Scottish Government committed to include heart health as a priority in the women's health plan, which was launched in 2021, along with those five asks. The report called for

"Improved awareness among the public and health care professionals of heart disease in women ... Improved data collection and linkage for heart disease ... A review of SIGN guidelines on heart disease to identify and address any relevant gaps relating to sex-specific issues ... The modernisation of cardiac rehabilitation to ensure that everyone can access personalised, responsive and flexible services suited to their needs"

and

"The appointment of a national Women's Heart Champion to implement these changes."

Fully actioned, the five calls will save lives and ensure a future in which families like mine will no longer have to deal with the devastating loss of someone who is so young. Women's health must be taken seriously, and women must take their own health seriously. Much of what we will discuss

in the debate is preventable, which is the starkest wake-up call of all.

In 2013, I travelled to Memphis to Elvis's Graceland, where, wearing my mother's ring, I squeezed my hand through some wooden bars to touch Elvis's furry chair in his jungle room. It was a sentimental moment to symbolise a connection with someone who is no longer here—a moment that I wished my mum could have shared with me. I have personalised my speech because, during heart month, I want to highlight the human cost of heart disease. I ask women to take their heart health seriously and to prioritise themselves. Women's hearts are often full of love and service for others, but our hearts are also our vital organ. I urge women to take care of their hearts and to demand that their health providers do, too.

17:02

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Paul McLennan on securing this important debate. February is heart month, and I thank the British Heart Foundation Scotland for the vital work that it does in my Cunninghame North constituency and across Scotland, investing more than £50 million in more than 100 Scottish research projects. I have often visited and purchased items from its large shop in my constituency. I hope that, after First Minister's question time tomorrow, all members will gather at the foot of the garden lobby steps for a photo call in recognition of heart month.

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, is essential to saving lives. With RevivR, a 15-minute online BHF training course, each of us can learn how to save a life. In 2021, there were 7,048 deaths in Scotland in which coronary heart disease—the most common type of heart illness—was the underlying cause.

The 19 per cent reduction in CHD mortality over the past decade is to be welcomed. However, further progress in the rate of decline has slowed in recent years, mainly due to our ageing population. Demographic change is another reason why, by 2043, the burden of cardiovascular disease is projected to rise by 34 per cent compared with 2019—more than for any other category of illness—according to a Public Health Scotland study that was published in November. Therefore, I am glad that the Scottish Government's "Heart Disease Action Plan 2021", which was described as "laudable" by Dr David Murdoch, a consultant cardiologist at Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, included minimising

"preventable heart disease by improving the detection, diagnosis and management of risk factor conditions"

as its top priority.

Sadly, Scotland has a relatively high prevalence of key heart disease risk factors, such as smoking and poor diet. The heart disease rate in the most deprived quintile of the population is two thirds higher than in the least deprived one. British Heart Foundation findings show that North Ayrshire has the fourth highest death rate in Scotland. Indeed, around 2,000 people die from smoking-related heart disease in Scotland each year, which is approximately one in seven of all circulatory disease-related deaths. The chemicals in cigarettes make the walls of human arteries sticky, which causes fatty material to stick to them, clogging and reducing blood flow and increasing the risk of heart attack.

Research by the European Society of Cardiology shows that e-cigarettes raise blood pressure and heart rate, and they change artery walls so that they become stiffer and less elastic. They inhibit the function of blood vessels by damaging their lining. I was therefore grateful to my colleague Siobhian Brown yesterday for raising in the chamber the problems that are posed by widespread youth vaping.

We can only reduce the number of deaths that are caused by heart disease if we continue working to reduce the risk factors. One challenge in preventing heart disease is engagement with hard-to-reach segments of the population, particularly poorer households that are at high risk of preventable ill health. Many people in Scotland already live with at least one risk factor, often without being aware of it.

The British Heart Foundation Scotland has worked hard for decades to change that by working to save lives across Scotland, from its dogged campaign over 20 years on organ donation, to its pursuit of equal treatment for women with heart disease and encouraging people to learn CPR. I have been involved in all those efforts and have raised them in the chamber over the years.

Community defibrillator availability is important. As Paul McLennan and Jenni Minto have said, every minute lost awaiting CPR reduces survivability following a cardiac arrest by 10 per cent, and defibs double the chance of survival.

In August last year, a man suffered a heart attack while waiting for the train at Dalry station in my constituency. Fortunately, the train driver witnessed it and informed the passengers. A doctor stepped off the train and performed CPR, while two other passengers ran to Dalry cross and back to fetch a defibrillator, before the ambulance arrived shortly after. The patient fully recovered thanks to the quick reaction of everyone who was involved in helping—and the availability of a

defibrillator. I am pleased that one has now been installed at Dalry station. Of course, more people need to learn how to use them.

It is clear that, although significant progress has been made in recent years in reducing the number of deaths that are caused by heart disease, Scotland faces challenges that are due to a combination of an ageing population and a relatively high prevalence of risk factors for heart disease, especially in areas that are in the most deprived quintile. Prevention already plays an important part in the Scottish Government's heart disease action plan, but progress in the number of people training in CPR and the installation of more defibrillators remain vital.

I once again thank the British Heart Foundation Scotland for its invaluable work and Paul McLennan for bringing the issue of heart disease to the chamber.

17:06

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I begin, as others have, by congratulating my colleague and friend Paul McLennan on bringing this important and vital debate to the parliamentary chamber. I also thank the British Heart Foundation for the fantastic work that it does in Scotland. We know, as every member has mentioned in their contribution, that heart disease unfortunately remains a significant cause of ill health and, indeed, death in Scotland.

Let me also echo other members in congratulating the British Heart Foundation on the phenomenal work that it carries out to tackle cardiovascular diseases. As others have mentioned, it is the largest public funder of cardiovascular research in Scotland: it funds over £53 million of research across 10 Scottish universities, meaning that almost 13 per cent of the British Heart Foundation's current research portfolio is spent in Scotland. That reflects its commitment to Scotland and to working with our partners here to address the issues around cardiovascular disease. It also reflects, I hope, the quality of cardiovascular research that is taking place right across our country. We should all be very proud of that, and a note of recognition is due to the researchers whose hard work is at the very heart—if members will excuse the pun—of that success.

Of course, the British Heart Foundation's mission does not stop at funding research. It has a number of other priorities, which have been mentioned in members' contributions:

“to tackle heart disease risk factors, ensure timely and equitable care, and improve the collection and use of data”.

Those priorities, which are outlined in Paul McLennan's motion, are entirely aligned with the

priorities in the Scottish Government's heart disease action plan.

I will touch on some of the points that have been made in contributions to the debate. Paul McLennan started by urging us all to familiarise ourselves with the BHF's online tool for learning CPR, RevivR. Others have mentioned that it is important not just that we know how to perform CPR correctly, but that we know how to use a defibrillator, too. Kenny Gibson made that point a moment ago, and it is a good reminder to all of us—even those who have learned first aid in the past—to make sure that we are refreshed on CPR techniques, as they could literally save lives.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, and it occurred to me that we did the RevivR training during committee one morning. Will the cabinet secretary consider whether it would be worth rolling that out to other MSPs on the Parliament campus?

Humza Yousaf: That would be a decision for the parliamentary authorities, but it is an excellent idea. I will take it to the Government, because it would certainly be good for me and other ministers to do that training.

It reminds me of a time in my life when I witnessed somebody having a cardiac arrest. It was at a reception and I was talking to the individual when they fell on their back and had a cardiac arrest. There were another 20 or so people in that room, and I am sorry to say that I did not know what to do. I was not sure about the signs and what was taking place in front of me. Luckily, one of the waitresses was also a student nurse, and she leapt into action. There was also a defibrillator, and the paramedics had a very quick response time indeed. Luckily, the individual is alive and with us today, I am pleased to say. However, the paramedics made it very clear that the story could have been very different if that student nurse had not been in the room. I take the opportunity to thank every single one of our hard-working health and social care staff for their excellent work. Nevertheless, none of the other 20 people in the room leapt into action, because we were not sure what to do. That was the moment when I thought that I really needed to learn CPR and some basic first aid, and I went on a course shortly thereafter.

The other point that I want to talk about has been mentioned only indirectly: inequalities. One of those inequalities is racialised inequality, particularly around chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder and heart disease. It is important that we do not lose sight of the racialised health inequalities that we know exist. My mentor, the late Bashir Ahmad, a former member of the Scottish Parliament, passed away from a heart

attack at the age of 68. We know that cardiovascular disease and COPD can affect ethnic minority communities disproportionately more than they affect the white Scottish population. It is therefore important that, when we look at inequalities, we look at the various factors that cause them, such as socioeconomic and racial factors, and the intersectionality between them.

A number of members made excellent contributions. Jenni Minto made an important point about the campaign that she has led, which other MSPs and MPs have joined, to remove VAT from defibrillators. I am happy to take that up with my UK counterpart. I was speaking to him today, but I will speak to him again to see what we can do to add our weight to a sensible campaign. I will certainly explore what more the Scottish Government can do to increase the number of defibrillators that there are in communities across the country. That can only be to the benefit of everybody. I am grateful to Jenni Minto for raising that point.

We will hold Craig Hoy to his promise that he will purchase an item from the BHF store in North Berwick. I am sure that he will keep that promise. More seriously, he made a point about sudden cardiac death, and I am more than happy to meet him along with the campaign group that he referred to. I am also grateful to him for mentioning David Hill's story. David was known to many of us in the Parliament. I met his family some months ago, at a Scottish Rugby reception, and I am in awe of how they have turned those tragic circumstances into campaigning for better awareness of sudden cardiac death. Nobody would fault them for grieving the loss of David, and I am sure that they do every day, so I am grateful to them for doing what they are doing. I am more than happy to meet Craig Hoy and get that meeting arranged.

I would have loved to meet Karen Adam's mum—it sounds as though she was an incredible woman. The point that Karen made about women's health is so important. Heart disease affects not just men, and she is right in saying that it is a central part of our women's health plan. A number of people were quite surprised that we included heart disease in the women's health plan, but they very much understood the importance of women, as well as men, knowing the risk factors for heart disease.

I am grateful for all the contributions today. We will continue to work with partners such as BHF, CHAS and others, and I recommit and rededicate the Government to doing everything that we can to tackle heart disease across Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:15.

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