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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 20 April 2023

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

General Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good morning. Our first item of business is general question time. I make a plea to members that, in order to get in as many questions as possible, I would appreciate succinct questions, with answers to match.

International Financial Services District Glasgow

1. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken to support the development and expansion of Glasgow's international financial services district in the past year. (S6O-02124)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade (Richard Lochhead): Glasgow's international financial services district is driven by a partnership between the public and private sectors. Since its launch, more than £1 billion of investment has been secured, of which more than 90 per cent is from the private sector, bringing more than 15,500 jobs to the area so far.

In December 2022, Scottish Enterprise completed the purchase of a key development site to facilitate continued investment on the Broomielaw. Through an agreed master plan and the continuation of work in partnership with the private sector, that will expand the district west of the current boundary and will unlock even more opportunities for the district.

Pauline McNeill: I thank the minister for that thorough answer. Barclays bank decided to invest in Glasgow in 2018, and JP Morgan agreed to expand and become tenants of the new office in Argyle Street in 2019, but there does not appear to have been much progress since then. In November last year, Avison Young reported that, of the 655,000 square feet of development under construction in Glasgow, only 55 per cent had been pre-let or pre-sold. There is a concern that Glasgow remains low in that regard compared with pre-Covid levels.

What is important is that prospective occupiers are looking for grade A office space, so will the minister outline how a pipeline of grade A office space is being ensured? What specific inward investment pitches have been made to investors over the past year? How many notes of interest

have been submitted? If he cannot give me an answer today, I would appreciate a follow-up response, if possible.

Richard Lochhead: I am happy to follow up on the member's questions in writing after question time as, quite rightly, she seeks a lot of detail.

Since the launch of the financial district, more than 15,000 jobs have moved into it through new investment, expansion or diversified development. The district is playing a big role as a catalyst for the regeneration of the Broomielaw and the west city centre area. This year alone, there have been many new investments, which are bringing more new jobs to the area from a number of companies. I think that I am right in saying that several dozen fintech companies are now based in the city.

Glasgow is forging an impressive reputation as an international financial centre. I am keen to support that, as are my colleagues in the Scottish Government, and I will be happy to write to Pauline McNeill about the action that has been taken.

Local Bus Networks

2. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is supporting communities and local authorities to strengthen local bus networks across Scotland. (S6O-02125)

The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart): Local authorities have greater tools at their disposal, from the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, to revitalise bus networks. Since June 2022, local authorities have been able to run their own local services, and, from 1 April, they can now request more information from operators via a new information-sharing process if they propose to vary or cancel services. Further legislation on partnerships and franchising will be introduced later this year.

Separately, through the bus partnership fund, £26 million of bus priority funding has been awarded to 11 partnerships, covering 28 Scottish local authorities, to tackle congestion and improve journey reliability.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the minister for that answer about the package that is emerging. However, despite public subsidies, private bus operators are still slashing services in rural areas. Community groups such as the Glenfarg community transport group are stepping up to provide new services. That community group recently launched a new bus service on a recently axed route from Glenfarg to Kinross, which managed to carry about 200 passengers in its first week alone. Will the minister outline the Scottish Government's plan to support communities to deliver the quality bus services that they deserve?

Kevin Stewart: It is always heartening when communities get actively involved in improving their local services. I welcome the launch of bus service 55 in Glenfarg.

We brought forward a toolkit of flexible bus options in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to enable local authorities such as Perth and Kinross Council to respond to transport challenges in their areas. Local authorities now have the power to run their own bus services. That sits alongside their existing ability to subsidise services. In 2021-22, local authorities spent £55 million on subsidising socially necessary services. Powers to develop bus service improvement partnerships and to establish local services franchising will follow.

As Mr Ruskell knows, because we have already had discussions about this, we are also introducing a community bus fund to support local transport authorities to explore the options in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and to improve public transport in their areas, as is happening in Glenfarg.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of requests from members to ask supplementary questions. I will be able to take only some of those, given the time constraints. I make a plea, again, for succinct questions and answers.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): If the minister was serious about getting people on to buses, he would take action on bus fares, as he is doing on train fares. Why does he not replicate what England has, which is a fare cap on local bus journeys?

Kevin Stewart: We will continue to look at not only rail fares but bus fares as we move forward. However, I point out to Mr Simpson that we do things somewhat differently here. In this country, we have a concessionary travel scheme that covers over-60s and under-22s. We are investing some £359.3 million in those schemes, which benefit people throughout Scotland. More than 2.3 million people throughout Scotland have access to free bus travel. That is certainly not the case south of the border.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I welcome the concessionary bus fares. How much do those subsidies—indeed, I would call them investments in the services—cost?

Kevin Stewart: As I have just pointed out in response to Mr Simpson's question, we are investing £359.3 million in concessionary travel and giving 2.3 million people access to free bus travel in Scotland. In March 2022, the Child Poverty Action Group reported that free bus travel for young people can save a total of £3,000 to the lifetime cost of a child in Scotland. That also

tackles child poverty. With more than 3 million journeys every week, those schemes are helping people throughout our nation to cut costs for essential, everyday and leisure travel, and are making sustainable travel a more attractive option. All of that, of course, supports our net zero ambitions, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in Monica Lennon's supplementary question if I can get a succinct answer from the minister.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Free bus travel is great but, in parts of Scotland, bus services have been taken away altogether, including in Hamilton, following the withdrawal of the X1 bus. Local people with free bus passes therefore have to use cars and taxis. That is bad for climate action and is exacerbating social and economic inequality.

Three weeks ago, I met 100 residents who want to see action from transport chiefs and joined-up support. They are not getting that from the Government or from others. Will the minister, whom I welcome to his new post, meet me and campaigners to see how we can find a way forward?

Kevin Stewart: I am willing to meet almost anyone, as folk in the chamber are very well aware. However, in the first instance, those campaigners need to speak to the local authority, which is ultimately in charge of those services.

I say to Ms Lennon and other members that the Government will do what it can in terms of investing, such as in the concessionary travel scheme and in the bus partnership fund, to get this right but, ultimately, some things are down to local authorities and local decision making. I hope that local authorities—in this case, South Lanarkshire Council—will have listened to Ms Lennon's question and will take action to support local bus services.

Sentencing Guideline (Young People)

3. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has reviewed the guideline, "Sentencing young people", issued by the Scottish Sentencing Council. (S6O-02126)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Responsibility for the development of sentencing guidelines lies with the independent Scottish Sentencing Council. Prior to introduction, all sentencing guidelines are approved by the High Court. The Sentencing Council has a statutory duty to periodically review the sentencing guidelines that it produces. As with the work of the council more generally, the independent nature of that process is fundamental.

As I have already made clear, as part of my new responsibilities, I intend to meet the chair of the council to discuss its important work, including how the council plans to keep its published guidelines under review.

Russell Findlay: Community service for child rape is obscene, and similar sentences are being passed across Scotland because of the sentencing quango created by the Scottish National Party Government, including for a 22-year-old hit-and-run driver who killed a child, a 22-year-old who scarred his teenage girlfriend for life, a 20-year-old who almost killed a police officer, and a 19-year-old sex offender who preyed on 28 underage girls. Yet victims' voices are—quite literally—not being heard.

When the new cabinet secretary meets the chair of the Scottish Sentencing Council, will she ensure that the vacancy for a victims representative is filled immediately?

Angela Constance: I can reassure Mr Findlay that the recruitment of a victims representative for the Sentencing Council is well under way. There was an earlier recruitment round, which was unsuccessful; I can assure him that the recruitment process is now at an advanced stage.

Mr Findlay will be well aware that, as justice secretary, it would be entirely inappropriate for me to comment about individual offenders or indeed about individual sentences, bearing in mind that this Parliament—in an act that all parties supported—passed the judiciary and courts legislation which sets out that we all, as ministers and members of the Scottish Parliament, have to uphold the independence of the Scottish judiciary.

It may well be of some use to Mr Findlay if I inform him that, with respect to some of the most serious offences, such as rape, 98 per cent of convictions for rape across all age groups result in a custodial sentence and that, with reference to young people, since the implementation of the sentencing guidelines, nearly 1,000 under-25s were incarcerated in 2022.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in two supplementaries if we have brief questions and succinct answers.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has gone into some detail about the independence of the Sentencing Council, and I understand that it consulted a range of stakeholders, including victims' groups, when formulating the guidance. What action is the Scottish Government taking to improve victims' experiences of the justice system—in particular, to ensure that their voices are heard?

Angela Constance: Improving victims' experiences in the justice system is at the very heart of our vision for justice and will be progressed through the forthcoming criminal justice reform bill. We are working closely and directly with victims through the victims advisory board to embed their lived experience into our actions.

The victims task force brings together victims, victims' organisations and criminal justice agencies to work collaboratively to deliver improvements. We are also committed to establishing a victims commissioner as an independent voice for victims as well as other pioneering initiatives to ensure that the needs of victims are met throughout their justice journey.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary clarify what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the Scottish Sentencing Council about the rights of victims and the extent to which the trauma of young survivors is being reflected in sentencing guidelines, and also that victim impact statements are being taken into account by the courts, particularly in serious cases such as rape cases?

Angela Constance: The member is correct to reference the fact that in any sentencing decision or any set of independent guidelines, as well as having regard to rehabilitation, for example, the guidelines often make specific references to young offenders. The purpose of sentencing is about punishment, protection of the public and expressing disapproval of offending. The impact on victims is imperative in that, particularly given the young age of some victims. That is why as a Government we are committed to developments such as the bairns' hoose, where we can ensure that young victims have access to justice, care and recovery.

United Kingdom Economic Performance (Impact in Scotland)

4. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in the light of the recent analysis by the International Monetary Fund, which predicts that the United Kingdom economy's performance in 2023 will be the worst among the G20 economies, what assessment it has made of the potential impact of this in Scotland. (S6O-02127)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The IMF's forecast for the UK economy to be the worst performing in the G20 is a shocking indictment of the UK Government's mismanagement of the economy, which undeniably has an impact on the Scottish economy. Global economic conditions are challenging, and the Scottish Government is doing

everything possible within its limited powers to support households and businesses through the current cost crisis and to grow and transform the economy in a way that delivers fairer, greener prosperity. However, the UK Government's mismanagement of the economy, alongside the economic damage of Brexit, risks harming our international competitiveness and holding back our ambitious programme of work.

Gordon MacDonald: The IMF's analysis serves to underline the on-going detrimental impact that Westminster control continues to have on Scotland's economy, and the people of Scotland are paying the price. Experts are now predicting that the UK's withdrawal from the European Union is costing millions of workers £1,300 a year in lost income. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the Tories and Labour at Westminster seem determined to press ahead with imposing their disastrous Brexit on Scotland, no matter the economic consequences? Does he agree that the best way to ensure that our economy and communities can flourish is by rejoining the EU as an independent country?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: Absolutely. *[Interruption.]* Independence and rejoining the EU would give us the powers that we need to take advantage of the rich economic opportunities that we have, whereas we are currently being held back by UK inaction. The EU and US have invested in their economies, putting them in a competitive position to take advantage of the green industrial future. We need the powers that independence would give us to make sure that we can take advantage of our rich opportunities in Scotland.

Apprenticeship Places

5. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many apprenticeship places it will commit to funding this financial year. (S6O-02128)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Modern apprenticeships are a vital resource for employers to invest in their workforce and for people to develop their skills. Investing in skills across people's lifetimes is critical to our future productivity and success. My priority and that of the Government is for high quality apprenticeships that provide sustainable jobs and careers, supporting our transition to net zero. Skills Development Scotland has already issued contracts for the 39,000 modern apprentices who are currently in training. We are working closely and intensely with Skills Development Scotland to respond effectively to the expectations of learners

and employers, and I expect it to finalise contracts for new modern apprenticeship starts imminently.

Stephen Kerr: Here is what the Scottish Training Federation has said in the past hour:

"Three thousand apprentices due to start a Modern Apprenticeship this month have been left in limbo due to the current freeze on funding for new apprenticeship places. And around 1,000 employers who had planned to hire these apprentices have had to put their recruitment plans on hold."

That is after it surveyed 1,000 employers who were planning to take on apprentices.

I know that the Scottish National Party is consumed by its internal wars, but why should thousands of young people be paying a price for the party's incompetence and distraction? For months, the SNP has been denying that there is a freeze on apprenticeships. There is a freeze—there was a freeze last summer and there is one now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, could we have the question, please?

Stephen Kerr: I welcome the minister to his new post. *[Interruption.]* I know how passionate he is about apprenticeships. Will he turn the page on the mess that his predecessor left him and fix it today?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly please, minister.

Graeme Dey: Due to the very significant budget challenges that we face—which have much to do with the UK Government's mismanagement of the economy—and the change of ministers, it was entirely reasonable to temporarily pause the issuing of contracts for new starts while we looked at the bigger picture. However, I am pleased to tell the chamber that we are about to green light that process. Despite the huge budgetary challenges that we face, I anticipate that the number involved will be in line with the number in 2022-23.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Scottish National Party Finances

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): The rules of the Parliament prevent me from asking crucial questions about the scandal over the Scottish National Party's finances, so I cannot dwell on that, but I want to use my opening question to give the First Minister an opportunity to be transparent.

Last night, the First Minister became the SNP's treasurer, so, although this is still a party matter, it is also now a Government matter if the First Minister is compromised, if his hands are tied, if the party of government is about to go bankrupt or if he himself becomes involved in the police investigation. Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister said:

"Going forward, the governance of the party needs to be ... about transparency, openness and people should be able to be able to question ... about the accounts."

We agree, and we believe that there are legitimate questions that the Scottish public deserve answers to. In the interest of transparency, will Humza Yousaf agree to make a statement to Parliament on the financial scandal that is engulfing the party of government in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Mr Ross, according to the Parliament's standing orders, First Minister's question time gives the opportunity to put questions to the First Minister that fall within the responsibilities of the First Minister as First Minister and, of course, the responsibilities of his Government. I am not entirely clear that that question met the requirements of the standing orders. I am looking at the First Minister to see whether he wishes to add anything to what I have said.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am happy to answer the question. I know that there are, of course, some serious issues for the party that I lead—the SNP—to address; I am not going to shy away from that. That is why in my very first act as SNP leader, attending my very first national executive committee, I am pleased that we got agreement from that committee—the body that oversees the party, which is elected by our members—to our review of transparency and governance. There was agreement not only to a transparency and governance review but to one that has external input, particularly on issues of finance oversight.

That is an important role for me, as leader of the SNP, but let me also say that what I am doing—and what the Government that I lead is doing

collectively—is focusing relentlessly on the day job. That is why, in the first few weeks of being First Minister, I not only doubled but tripled the fuel insecurity fund. I know that Douglas Ross will not want to talk about that, because it lays bare the harm that the Tory cost of living crisis is doing to households up and down the country. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I suspend proceedings. First Minister, please resume your seat.

12:03

Meeting suspended.

12:04

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please continue, First Minister.

The First Minister: Douglas Ross will no doubt be pleased that it was me that got interrupted for once.

That is why, in my first few weeks as First Minister, I announced £15 million for school-age childcare that is targeted towards the lowest-income households, an additional £25 million to support the just transition, additional funding to support general practices in our areas of highest deprivation and £25 million to be able to buy back or long lease empty properties for the social rented sector. Those are priorities for me, and they are the priorities of the Scottish people. Although I take my responsibility as leader of the SNP extremely seriously, I and the Government that I lead will focus relentlessly on the priorities of the Scottish people.

Douglas Ross: The first words from the First Minister when he stood up were that he was happy to answer the question, but he then basically refused to do so. I simply asked for a statement and for transparency, which I think are needed from the First Minister, because the secrecy must end.

I will move on to one of the matters of substance that the First Minister should be focusing his attention on, instead of on the huge distractions within his party. Last year, an SNP Government agency introduced guidelines that encourage more lenient sentences for under-25s, even for some of the worst crimes. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs was asked about that in the session before First Minister's question time. Does the First Minister fully support the policy that was brought forward for consultation when he was justice secretary?

The First Minister: That is a very important issue. Although I will not comment on individual sentencing decisions, as it would not be right for me to do so as First Minister, let me clarify some important issues around the sentencing guidelines. I heard Angela Constance make these points in response to the question earlier.

Sentencing guidelines are, rightly, entirely the responsibility of the independent Scottish Sentencing Council. Decisions about whether to approve those guidelines are for the High Court. The new Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has written to the chair of the Sentencing Council to discuss its important work. That letter notes that she will discuss how the council plans to keep those published guidelines under review.

It is also important to note not only that decisions on sentencing are rightly for the independent judiciary but that they are evidence based. Anybody who has read those sentencing guidelines—I assume that Douglas Ross has done so—will have seen a comprehensive guideline that is evidence based in relation to the sentencing of young people.

Notwithstanding all the good that is in there, the last point that I will make on that sentencing guideline is that it is very clear that there is no bar on imposing a custodial sentence on a young person where the judiciary considers that to be appropriate. However, that must be a decision neither for the First Minister or Government ministers nor for Opposition colleagues; it is a decision that is, rightly, for the independent judiciary.

Douglas Ross: A few weeks ago, my party and almost everyone in Scotland were outraged at the case of a 13-year-old girl who was raped at a park in Dalkeith. Her attacker, Sean Hogg, was found guilty of rape, but he did not go to prison. All that he had to do was carry out 270 hours of unpaid work. The judge said that, if Hogg had committed that crime when he was over 25, he would now be behind bars. That confirms that the problem is the sentencing guidelines that were introduced. It is very clear that the SNP's justice system is broken. Will the First Minister fix it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the First Minister to respond, I remind everybody in the chamber that this is a live case and that any reference thereto should therefore be made with extreme caution.

The First Minister: With that caveat in place, let me also say in reaction to that case that I can understand why people have concerns. However, I must go back to the central point that sentencing decisions are, rightly, for the independent courts and judiciary. The Lord President reminded me of that when he made some remarks on the public

record when I attended the Court of Session to give my oath as the First Minister of Scotland. I committed to upholding the independence of the judiciary, which is a responsibility that I take with the utmost seriousness.

I read the very distressing account of the victim, who was 13 years old at the time. I also heard from her family in the public statements that have been made. Everybody would sympathise with the strong feelings of the victim. Talking generally and not about that specific case, I think that it is important to say that 98 per cent of all those who were convicted of rape between 2018 and 2021 received a custodial sentence.

It is important that we continue to give the judiciary the independence that it has, and that we have that separation between Government and judiciary. However, in the letter that Angela Constance sent to the Scottish Sentencing Council and the Lord Justice Clerk, she said that the Government would like to discuss the issues around how the sentencing guidelines are kept under review. I take Douglas Ross's point that there is clearly public interest in the sentencing guidelines.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister mentioned that he had seen the comments from the victim and her family—they are all in the public domain and it is legitimate to raise them in the chamber.

The grandfather of the victim said:

"With this new ruling they've got, any person under 25 can go out and do any crime they want, however horrendous it may be, and there's a good chance that they will get a community payback."

The survivor of the rape said:

"When I was told he had been found guilty I felt a wave of emotions. I didn't know how to react. I cried, I think I cried with relief ... Now it makes me think, why did I even bother reporting the rape in the first place."

She continued:

"Whoever is in charge of the justice system needs to sort this out: you say you care about victims like me, but how can a serial rapist receive 270 hours community payback?"

Her final line was,

"Why is it ok to rape anyone and not go to jail?"

The First Minister seems to be hailing the statistic that 98 per cent of people who are convicted of rape go to prison. One hundred per cent of rapists who are convicted of that crime must go to prison. I will repeat the words of the victim as my question to the First Minister:

"Why is it ok to rape anyone and not go to jail?"

The First Minister: Speaking in the general and not about a specific case, I agree with the sentiment that, if somebody commits rape, they should go to jail. I believe that, but I also believe

very firmly that it is up to the independent judiciary, including judges in the High Court, to make a decision about the appropriate punishment for an individual for the crime that they have committed.

I refer back to the sentencing guidelines, which are the central issue that Douglas Ross raises. The guidelines make it clear that, as well as looking at issues around rehabilitation and consideration of sentencing for young people under 25, other factors, including

“protection of the public; punishment ... and expressing”

strong

“disapproval of offending behaviour”,

should also be taken into account.

Therefore, the courts can still, even with the guidelines that are in place, impose a custodial sentence on a young person if they consider that to be appropriate in the light of all the facts.

I take what has been said by the victim and her grandfather very seriously. That is why we are looking to improve the justice system, particularly when it comes to women, who are often the victims of sexual offences and rape. We will shortly introduce a criminal justice reform bill, which will seek to make those changes to the court system and to the justice system in order to improve the experience and outcomes of justice for victims of sexual offences and rape. I hope that it will get support from across the chamber.

Ferry Services

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On Tuesday, Humza Yousaf tried to convince the country that he represented a fresh start. Sixteen years of command and control, financial mismanagement and a complete lack of transparency—that is not only how the Scottish National Party governs its party; it is how it governs the country.

Just one example is the on-going ferry crisis—£200 million over budget, with no ferries in sight. Last week, I was in the Western Isles, and I heard directly from people about the consequences of that failure—cancelled ferries, meaning missed cancer appointments, lack of supplies coming in, produce not getting out and businesses going to the wall.

In 2017, the then SNP Minister for Transport and the Islands said that resolving the Western Isles ferry crisis was a priority. Six years on, people are still waiting, and it has got worse. Who was that incompetent transport minister and where are they now?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I recognise the challenges that those who rely on our ferry services—our island communities—have

suffered in the past few weeks, particularly over the Easter tourism season.

However, let me speak clearly to those island communities. We not only understand their frustrations but are taking action to ensure that we bolster the ferry network services. That is why this Government has bought and deployed an additional vessel in the MV Loch Frisa. That is why we chartered the MV Arrow to provide additional resilience and capacity. That is why we commissioned two new vessels for Islay. That is why we commissioned two new vessels for the Little Minch routes. That is why we progressed key investments in ports and harbours. That is why we confirmed additional revenue funding for the operation of local authority ferry services. That is also why we are looking forward to the MV Alfred and why we provided additional funding to Caledonian MacBrayne for it, to provide additional resilience, not just for the next few weeks but for the next nine months.

It is, of course, a very serious matter that Anas Sarwar has raised, but we are a Government that is taking action to ensure that we have resilience on our ferries network.

Anas Sarwar: That was a great example of what has become typical of this leadership in the past three weeks: comical Ali, saying everything is fine, while the house burns down behind us.

Island communities will not believe those excuses from the First Minister. He and this Government are totally out of touch. Six years ago, Humza Yousaf, as Minister for Transport and the Islands, made a promise to fix this, but the Scottish National Party Government has failed to get a grip, and its financial mismanagement has cost us hundreds of millions of pounds.

It has cost people in the islands dearly, too. The impact on the local economy has been devastating. One report has estimated that the loss of the Lochboisdale to Mallaig ferry alone cost nearly £50,000 a day. That is almost double the average annual salary on the islands. As one business put it,

“No ferry means no income, no jobs, no people”.

Businesses in Uist have asked the Scottish Government to compensate them for their losses. Last year, Transport Scotland took millions of pounds in fines from CalMac because of the lack of services. Will the First Minister commit to compensating islanders, and at the very least pass on the fines that the Government has collected from CalMac to the people who have been affected by the crisis?

The First Minister: I will look at any proposals that are suggested by anybody across the chamber, including the one that Anas Sarwar just mentioned.

I completely accept, and am unequivocal in saying, that the Government understands and regrets any delays and disruption that have impacted our island communities. What does not help island communities are easy soundbites from Anas Sarwar—[*Interruption.*]*—*that are not an attempt to provide any solutions but silly personal attacks around comical Ali. That is not going to help those in our island communities one single bit.

What will help our island communities is delivering—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister:—six new major vessels to serve Scotland’s ferry network by 2026. That is a priority for this Government.

Let us look at the facts. Of course there has been disruption—I do not deny that at all—but in 2022, there were 170,000 scheduled sailings across the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services network, and around 6.6 per cent of them were cancelled. Over half of those cancellations were due to weather-related issues. Around 1.1 per cent of the total scheduled sailings were cancelled due to technical issues. The vast majority of scheduled sailings take place when they are meant to. We should and will bolster the ferry service network’s resilience, and I look forward to the charter of the MV Alfred in the coming days.

I will say to Anas Sarwar that I will end where I started. Any sensible suggestions from the Opposition, and from across the chamber, will be listened to by the Government.

Anas Sarwar: The harsh reality is that island communities just do not believe him. Island communities feel completely let down, and they have heard these excuses for years. They cannot wait for more years of Government failure. This is impacting the lives of islanders right now. Businesses are failing right now. Millions of pounds are being lost right now. Exports are stuck on the islands right now. People need support right now, and that is why they need that compensation scheme.

This is no fresh start. Humza Yousaf has served in Government for over a decade. He was a failed transport minister, with hundreds of millions of pounds wasted on ferries that never sailed. He was a failed justice secretary, with millions of pounds wasted on botched prosecutions and court delays. He was a failed health secretary, with over £300 million wasted on delayed discharges, while people waited to get life-saving treatment. Now, just three weeks in, he is a failed First Minister, bogged down in scandal, unable to lead and completely out of touch with the priorities of the people of Scotland.

Therefore, I ask the acting SNP treasurer: why should Scots keep paying the price for SNP failure?

The First Minister: I say once again to Anas Sarwar that we are acting now. That is why the MV Alfred—an additional vessel for which we have helped to fund CalMac—is coming on board in the next few days. That is tangible action that will make a difference to our ferry networks, right here and right now. He says that the people of Scotland do not trust us and that he was in the Western Isles. I remind him that the Western Isles has an SNP MP and an SNP MSP, so the people of the Western Isles absolutely do trust us. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members! We need to hear the First Minister respond.

The First Minister: He says that we have not been getting on with the job. Well, I am afraid that people in Scotland disagree with him. I stood here on Tuesday and announced and articulated our policy prospectus, and I am delighted that it got support from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and that some of the policies that I announced got support from Dr Liz Cameron, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. There was support from Transform Scotland in relation to the pilot for peak rail fares being abolished, and support from the Scotch Whisky Association, the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland, the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, Crisis Scotland, Reform Scotland, the Poverty Alliance, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland and Parkinson’s UK.

This is a time for new leadership, of course, which I am delighted to bring to this Government, and time for a fresh start. The people of Scotland recognise that; maybe it is time for Scottish Labour to recognise it, too.

Rosebank Oil and Gas Field

3. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on what recent engagement the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the proposed development of the Rosebank oil and gas field, in light of the Scottish Government’s draft energy strategy and just transition plan. (S6F-02014)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Licensing of exploration and production of the offshore oil and gas sector remains reserved, regrettably, to the UK Government. The Scottish Government is clear that unlimited extraction of fossil fuels is not consistent with our climate obligations. It is not the solution to the energy price crisis, to meeting our energy security needs or, indeed, to ensuring a just transition for our oil and gas workers, as North Sea production inevitably declines.

That is why we need a new plan for Scotland's energy system. The draft energy strategy and just transition plan seeks to do that. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to a just transition and to ensuring that we take workers with us on the important journey to net zero. We will not do to the north-east what Thatcher did to mining and steel-working communities right across Scotland.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the First Minister for that response. While recognising that licensing is reserved, the draft energy strategy and just transition plan sets out the position that

“in order to support the fastest possible and most effective just transition, there should be a presumption against new exploration for oil and gas.”

Since the draft plan was published, the United Nations secretary general has said:

“our world needs climate action on all fronts—everything, everywhere, all at once. ... Ceasing all licensing or funding of new oil and gas ... Stopping any expansion of existing oil and gas reserves”

and

“Shifting subsidies from fossil fuels to a just energy transition.”

Whether it is Rosebank today or other proposals to drill tomorrow, does the First Minister agree that a just transition on a liveable planet depends on our firm commitment to a fossil fuel free future?

The First Minister: I agree that we should all want a fossil fuel free future and, on that, I agree that delivering on our climate obligations is an absolutely priority. As one of the first things that I did—I think that it was my second official visit as First Minister—I went to the north-east of Scotland and spoke to people who are absolutely committed to that just transition, particularly in the north-east. I want the north-east of Scotland to be the net zero capital of not just Europe but the world, and I believe that it has the potential to do so.

Maggie Chapman is absolutely right that, first and foremost, we have to make sure that any decisions that are taken by the UK Government must be taken in relation to our climate obligations. We want the UK Government to strengthen its climate compatibility checkpoint. We have asked for tougher and more robust climate tests.

Secondly, we should ensure that the decisions align with our energy security needs.

My third point is really central, and I believe that Maggie Chapman will agree with me. We must take the workers of the north-east with us. As I have already said, we will never do to the north-east what Margaret Thatcher did to our mining and steel communities. We will not decimate sectors

and we will not leave a single worker on the scrapheap. That is why I will continue to invest in and accelerate the just transition as quickly as possible.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): New exploration and production in the North Sea would protect more than 70,000 Scottish jobs. It would help our energy security and it would have a positive impact on emissions, rather than offshoring our responsibilities. Will the First Minister therefore re-examine the plans in his threadbare energy strategy to close the North Sea, or will he continue to be dictated to by a cabal of Green MSPs?

The First Minister: That is, of course, not what is in the draft strategy. If we truly unleash and unlock the green economy, we would be talking about tens of thousands of jobs over the next couple of decades. We want to take the workers of the north-east in particular with us on that journey.

What a cheek Liam Kerr has to stand there and talk about Scottish energy jobs when the party that he belongs to and the UK Government have continued to block, delay and dither when it comes to the Scottish Cluster and the Acorn project, which it has refused to give permission on and has relegated to track 2. I say once again that the Tories can never be trusted when it comes to protecting Scottish jobs.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Scotland and the UK will continue to need and rely on gas for decades to come. In many cases, gas is imported from the US, but its gas is produced with more than four times the carbon emissions of Rosebank. Does the First Minister therefore agree with me that sacrificing the development of our own gas resource would not only decimate tens of thousands of highly-skilled well-paid jobs in a form of economic masochism that is advocated by the wine-bar revolutionaries in the Green Party but make climate change worse, not better?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister responds, I remind members of the requirement to treat each other with courtesy and respect.

The First Minister: Deputy Presiding Officer, I suspect that that is not the first time you have had to tell your brother off.

Let me make a point of agreement with Fergus Ewing and say that nobody I have heard in the Scottish Government or the Green Party has said that extraction must stop tomorrow. We understand that a just transition means that we have to take the workers of the north-east with us. The point is that the transition has to be just, which is why we believe that we must accelerate the just transition with further investment in non-fossil fuel alternatives.

Independent research that was based on industry projections found that production in the North Sea will be around one third of 2019 levels by 2035. We therefore know that it is a declining basin, which is why we have to make sure that we accelerate the just transition. Meanwhile, as at 2019, only 16 per cent of the oil and gas that comes into Scotland, including imports from Norway and beyond, is consumed in Scotland. Reducing our energy consumption while ramping up our energy generation capabilities through renewables and hydrogen will mean that a net zero Scotland will not only be less reliant on imported oil and gas but will, I hope, be a net exporter of cleaner and greener energy to the rest of the UK and beyond.

Business Community (Engagement)

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of his recent visit to the Port of Aberdeen, what engagement he has had with the business community since taking office. (S6F-02027)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Resetting the relationship with business is a core priority for the Government. On Tuesday, I set out plans to agree a new deal for businesses and the introduction of a new group, to be co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, that will explore how Government can better support our businesses and communities using all the policy levers that we have at our hands.

During my visit to the Port of Aberdeen, I announced, as I have already said, £25 million to be invested in the just transition away from oil and gas. That was the first of many meetings that I have planned as part of an extensive programme of engagement with business and industry leaders across all of Scotland's sectors to identify priority areas of challenge and opportunity. Later today, I will meet the main business organisations to personally reiterate my commitment to that new working relationship and to talk about how we can deliver on our mission to have a fairer, greener and growing wellbeing economy for all of Scotland's people.

Audrey Nicoll: The Scottish Government's commitment to agree a new deal for business has received an extremely positive response from the business community, and we all agree that it is absolutely vital that we work together constructively to develop our wellbeing economy.

Given the substantial pressures that many businesses are facing from rising costs and a disastrous Brexit, it is clear that urgent and sustained action is needed to maximise the support that is available to them. Can the First Minister say any more about the steps that the

Scottish Government is taking to ensure that it can best support our businesses using the full amount of policy levers that it has at its disposal? Does he agree that we would, if full powers over our economy rested with this Parliament, be much better placed to support our businesses to thrive?

The First Minister: Of course we would. I can hear groans and jeers from the Scottish Conservatives, so let us hear what the chairman of the Office for Budget Responsibility said about the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom economy. He said that it was of the same "magnitude" as the impact of the Covid pandemic and the energy price crisis. In addition, the Centre for European Reform has found that Brexit has cost the UK a staggering £33 billion in lost trade. This is not just the opinion of the Scottish National Party-led Scottish Government; it is the opinion of experts in the economy who are saying that Brexit has seriously impacted on trade in the UK and in Scotland.

Businesses are the backbone of the economy—I am the proud son of a small business owner. That is why the new deal for business, which I articulated in our policy prospectus on Tuesday, is so important. It is crucial. Through the Scottish budget, we responded to business's biggest ask on non-domestic rates by freezing the poundage for 2023-24, which it is estimated will save ratepayers £308 million.

We will continue to use the powers of devolution that we have to the absolute maximum effect in order to grow and transform our wellbeing economy. However, I agree with Audrey Nicoll that we need significantly increased policy levers to ensure that Scotland will be wealthier, fairer and greener, and that the wellbeing of our people is enhanced. Until we have that, I am afraid that the Scottish Conservatives will continue to have the levers that, as we can see, they use to harm our people and our business and trade, here in Scotland.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Connectivity between the Port of Aberdeen and the freeport in Cromarty will be vital for the north-east economy, so will the First Minister grow a backbone, stand up to the Greens and fully dual the A96, as promised?

The First Minister: That question goes to the heart of the Conservatives' hypocrisy. They demand that we go further in tackling the climate emergency, yet anything that we do—including, for example, a review of sections of the A96 for climate compatibility—they oppose. It does not matter what the Scottish Government tries to do to ensure that we tackle the climate emergency in order to leave a cleaner and more sustainable planet for future generations—the Conservatives will always oppose it.

We are absolutely committed to dualling the A9 as well as the A96 from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. I have already said to my good friend Fergus Ewing that we will bring forward a timetable on that as soon as possible.

Highly Protected Marine Areas

5. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's plans for highly protected marine areas, following the end of its public consultation. (S6F-02002)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Our initial consultation on highly protected marine areas closed on Monday, and it is only right that we take some time to carefully consider all the responses—there has been a substantial number of responses—before we set out our next steps, especially given the strength of views that have been expressed on the issue.

Our seas must remain a source of prosperity for the nation, especially in remote coastal and island communities. It is vital that those communities help to shape the creation of HPMAs, which is why we chose to consult very early on in the process. My officials have held more than 40 meetings relating to the process, and my colleague Màiri McAllan will continue to engage directly with coastal and island communities before we decide on our next steps together.

I make it clear that no sites have been selected. That will not begin until we have considered the feedback from the consultation and the engagement process is complete. We are determined to ensure that as many voices as possible are heard in the process.

Donald Cameron: Earlier this week, the First Minister said that HPMAs should not be imposed on communities that do not want them. Not one community in the Highlands and Islands wants the HPMAAs.

We all acknowledge the need to protect our marine environment, but the HPMA proposals will devastate coastal communities—the fishing sector, in particular—and threaten their very way of life. It is no wonder that the policy has been compared with the clearances—people cleared off the land and cleared off the sea.

Given the anger that the policy has caused and the widespread opposition to the plans, including from many in the First Minister's own party, and given that he wants to be First Minister for the whole country, will he now scrap the plans once and for all and start again?

The First Minister: The point is that there are no plans yet. There is a consultation, but we do not yet have set sites or set criteria. We are at a

very early stage—an inception stage—in which we want to work with our coastal, island and fishing communities. I believe that, ultimately, there is agreement on the outcome. The outcome that we all want is a sustainable marine environment. We want our fishing industry and our seas to be sustainable for the future. We want the industry to continue. However, that can happen only if the marine environment is sustainable. I believe that there is agreement on that.

Of course, our fishing, island and coastal communities have often been at the forefront of the effort on sustainability, so we want to work with them and engage with them.

All that said, I reiterate what I said on Tuesday: this Government will not steamroll through or impose on any community a policy that it is vehemently opposed to. My colleague Màiri McAllan will engage with those island and coastal communities, and we will analyse their responses very carefully. I say to all those who have expressed their opposition to highly protected marine areas that we are willing to engage and to listen. Let us hope that we get to the agreed outcomes together.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that the no-take zone in Lamlash bay has had no adverse impact whatsoever and, indeed, has shown that conservation can help to revitalise our fishing sector, and that identifying potential highly protected marine area sites would allow more effective direct engagement to take place with concerned fishers and communities?

The First Minister: That is absolutely right. Far from having any adverse impact, the Lamlash bay no-take zone has shown us the benefit for the marine environment and the people who rely on it. The example of Lamlash bay is a very good one—it was the community that wanted the no-take zone to be established. That goes to the central point, which is that we will work with communities to get to the outcome that I hope that we all agree on, which is having a sustainable marine environment.

Based on studies that were co-ordinated by the community group at Lamlash bay, it has been noted that, since protection was established, commercially important species such as the king scallop and the European lobster have increased in size, age and density. The 2008 designation of the Lamlash bay no-take zone off the coast of Arran was a result of campaigning by the local community, and I think that that is a good model for us as we take forward our work on highly protected marine areas.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Earlier this week, Orkney Islands Council joined its

counterparts in Shetland and the Western Isles in voicing the strongest possible opposition to the Government's plans for highly protected marine areas, given their potential impact on island communities.

On the same day, the First Minister announced welcome, if long-overdue, U-turns on his deposit return scheme and alcohol advertising sanctions. I therefore urge him not to spend months defending the indefensible and to confirm, in the light of the significant and growing opposition in coastal and island communities, that his Government will now rethink its plans to arbitrarily designate 10 per cent of Scottish waters as HPMA's by 2026.

The First Minister: Liam McArthur will be well aware that, when I was Minister for Transport and the Islands, I brought forward island proofing, which is something I believe into my very core. Therefore, we will not impose upon any community, island or otherwise, a policy that it vehemently opposes.

We will analyse the consultation responses and agree on the outcomes. I think that there is general broad agreement on the outcomes. We want to have a sustainable marine environment and a fishing sector that is sustainable in the long term and protecting our biodiversity helps us with that outcome.

I will continue engaging personally, as will Màiri McAllan, who will, no doubt, travel across the country, including to Orkney and Shetland, to meet with those who have expressed concerns. I hope that, together, we can get to a place where we all agree on the outcome and can move forward to protect our marine environment and make it more sustainable for the future.

Ferry Services (Highlands and Islands)

6. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what immediate action the Scottish Government will take to improve the situation regarding ferry services across the Highlands and Islands, in light of recent reports of unprecedented disruption. (S6F-02011)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): As I already said in my response to Anas Sarwar's question, I recognise the significant impact that delays and disruption have, regrettably, had on our island communities during the annual overhaul programme. We know that not only individuals but businesses in our island communities rely on those lifeline services.

I am committed to investing in our ferry services and we will be delivering six new major vessels to serve Scotland's ferry network by 2026: that is a priority for me and for the Government that I lead. We have already procured the MV Loch Frisa, we previously chartered the MV Arrow and we look

forward to shortly welcoming the MV Alfred into service to provide additional resilience in the network. In the meantime, we will continue pressing Caledonian MacBrayne to consider all options to minimise the impact on communities and businesses.

I know that the Minister for Transport is engaging very closely on that issue. He has held resilience calls with CalMac and Transport Scotland in the light of the latest disruptions and has proactively engaged directly with local stakeholders, with our operators and with Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd to improve reliability and resilience right across the network.

Rhoda Grant: The transport minister refused to take responsibility for the ferry crisis and also refused compensation payments for local businesses that are going to the wall because of ferry failures. Now that constituents on Uist will have no mainland ferry services from Sunday, which is in three days' time, is the First Minister going to do the same, or is he going to tell us what emergency provision he will put in place? Has he asked the Ministry of Defence for help and what compensation will he give to the businesses that will close as a result of this?

The First Minister: I already said in my response to Anas Sarwar that we will consider the issues of compensation and of what more we can do to support businesses when there is disruption. I do not agree with the premise of the member's question. I know that Kevin Stewart has been directly involved in engaging with CalMac and with the island communities that have been affected.

I go back to my responses to both Anas Sarwar and Rhoda Grant: we have the MV Alfred coming on board—I hope—in the coming days, which will provide further resilience to our network. However, I take the points that have been made. Of course, any disruption to our ferry network is regrettable. The other point that I know that Kevin Stewart has been engaging on is that we want to ensure that we improve our communication and CalMac's communication with islanders when such disruption takes place.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Scottish Government has now officially asked the United Kingdom armed forces to step in and provide a temporary replacement service across the Corran narrows. Although that service is run by Highland Council, it highlights the lack of resilience and the growing crisis in Scotland's ferry network.

Can the First Minister advise me if he was involved in signing off that request to the MOD and, if so, when he did that? Given the need to ensure that this kind of disruption, and the severe impact that it has on local communities, does not

happen again, will he today commit to either he, or his new transport minister, visiting the area at the earliest opportunity to meet with local residents and businesses?

The First Minister: I have a slight correction to Jamie Halcro Johnston's question: it is our MOD. Our Scottish taxpayers' money helps to fund the MOD, so when he talks about the MOD stepping in, it is important to say that it is using assets that Scottish taxpayers contribute towards. That is a really important point of clarification.

The Scottish Government has been helpful. We have helped to facilitate engagement between Highland Council—because we know that the Corran ferry is its responsibility—and the MOD. It was my colleague Ian Blackford, the MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, who helped to ensure facilitation between Highland Council, the MOD and the Scottish Government.

We will do everything that we possibly can in relation to that military aid to the civil authorities request. My understanding is that the MOD is currently doing initial assessments. Whatever the next steps are in relation to that process that involve the Scottish Government, we will be as helpful as we can possibly be.

I also remind Jamie Halcro Johnston that it was the former Deputy First Minister who announced in his final budget that the Scottish Government would provide full revenue funding to councils that run their own ferry services. Our officials are in very proactive engagement with Highland Council about these costs. Kevin Stewart would, of course, be happy to visit the Highlands and talk to the local community about the Corran ferry route.

Cancer Testing and Screening Programmes

7. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the First Minister what urgent action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that everyone who is eligible for any cancer testing and screening programme is receiving their invitation on time, in light of recent reports that 13,000 women who were mistakenly removed from the national database are being offered an appointment for a cervical smear. (S6F-02017)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Beatrice Wishart for raising what is an incredibly important issue. The national audit of the cervical screening programme is under way. It is a result of an incident that was brought to our attention in 2021 where a small number of women were incorrectly excluded from the cervical screening programme after having subtotal hysterectomies.

This final stage of the audit is precautionary. It follows an initial audit in 2021 of those women who were considered to be at the highest risk of being wrongly excluded. No cervical cancers were

detected as part of that audit and the risk to participants in this audit is very low. The actual number of patients who need to be reinstated to the screening programme will obviously not be known until the audit is complete and all affected individuals are contacted.

Funding has been made available, particularly to GP practices to ensure that they can absorb any increase in demand.

Beatrice Wishart: I thank the First Minister for that answer. I recognise the complexity of the case. We are talking about a statistically small number of people, but each of them will, no doubt, be concerned when they receive a letter. Can the First Minister assure those with concerns that measures are in place to ensure that similar errors are not repeated and that all those who are affected will be contacted as swiftly as possible? Will he indicate what work is under way to improve access to screening, including the introduction of self-sampling, to ensure that this news does not further impact uptake?

The First Minister: Beatrice Wishart is absolutely right. Although the numbers may be small, when someone receives the letter, I can imagine the impact, the concern and the worry that they will have. That is why I was very keen to reiterate that the women who were called in the first audit were the ones who were most at risk. If someone receives a letter or is asked to come back in for screening, there is low risk but, of course, there is still risk, and that will be a concern for those who receive the call-up as part of the audit.

Beatrice Wishart is also right to ask what we have done to ensure that the error does not occur again. It is an error that has occurred, I am afraid, in the system for many, many years. We have made improvements to the information technology systems in relation to the cervical cancer screening programme. We have also improved the record-keeping process, and 14 territorial boards have taken action in relation to their audit activities.

We expect the audit to be fully completed in the next 12 months. I note again that we have started with those at the highest risk.

In relation to cervical cancer, Beatrice Wishart mentioned some of the initiatives that we are taking forward, but we are also seeking to do more in relation to mobile screening units, which we know are particularly important in rural, remote and island communities. Beatrice Wishart raises a very important point indeed around the fact that we need to make sure that screening for all cancers—cervical cancers, of course, included—is as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will now move briefly to general and constituency supplementary questions.

Devolution

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of an article in this morning's *Telegraph* by Conservative peer David Frost, which proposes to reduce and remove powers of devolution and undermines this Parliament. How does the Government intend to defend the powers of this Scottish Parliament from unelected Tories at Westminster who are intent on dismantling devolution? Does the First Minister agree that it is for all MSPs from all parties to defend this Parliament from an attack on democracy?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Absolutely. Lord Frost, an unelected Tory peer, gave the game away. He said the quiet bit out loud. He said what every Scottish Conservative really thinks. I will quote him. He said:

"Not only must no more powers be devolved to Scotland, it's time to reverse the process."

He also said:

"Ministers should make it clear that, if re-elected, they will review and roll back some currently devolved powers."

It is hardly a surprise that the party that did not support the Scottish Parliament now wants to dismantle it.

Let me be abundantly clear. Whether it is in relation to the section 35 veto, the Conservatives' inability to grant an exemption under the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 or the fact that they want to curtail our excellent international development work and external engagement, the Scottish National Party-led Scottish Government will always defend our democracy and we will always defend the voice and the will of the Scottish people.

Children in Care

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the report by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Scotland, "#Keeping the Promise to Infants, 0-3 Years". It states that Scotland's care system has a "baby blindspot". It also states that, despite the fact that the youngest children are the most vulnerable to harm, the zero-to-three age group can often be overlooked, which is shocking, especially when a quarter of all child protection orders are for infants under 20 days old. It makes reference to the need to improve, support and redesign services in order to keep the Promise.

Given the public commitments by the former First Minister, what will the current First Minister

do to ensure that the baby blindspot in Scotland is removed once and for all?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Roz McCall raises an important issue. She is right to scrutinise what the Government is going to do to keep the Promise. I made an unapologetic and unequivocal commitment in relation to this Government's determination to keep the Promise. Of course, I have appointed a minister who has responsibility for keeping the Promise, and Natalie Don will report directly to me, as First Minister, on that issue.

The Government will lay out in detail what we can do for care-experienced young people. This Parliament has passed some relevant legislation on issues such as sibling separation, but what I heard from care-experienced young people in particular is that we need to go further in terms of the implementation of that legislation on the ground. Roz McCall rightly raises the issue of what the NSPCC refers to as the baby blindspot, and that is another issue that I am determined that we will do more on.

As I say, I give an unequivocal commitment that this Government will keep the Promise not just in relation to babies and young people, which is important, but in relation to care-experienced people, because care experience is lifelong.

Hospices (Funding)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Scottish hospices face a perfect storm of rising staff costs, increased energy and running costs and a tough fundraising environment. They need urgent funding to match the national health service pay uplift so that they can offer their staff the fair wage that they deserve.

Hospice UK met the First Minister in his old role as health secretary some five weeks ago, but all that it has had since are holding responses. Time is running out and hospices will need to make decisions in order to sustain their services. Will the First Minister act swiftly—indeed, today—and provide hospices with the additional funding that they so urgently need?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We are investing a record £19 billion in our health and social care system this year. That has been possible only because of the progressive taxation that the Scottish Government has brought forward. I will, of course, speak to the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to see what more we can possibly do and what funding we are able to provide. However, every penny of our funding has been allocated.

I understand that the issues that Jackie Baillie has raised on behalf of Hospice UK are important and I value the work that hospices do—I have

personal experience of that work from when I lost an uncle to pancreatic cancer many years ago—so I take the issues that she raises seriously and we will look to do whatever we can to support the excellent work that our hospices do across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension before the next item of business to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so before the debate starts.

12:54

Meeting suspended.

12:55

On resuming—

Damp Housing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage those who are leaving the public gallery and the chamber to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07511, in the name of Foysoil Choudhury, on damp housing in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the tragic death of Awaab Ishak due to mouldy housing; notes the view that there is a need for urgent action to avoid similar tragedies happening in Scotland, including in the Lothian region; recognises that mould and damp in homes can be dangerous and cause health problems; understands that the cost of living crisis has caused constituents across Scotland to avoid heating their homes, which can further exacerbate the problem of damp and mould; further understands that damp housing is disproportionately affecting those living in poverty; acknowledges the calls for every constituent in Scotland to have a right to safe, warm housing; notes the view that extra investment for a whole house retrofitting programme is required to tackle problems caused by damp housing; further notes the calls for the creation of a grant scheme to tackle the problems of damp housing across the housing sector, including social housing, housing associations and the private sector; notes the belief that there is a need for increased support and guidance for constituents on the prevention of damp in properties across Scotland; believes that this issue is of nationwide importance, and notes the calls for all political parties in the Parliament to collaborate to tackle damp housing in Scotland.

12:56

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I begin by thanking all those who signed the motion and all my colleagues who are present to speak on what is an important issue.

As members will be aware, in December 2020, two-year-old Awaab Ishak died from a respiratory condition that was caused by extensive mould in the housing in which he lived, in Rochdale, England. That tragedy is a stark warning of the danger that mould can cause when it is not dealt with properly. We must act now to stop preventable deaths such as Awaab's from occurring in Scotland.

Unfortunately, too many Scottish residents live in dangerous housing. The charity Crisis found that 2 million British households on low incomes are living with poor conditions such as mould, damp and overcrowding. Scotland is particularly hard hit by that. The Scottish Government's most recent house condition survey found that 40,000 homes in our nation fall below the tolerable

standard, with one third of that figure being directly due to rising or penetrating damp. Given that, on average, there are two people per household, 80,000 Scottish residents are living in homes that their own Government considers to be unacceptable. For 27,000 of those, that is directly due to damp.

That brings me on to the experience of my constituents for whom the problem of damp and mould has become all too common. Sara Martin and Alistair Stuart live with their four children in a council house in Edinburgh. Two of the children have asthma, which has got worse, and another has developed a constant hacking cough as a result of damp and mould. Ms Martin has told me that she fears for her children because of their prolonged exposure to mould. At one point, she had to call an ambulance due to her son's severe chest pains. The ambulance report cited mould as an environmental factor at the property.

Council repairs were undertaken at the property, but my constituents have reported that the work was simply cosmetic—it only covered up the mould, which came back just months later. Sara and Alistair have now had to leave the flat after dealing with the damp and mould for 10 years. Structural repairs to deal with the mould are still not finished.

Another of my constituents has been living in a mould-infested house for 16 months. The placement was supposed to be temporary accommodation, but she now has to live out of one bedroom with her 21-month-old son. She has spoken of the serious effect that the situation has had on her mental health. She believes that she cannot access the help that she needs until her difficult living situation is resolved. She feels helpless and that nothing is being done to move her into permanent or safe accommodation.

The negligent behaviour of private landlords is particularly to blame for the situation. Almost half of private sector rented homes in Scotland failed to meet the Scottish housing quality standards. The lack of regulation in the sector means that the worst landlords get away with providing poor-quality homes, and people on the lowest incomes live in them because they feel that they have no other option.

The experience of my constituents speaks for itself. I have heard from other constituents who have had to move out of their privately rented accommodation because of fears about the effects of damp and mould on their very young child. That was after repeated attempts to get the letting agent to do more than cosmetic repairs that simply covered up the mould instead of eradicating it.

Letting agents and private landlords must ensure that tenants are aware of the ways in

which mould and damp occur and how to prevent them. Many tenements around Scotland have no place to dry clothes outdoors. That only makes the problem worse. More information needs to be made available to tenants to make them aware of the causes of mould and ways in which to treat and prevent it. In addition, landlords should not rent out houses or flats that need structural repairs to avoid mould forming.

Ultimately, housing providers should be held responsible for ensuring that the accommodation that they provide is clean and safe for every resident or tenant who moves in. The Scottish Government needs to do more to help them and to hold them accountable when crucial repair work is not done properly. How many trips to hospitals, long-term illnesses or deaths caused by damp housing will it take for the Scottish Government to take the issue seriously?

Too many of our citizens are living in dangerous accommodation, and landlords are getting away with doing nothing about it. We, as a Parliament, have to do more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given the earlier start time for the resumption of business this afternoon, I would be grateful if colleagues stick to their speaking time allocation, although I will certainly allow time back for interventions.

13:03

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I commend Foysol Choudhury for his motion and for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

I am speaking in my capacity as a constituency MSP, of course, and in light of the experiences in casework that I have received. The number of Edinburgh and Lothian MSPs who are in attendance is interesting. The motion was, of course, lodged by a Lothian MSP.

I commend the incredible action from the Scottish Government since 2007 in delivering 118,000 affordable homes across the country, but there are areas across the country—particularly in Edinburgh—where the standard of housing is not up to what we would want our constituents to experience. Indeed, the City of Edinburgh Council has stated that Edinburgh has the lowest proportion of social rented homes in Scotland. That is an important fact to consider when thinking about the wider question.

The problems that are outlined in the motion and which will be discussed in the debate fall into two areas of concern: the public provision of social housing through registered social landlords or council houses, and the provision through mid-market rent.

The clear argument that I want to articulate on behalf of my constituents is that, first, we need additional capital investment in Edinburgh to provide more affordable homes here in the capital. Secondly, we need to work with the local authority to make sure that the quality of the works undertaken is of the right standard.

I know that colleagues will also have had casework relating to repairs not being done to an adequate standard. Indeed, I have discussed that issue with the City of Edinburgh Council, and I would be happy to engage with the Government and the council on how we address the matter more substantially.

Foysoil Choudhury referred to the private rented sector. The problems that are emerging relate to two policy considerations. The first is the lack of enforcement of our housing standards. That will become even more pertinent when 1 March 2024 comes around and the new standard is implemented. We have to get better at enforcing the standards that we have more strongly. I am not sure that we necessarily need new legislation—a new standard is coming next year—but we need to make sure that standards are enforced and that private landlords are held to account for the quality of the dwellings that they provide to people.

The second consideration relates to a piece of work that I started back in 2016 and which I was leading on in the Parliament until 2018. It has been taken on by other members of the Scottish Parliament—in particular, by Graham Simpson. I am talking about tenement repairs and maintenance. A great deal of work has gone into taking the matter forward by that group of MSPs and stakeholders, and I know that Patrick Harvie is leading on this area for the Government. We have to do the hard work and implement the law so that we have a system that facilitates greater upkeep of properties.

It is all very well building new properties and building them to a high standard, but we also need to make sure that we repair and maintain the quality of our current stock. That involves systematic change, and it will also require political leadership. There is lots of work to do. We are all committed to making sure that we improve the situation. All that I ask of the minister, whom I welcome to his post, is a commitment in his summing-up speech to meet me—indeed, I think that it would be worth while for him to meet all the MSPs for Edinburgh and the Lothians—to discuss the specific challenges that we have here in the capital.

13:07

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank my friend and Lothian MSP colleague Foysoil Choudhury for securing this important debate. As Ben Macpherson has outlined, I hope that the debate provides the opportunity for Edinburgh and Lothian MSPs to really push the Government on this issue, which is really important to our constituents. I also welcome both ministers to their positions.

We all know the negative impact that poor housing can have on people's health—individuals and families. The Royal College of General Practitioners briefing for the debate made a number of important points about the real, direct impact that poor housing has not just in terms of housing but on our health service, too. We need to look at the matter holistically across our public services, because cold, damp homes make people ill. General practitioners are often approached by patients—I have worked with GPs on this—who have concerns about their housing and are trying to move out of those homes. They are looking for supporting letters to be able to achieve that through a housing association or a private tenancy. Those are important issues that we also need to consider.

As the Crisis briefing for today's debate states, Scotland has some of the oldest housing stock in Europe. One in five homes were built more than a century ago, so ensuring that homes are healthy, safe and energy efficient presents a huge challenge to us all. We have to recognise that, in Scotland, about 40,000 homes that people are living in fall below tolerable standards—that was the 2019 figure from the Scottish house condition survey.

Replies to recent freedom of information requests that I have sent to local authorities have shown that a number of incidents involving the reporting of mould and damp, especially during the pandemic, have not been addressed. Foysoil Choudhury made some important points in his opening speech in that regard. Along with other Edinburgh MSPs, I recently met the Edinburgh Tenants Federation. The standard of repairs that we are seeing is totally unacceptable. People are reporting cases of mould and damp, but it is just being painted over. Literally within hours, the problem is re-emerging. How we make sure that repairs take place, rather than the damp being painted over, is key. Ben Macpherson touched on that, and I hope that the housing bill might present an opportunity to address the matter. We also need to make sure that there is qualitative work, because there is not enough of that.

I welcome the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations' briefing, which makes some positive points about the work that it, along with the Scottish Housing Regulator, has undertaken to try

to make sure that standards are improving. It points specifically to a practical guide that it has developed with housing professionals to make sure that housing associations respond to incidents of mould and damp and that specific standards are put in place.

The United Kingdom Government is perhaps slightly ahead of us in that regard. Michael Gove has taken a good lead on the issue, and there is a shared need for us to look at it. Awaab's law will make sure that there are specific laws and protocols relating to how damp and mould are reported, to the time limits that people should expect for inspections and work to take place, and to people being removed from homes that are unfit for habitation. It is important that we develop Scottish standards on that as soon as possible.

I know that I have only a few seconds of my time left. I recently lodged a written question for the Scottish Government, which Shona Robison responded to. She said:

"The Scottish Government does not have a reporting system in place to track incidents of damp and mould"—*[Written Answers, 10 January 2023; S6W-12614.]*

in homes in Scotland. We need to rectify that, and I hope that the minister will take that away. I welcome the fact that he is reaching out to all parties and spokespeople on the matter, and I look forward to taking the issue forward. I hope that we can have a wider debate on the issue in Government time in the coming weeks.

13:11

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I apologise to members, as I will have to leave early to attend an event that I agreed to chair some time ago.

Like other members, I am grateful to Foysoyl Choudhury for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I will also plug a housing summit that I am hosting in the Parliament about the housing crisis in Edinburgh—I know that some members have already signed up to it—that will look at scarcity, overcrowding and dilapidation. I look forward to seeing some members there.

I acknowledge the unspeakably tragic loss of Awaab Ishak, who was just two years old when he died. The appalling conditions in his family's home should never have had to be endured, and his death must serve as a wake-up call highlighting how deeply important it is to fix the state of housing in the United Kingdom. A home must be a place of safety and solace. It is a space where loved ones can gather, relish the joys of life and find peace. No matter the size or price, whether rented or owned, someone's home should be a comforting presence in their life. All too often, that is not the case.

The right to adequate shelter is a fundamental human right that is recognised in both domestic and international law. However, frankly, the rapid deterioration of housing conditions has threatened that right for thousands of families across Scotland. The latest Scottish house condition survey found that 40,000 homes in Scotland failed the tolerable standard threshold—that is 2 per cent of all dwellings in Scotland. Once characterised by warmth and safety, countless Scottish homes have now been plunged into damp, dilapidation and mould. Any such home is a real risk to health, as we have heard many times in the debate, and those dire conditions have led to a material negative impact on the wellbeing of many of our constituents.

Far too many of my constituents, many of whom live in areas of extreme deprivation, have contacted my office seeking assistance with the condition of their homes. I know that I am not alone in that; we have heard some of that in the debate. They include Bobbie, whose flat has been covered in mould for months, which has made her young children sick as a result; or Karen, a woman with pre-existing respiratory problems who, because of high levels of mould in her house, is struggling to breathe in her own home. Constituents such as Karen and Bobbie tell me about the impacts that that mould has had on not just their physical health but their mental health. They are racked with anxiety about their safety and that of their loved ones inside their own homes.

I know many of my parliamentary colleagues have had similar conversations in their constituencies. Cases such as those of Karen and Bobbie are all too common. Frankly, that is not acceptable. It is incumbent on us in the Parliament and it is our duty as public servants to use every tool that is at our disposal to solve the crisis.

As the tragic case of Awaab Ishak painfully demonstrated, we cannot afford to wait. First, the Government must recognise and rectify the hollowing out of Scottish communities and the slashing of council budgets. Those cuts have left local authorities without the ability to provide widespread high-quality housing for their most vulnerable constituents. Addressing that must be a top priority for the new SNP-Green Administration. It would greatly aid in fixing council-owned properties in a dire state.

My amendment in the cost of living and child poverty debate this Tuesday called for the Government to take on the Liberal Democrats' plan for an emergency home insulation programme that would save more than £700 million for Scottish families that are in social housing and private lets. Regrettably, the amendment was voted down.

The skyrocketing energy costs this winter led to seven in 10 Scots reporting that they would heat their home less than they normally would, which undoubtedly contributes further to mould and exacerbates the housing crisis.

The SNP must commit to being honest with the country, and I hope that our new housing minister will join a cross-party conversation that acknowledges the shortcomings of previous Government strategies, and that he agrees with me that concrete action needs to be taken urgently to address this pressing issue. Then, and only then, can Scottish families live in the safety and solace that they deserve.

13:16

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank my colleague Foysol Choudhury for bringing this important debate to chamber.

I begin by offering my condolences to Awaab Ishak's family. They suffered an unimaginable tragedy in 2020. Awaab was two years old and he died needlessly. His death was wholly preventable. He was a poor bairn who was poorly served by public service, and that should be chilling to all of us in the chamber. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

"I have the right to have a proper house, food and clothing."

A proper house does not mean any house; it means a house that gives security and safety and that does not damage health.

I am heartened by the action that the Scottish Government has taken on housing during the pandemic and amidst a cost of living crisis. Measures such as the rent freeze and the moratorium on evictions were bold rights-based policies, and those ideals—protecting people's right to housing—should be the benchmark for future policy. We can build on that progress.

My office has a vested interest in this debate, as our case load has been high with serious concerns about the prevalent dismissive attitudes of many landlords—including social landlords—when it came to damp and mould. Awaab's story should have set alarm bells ringing for landlords across the UK but, during the past year, my office has received several reports of damp and mould in local authority housing from constituents. Sadly, the blame game exists. The most typical excuses that are given in response are that damp and mould are caused by excessive showering, drying clothes in the house and not ventilating the property. We have to push for further action.

As reflected in today's motion, that dismissive culture has led to tenants being forced to adopt

potentially harmful daily practices. Many will feel compelled to turn on the heating to counter the cold and damp, and many will feel conflicted because they are worried about rising bills. Some will feel pressured to open windows to increase ventilation, but Scottish winters are unforgiving.

In some cases, the council eventually agreed to do remedial works. Unfortunately, that often means just covering over the damp areas and not tackling the dampness in the buildings. When the damp inevitably returns, the work order is repeated.

I have been helping a constituent who was forced out of their home due to flooding caused by empty council properties, or voids. The council in question is North Lanarkshire Council, which has a Labour administration that is supported by the Tories. The failure to secure voids against the winter has caused immeasurable damage not only to the void properties but to neighbouring ones and to council tenants.

One constituent of mine has been out of her home for five months awaiting remedial work because of damage caused by flooding because a void property was not protected from the winter. In that time, she has been paying rent for a property she cannot live in. That inequity cannot be allowed to exist.

As I said at the outset, the right to safe, secure and warm housing is not rhetoric; it is a fundamental human right and, indeed, a children's right. The abrogation of that right has become prevalent, and landlords must be held to account when it is impinged on. I wholly reject the notion that that is a lofty or idealistic want; with political will, it is eminently achievable.

I again thank Foysol Choudhury for highlighting the very sad case of Awaab Ishak and his family. Let us ensure that his death was not in vain, as we tackle this issue.

13:20

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, thank Foysol Choudhury for securing the debate, and I hope that it will be instrumental in getting this issue the priority that it deserves.

Others have already spoken about the death of Awaab Ishak. It was a tragedy but, sadly, it was not a one-off. His parents fought bravely to have their housing issues recognised and to protect their child, and I am sad to say that they also had to fight to have the cause of his death properly recorded. That took strength.

I fear that, if all deaths due to damp and mouldy homes were recorded appropriately, the numbers would be huge. We all have cases of families coming to us, complaining of damp in their homes.

All too often, they are told that it is down to their drying washing indoors, and their concerns are not taken seriously. “Putting Safety First: a briefing note on damp and mould for social housing practitioners” states:

“Responding to damp and mould primarily or initially as a lifestyle problem is inappropriate and ineffective.”

Indeed, that was reflected in the Housing Ombudsman’s report into the social landlord responsible for Awaab Ishak’s death. It takes effort and persistence to get a different approach taken and to get concerns taken seriously.

Housing problems are going to get worse, because of the cost of living crisis. People can no longer afford to heat their homes adequately and, as a result, damp is much more likely. The Highlands and Islands has the highest rates of fuel poverty in the country. The climate means that homes need year-round heating, and people do not have the luxury of being able to turn off the heating in the summer. The Scottish Government must therefore revisit the winter heating payment. It is unacceptable that people who have to have their heating on year round receive the same amount as those who can switch theirs off over the summer.

The Scottish Government must also look at its other schemes such as the boiler replacement and insulation schemes, which do nothing for off-gas-grid properties. They have been designed for urban housing schemes, not draughty old croft houses. It is sad that such ignorance on the part of the Scottish Government is actively stopping intervention instead of putting it in place.

Moreover, there is no point installing heat pumps in homes that have poor or no insulation. The Scottish Government must start by retrofitting old homes to make them energy efficient and then look at heating solutions. Of course, we need to stop reliance on fossil fuels, but the only way of doing that is by providing workable alternatives, which must start with cutting the amount of fuel needed to heat a home.

The Scottish Government is not doing that in the areas with the highest fuel poverty. Policy devised for rural areas works everywhere, whereas policy designed in urban areas does not transfer easily to rural parts. I urge those in the Government to get out from behind their desks and look at the reality of the impact of these policies on rural Scotland, because our young people should be able to grow up healthy and happy in warm homes.

13:23

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I, too, thank Foysol Choudhury for lodging this motion for debate. There is no doubt that, in the 12 years that I have been an MSP

representing the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency, housing—and, in particular, damp housing—has been the number 1 issue for my constituents.

Given the numerous cases that my staff and I have raised with the City of Edinburgh Council and Link PSL with regard to the condition of some properties in my constituency, including the Wester Hailes area, I welcomed the announcement in March 2021 that the council was piloting its new mixed tenure improvement service to upgrade all 1970s-built flats in Wester Hailes. That £30 million improvement scheme, which applies to almost 1,300 homes across 167 blocks of flats, is now well under way in the Murrayburn, Hailesland and Dumbryden areas. Work on each block includes repair or replacement of roofing, guttering, drying room facades, installation of external wall and attic insulation, as well as maintenance and decoration of the communal stairwells and closes.

Although most residents were pleased that the upgrade was happening, there was a large financial penalty for the 29 per cent of homes that were privately owned. Owner-occupiers were initially asked to contribute over £30,000, which many found was simply unaffordable and the only option available to them was to sell their home back to the council.

I was approached by several owners at the time and, by working with council officials, we managed to identify that substantial untapped funding for owners was available through the Scottish Government’s home energy efficiency programme grant scheme. We also highlighted to the council that, in comparison to other city councils, the loan period was too short and the interest rates were too high. The outcome was that the loan period was extended from 10 to 15 years and the interest rate was cut from 6 per cent to 4 per cent. The result was that my constituents saw their bills for the improvement work drop by at least 50 per cent.

Phases 1 to 4 have been completed, covering 484 flats and 18 houses, and those streets now look vibrant and modern with residents benefiting from warmer and more energy-efficient homes. The common areas between the blocks have yet to be upgraded but my understanding is that council plans are under way to further enhance the area with new play areas, upgraded landscaping and improved car parking.

Given the energy crisis of the past couple of years, it is important to measure how the energy efficiency measures are performing. Many residents have agreed to have Tinytag loggers installed in their homes to enable moisture and temperature levels to be measured and to track the energy efficiency of their homes.

The early indications of the energy efficiency of the refurbished homes are encouraging, with residents highlighting that their homes heat up quicker and stay warmer for longer, and that they do not need to have the heating on for as long or as often as they did prior to the works. There are also financial savings: one tenant said that she did not switch on her heating at all last winter and believes that she has saved about 80 per cent on her heating bills. The homes in the completed phases are now reaching an average EPC rating of B, which is equal to new-build standard and is higher than the current Scottish average EPC rating of D.

It is a hugely successful improvement programme that I believe should be not only replicated across my constituency but rolled out across all social housing in Scotland. I welcome the minister to his post. If he has not yet seen the improvements that are under way in Wester Hailes, I invite him to visit my constituency to see what can be achieved to tackle the issue of cold and damp homes.

13:28

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the new housing minister to his post. I congratulate Foysol Choudhury for leading this important debate and for his relentless campaigning for justice in highlighting the tragic death of Awaab Ishak.

What a shameful indictment it is that, nearly a quarter of a century since devolution, and since housing has been solely in the hands of the Scottish Parliament, it is still necessary to lodge a motion on the scandal of damp housing in Scotland. Why is that? Is it because there are too many landlords in this Parliament and too few tenants? We do have a problem of the overrepresentation of landlordism—the register of members' interests is bulging with landlords. Is it because there are too few representatives in the Parliament who have first-hand experience of poverty and the decrepit slum housing that is below the tolerable standard that invariably goes with it, or is it because the Government of the past 15 years has simply had the wrong political priorities?

Next year will mark the centenary of the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924—the John Wheatley housing act. By common consent, it is not just the most important piece of legislation but the most important practical action and act of socialism of that first-ever Labour Government.

Wheatley took the concept that he had developed as an Independent Labour Party councillor in Glasgow, representing the slum dwellers of the city, and worked with people such

as Mary Barbour, and John Maclean, whose centenary we celebrate this year. He also worked with the tenants movement and the trade unions to invest the surpluses from the Glasgow Corporation trams to clear out the slum landlords and to invest in decent council housing.

He scaled that concept up nationally and, in so doing, he unleashed the means for some of the finest council houses ever built—“homes, not hutches”. That is the kind of national vision that we need now, but it is also the kind of national urgency that we need now, because I tell you this: the experience of Wheatley, of Mary Barbour, of Maclean and of other pioneers was that bad housing led to bad health.

Wheatley, as minister for health, had responsibility for housing, too. In 1945, Nye Bevan was not just the minister for health but minister for housing, too. They knew that we needed the clearance of slums to ensure the clearance of public health ills such as tuberculosis. So I call on all members of this Parliament to start giving a much higher priority to housing, and for much higher investment, too. Let us have the imagination of a century ago.

Finally, I do not want to overinflate the minister's ego, but I have long held the view that the housing minister should be a dedicated minister of Cabinet rank, because there is a housing crisis, there is a public health crisis and there is a class-based crisis.

So we are indebted to Foysol Choudhury for lodging this motion, but we need to send out the message that Parliament does not bring about change; it is the people who bring about change. It was the people outside Parliament—the rent strikers in Glasgow—who brought about the Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act 1915. It was the people outside Parliament who built the movement for change that culminated in the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, and it will be the people once again—the Living Rent campaigners, the tenants organisations and the trade unions—who will build up pressure on this Parliament to use the powers that we have to build a better future and to banish damp housing finally to the history books.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Leonard. I call Paul McLennan to respond to the debate.

13:32

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

I thank Foysul Choudhury for bringing forward the motion and I thank members for their thoughtful contributions, which I will touch on later.

The tragic death of Awaab Ishak in a housing association property in Rochdale in 2020 highlighted the issue of damp and mould in housing to everyone across the United Kingdom. Nobody should live in substandard accommodation. Today, we have heard from various members that decent housing is a human right. Nobody should lose their life due to the condition of their home.

The Scottish Government takes—I take—the issue very seriously, and I will touch on some of the points that have been raised in that regard. The Government is committed to tackling disrepair and driving a culture in which good maintenance is given a high priority. The condition of homes in Scotland has been improving due to the action of this Government, but there is no doubt that we need to quicken that action. We recognise that there is much to do to ensure that everyone has the same chance to live in a high-quality home.

Earlier this week, the First Minister was clear in setting out that this Government's work will be defined by three distinct and interdependent missions. Those missions are centred on the principles of equality, opportunity and community. Housing plays a key part in that and it has a vital role in delivering on those principles.

All homes in Scotland must meet the minimum tolerable standard. We have heard that 40,000 homes do not meet that standard, which is 40,000 homes too many. Local authorities are required to have a strategy for ensuring that all homes that do not meet the tolerable standard are improved, and they have broad powers to assist home owners to ensure that their properties meet that standard. In the rented sector, there are additional standards that must be met.

In the social rented sector, the standard of homes has improved since we introduced requirements to meet the Scottish housing quality standard in 2012. The Scottish Housing Regulator is responsible for monitoring and reporting on social landlords' performance against the Scottish social housing charter. Social landlords are required to have a clear complaints process, and where a tenant is dissatisfied with the response of their landlord, they are able to escalate the issue to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Given the severity of the issues that have been identified in social housing in England, it was right to take urgent action here in Scotland. The Scottish Housing Regulator immediately wrote to all social landlords to ask them to consider the systems that they have in place for dealing with damp and mould and what work they have done.

The SHR has since worked with the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations to produce updated guidance. I hope to meet all those organisations in the near future and will raise the issue with them. I am pleased that the sector is taking action and working together to tackle the issue.

Foysol Choudhury mentioned private landlords. They have to adhere to the repairing standard, which was updated and strengthened in 2019. Mr Macpherson talked about the additional standards coming into force in 2024. It is key that we monitor that and I have asked officials to consider how we do that much more regularly. We cannot be in a position in which we are looking at figures that are two or three years old.

If a landlord has been notified of a problem and it has not been dealt with, tenants have the right to refer the matter to the First-tier Tribunal housing and property chamber, which can require landlords to take action. I encourage anyone who is in that position to do so. However, I take on board the point about communication to ensure that tenants are aware of their right to do that. I am also asking officials to consider that.

To support private landlords to meet the requirements of the updated repairing standard, we published new guidance last month. The guidance sets out the action that private landlords must take when dealing with problems of damp and mould.

Foysol Choudhury and Clare Adamson correctly said that problems with damp and mould can be exacerbated if people are not able to heat their homes. Everyone needs accommodation that is safe, warm and affordable. Energy bills are still at historically high levels and the UK Government is withdrawing its energy bills support scheme even though we know that many people are struggling to afford their fuel bills.

At First Minister's questions, the First Minister mentioned the fuel insecurity fund, which we had doubled from £10 million to £20 million but will now triple to £30 million. The fund is a critical plank in our support to people who are struggling with their energy costs. It continues to provide a lifeline to households who are at risk of self-rationing their energy use or of self-disconnection.

As we progress our just transition to net zero, we must ensure that we continue to tackle fuel poverty, working with our advisory panel to meet our statutory fuel poverty targets. The Scottish Government has allocated £350 million to heat, energy efficiency and fuel poverty measures this year, including £119 million targeted at fuel-poor households.

Rhoda Grant mentioned the winter heating payment. I would be willing to discuss with her how we monitor the new system and how it supports the Highland communities. I will touch a bit more on the points that you raised in that regard. The investment of £20 million in the winter heating payment is alongside other valuable support, such as the child winter heating assistance and wider energy-efficiency measures.

To ensure that all homes are warmer, greener and more efficient, we have, through our heat in buildings strategy, set the target of all homes in Scotland reaching a good level of energy efficiency by 2033. I take the point that Rhoda Grant made. How we work with our rural communities on that is not a one-size-fits-all approach. That is vital.

I am keen to visit rural communities this summer, so I would be delighted to engage with you on suggestions for doing that. In particular, we could discuss housing and other issues that you have raised the debate. I am happy to engage—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, but I do not know whether that was an intervention. *[Interruption.]* No, it was not—my apologies.

In addition to playing a key role in meeting our climate targets, improving the energy efficiency of our homes will also help to ensure that energy costs in the future are affordable and will provide considerable wider social, environmental and health benefits. We have committed to investment of at least £1.8 billion across this session of Parliament for heat and energy efficiency projects.

I will touch briefly on some of the other points that have been raised. Foysol Choudhury mentioned the 40,000 homes that are below the standard. That number is far too many.

Ben Macpherson requested that I meet Edinburgh MSPs. I would be delighted to do that. Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned that as well. We could talk not only about damp housing but about the wider issues. I will ask my officials to contact you and Mr Cole-Hamilton, and I would be delighted to attend any summit.

You also mentioned enforcement in tenement repair and maintenance. That is incredibly important. I hope to meet the City of Edinburgh Council soon and will engage with you on that. If there are any examples—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I give you a gentle reminder that remarks should be made through the chair rather than directly to members.

Paul McLennan: My apologies. Miles Briggs mentioned tenure and meeting the same standards as set out in “Housing to 2040”. That is something that we will be looking to do. It will be

part of the housing bill, and I am happy to engage with Mr Briggs on the issue. Indeed, we already have a meeting planned in regard to it.

Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned the housing summit. I would be happy to pick up on that as well. On cross-party discussions on housing in general, I have already engaged with the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and met Mr Rennie of the Liberal Democrats.

Clare Adamson’s point about empty homes and voids is incredibly important. I have already touched on Rhoda Grant’s points. I would be happy to accept Gordon Macdonald’s invitation to visit the scheme that he mentioned. I have read about that great scheme, and there are opportunities to see how we could replicate it across Scotland.

It was the usual passionate speech from Richard Leonard. Housing is a human right. That is the key point. With the appointment of a dedicated Minister for Housing, there is more of a focus on that. I am dedicated to pushing it as a human right. There are lots of issues in that regard.

Standards have improved in Scotland over the years, and we have taken urgent action to support households that are experiencing high energy bills and poor living conditions, but there is much more to do. The Government and I have big ambitions and there is much more work to be done to achieve them. However, the tragic story of Awaab Ishak reminds us all why doing so is so important.

I again thank Foysol Choudhury and other members for their contributions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2 o’clock.

13:40

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions on social justice, housing and local government. I remind members that if they wish to request to ask a supplementary they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question or indicate that in the chat function by entering the letters RTS during the relevant question.

Affordable Homes

1. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many affordable homes it has delivered in the past year. (S6O-02116)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Scotland has led the way in the delivery of affordable housing across the United Kingdom. Latest published statistics to the end of December 2022 show that, in the calendar year 2022, the Scottish Government supported, through the affordable housing supply programme, the delivery of 9,727 affordable homes—an increase of 1 per cent on the previous calendar year. More than 8,000 of those homes are for social rent, which takes the total number of affordable homes delivered since 2007 to more than 118,000, 70 per cent of which are for social rent.

Alexander Stewart: I thank the minister for that response, which I welcome. Statistics that were released by the Scottish Government last month indicate that the number of new home starts in the last quarter of 2022 decreased by 24 per cent. The housing market is in crisis and, without any plans for how to address it, things can only get worse. Projects are being halted due in part to Patrick Harvie's rent freeze. Does the minister agree that the recent rent cap will negatively impact on delivery of new homes?

Paul McLennan: One of the key points when discussing the sector is cost: the cost of construction inflation and general inflation costs. Construction inflation is at 16 per cent, which has obviously impacted on delivery of homes in both the social and private sectors. That is the feedback that we have had. The feedback also tells us that the market has slowed down because of the massive increase in interest rates, which I think has been the biggest influence that we have seen in the slow-down of the housing market.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Shetland continues to have a shortage of available housing and long waiting lists for housing association and council homes. Recruitment and retention in key industries and public services is hampered by lack of available housing. The Scottish Government needs to ramp up the pace to deliver its promise to build 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that estimates of the number of affordable homes that are needed in rural and island areas are adjusted for the demands of growing industries being attracted to the Highlands and Islands?

Paul McLennan: Beatrice Wishart has made an incredibly important point. At least 10 per cent of the 110,000 target is to be rural housing, which is about 11,000 homes. We are working on our remote, rural and islands housing action plan. I am looking to visit as many islands and rural areas as I can, as part of my work over the summer. I would be keen to visit Beatrice Wishart's constituency, in that regard.

As I mentioned, we have to look at the 16 per cent increase in construction costs in relation to affordability. I am working on that with officials at the moment. We will see more detailed work in the remote, rural and islands housing action plan. I am more than happy to visit Beatrice Wishart's constituency during the next few months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I move to question 2 from Bob Doris, I note that the member was not here at the start of portfolio questions. I am sure that you will wish to preface your question with an apology to the chamber.

Low-income Families (Glasgow)

2. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Indeed, I would have apologised without your prompting, Presiding Officer. That is duly noted and my apologies are forthcoming.

To ask the Scottish Government how it supports low-income families in Glasgow. (S6O-02117)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Tackling child poverty is a defining mission of this Government. We are providing a range of support that will benefit families in Glasgow and across Scotland. That includes investment in the Scottish child payment, 1,140 hours of funded childcare, free school meals and discretionary housing payments, which provide direct financial support to people who are struggling with housing costs. We are actively working with partners in Glasgow to connect families to the services that they need in order to thrive, and we have committed to tripling our fuel insecurity fund to support anyone who is at risk of

self-disconnection or of self-rationing their energy use.

Bob Doris: I welcome those substantial efforts.

In Tuesday's child poverty debate, I suggested the possibility of providing a school clothing grant twice in the school year and a summer holiday supplement to the Scottish child payment, which suggestions could benefit low-income families at particularly challenging times. Given that there is to be an anti-poverty summit, how will the Scottish Government consider new initiatives to tackle child poverty—including the suggestions that I have made—and how will those be agreed, as resources are identified?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Bob Doris for his proposals and suggestions. The last point in his question—on when new resources are identified—is the key point because, as Mr Doris knows, one of the challenges is that our budgets are fully allocated. However, we need to look seriously at new ideas, which is why the First Minister has proposed the anti-poverty summit. I believe that invitations are now going out for that.

I am happy to take Mr Doris's suggestions as read, but if he would like to provide me with more detail in writing, I would be happy to receive that.

Winter Heating Payment (Aberdeenshire)

3. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the number of households that have received the winter heating payment in Aberdeenshire. (S6O-02118)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As a 31 March 2023, almost 400,000 low-income households had automatically received their £50 winter heating payment to support them with their energy bills for this winter. All will have received a letter explaining their entitlement to the benefit.

Our first release of official statistics on winter heating payments will be published on 6 June 2023, and they will be released annually, in the future. The statistics will include additional local authority area breakdowns and will be available on Social Security Scotland's website.

Alexander Burnett: We look forward to the local authority breakdowns. In my constituency, areas such as Braemar and Aboyne have been recognised as having some of the coldest temperatures in the United Kingdom, and previously constituents could have received more than triple the current £50 flat rate. What consideration has the Scottish Government given to people who are now missing out on receiving support that they previously had under the UK's cold weather payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One of the challenges of the previous scheme, which the winter heating payment scheme has tried to resolve, was that nobody knew how much money they were going to get each year. It was, of course, weather dependent but it did not include aspects such as wind-chill factor, and there was a great challenge in terms of where weather stations are. That created great challenges for people in some parts of the country, who did not receive money that they thought they should be receiving.

With the benefit, we have tried to ensure that people know how much they will receive and when they will receive it, so that there is certainty about what is happening. That is very important when we look at the cost of living crisis that has been exacerbated by Tory mismanagement of the UK economy, including energy prices.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Older People and Social Security

5. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether older people and social security are priority policy areas, in light of the decision not to include those in ministerial titles in the recent round of ministerial appointments. (S6O-02120)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, which includes social security. The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, as with the previous equalities minister, has responsibility for older people. It is totally clear to anyone that social security and older people are important to this Government, unlike the United Kingdom Government. That is why we are delivering seven Scottish Government benefits that are available only in Scotland, and are mitigating the harm that has been caused by UK Government policies.

Our £50 winter heating payment goes automatically to 400,000 people, including those on pension credit, and we have tripled the fuel insecurity fund to £30 million to support people in hardship. I urge the UK Government to match those efforts.

Jeremy Balfour: With no specific minister responsible for social security, what reassurances can the Scottish Government give us that there will be no further slippage in the full transfer of devolved benefits?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: This is the second day in a row that we have tried this; I am going to try once again. I am the minister who is responsible for social security. When Ben Macpherson, as a junior minister, was made responsible for social security, the Conservatives

complained that we had demoted the post; however, now they are complaining because it is back at cabinet secretary level. I find it a little bit strange. It is maybe a case of finding a complaint where none is required.

I hope to be able to demonstrate to Jeremy Balfour through the work that we do—and, I hope, through work that we do together—that I will be taking very seriously all the issues that are involved in Social Security, and I will be ensuring that we work towards delivering not only the benefits but the case transfers, as the current timetable suggests.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I cannot believe that the Conservatives are so worried about titles instead of reality.

I understand that the Scottish Government has recently launched a campaign to make people more aware of eligibility for disability benefits. Can the cabinet secretary say more about that campaign?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is a very important aspect that we are determined to carry forward. Not only is that about putting dignity, fairness and respect in the system, but it plays a part in ensuring that people are aware of the benefits that are available, and that they are encouraged to apply for what they are eligible for. I do not know of any UK Government scheme that proactively encourages people to apply for disability benefits and aims to ensure that people get the money that they are entitled to. We are absolutely determined to do that. I encourage all members in the chamber, regardless of their party, to share for the benefit of their constituents the work that Social Security Scotland has done on the campaign.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): In a week in which research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has revealed that the number of people who are living in very deep poverty has increased significantly in the past two decades, does the cabinet secretary at least acknowledge that removal of those subjects from ministerial briefs sends a concerning message about the Government’s commitment in those spaces? Would she also recognise that, although she is a very talented member of the Government, she has a brief that is huge and very varied, and that having a minister who is responsible for older people and social security would be of great help to everyone who is involved in tackling poverty?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am quite happy to take compliments when they are given—by members of the Opposition, in particular.

I say to Paul O’Kane with the greatest respect that one of the things that the Government is normally criticised for is its being too big and

having too many ministers. Now it seems that we are being encouraged to have more ministers in my portfolio. Although I might welcome that for my portfolio, I think that it can be seen on the front bench today that we are ably supported by a range of ministers. We will be delighted to work together with the member and others on all parts of the portfolio.

Eviction Cases

6. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that there were 224 eviction cases involving tenants lodged with the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland in the month to 15 March. (S6O-02121)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants’ Rights (Patrick Harvie): We understand that the figure of 224 that the member quotes relates to the number of eviction hearings or case management discussions that were scheduled to take place up to 15 March 2023. That is not the number of eviction applications that have been received by the tribunal. Each application can involve a number of hearings or discussions, so the number of those will not be the same as the number of eviction applications received.

The Cost of Living (Tenant) Protection (Scotland) Act 2022 does not prevent landlords serving a notice to leave or making an application to the tribunal, and the tribunal will still make a decision on whether to issue an eviction order or decree. However, enforcement of the eviction must be paused for up to six months, except in certain narrowly defined circumstances.

Katy Clark: I am pleased that the Scottish Government has confirmed that the moratorium on evictions, plus a rent cap, will remain in place until September. However, the number of eviction cases being lodged per month appears to be actually higher than before the eviction ban, due to various loopholes in the legislation. The ban does not apply to tenants with arrears of six months or more, to social tenants with debts of more than £2,250 or where the landlord chooses to sell the property.

Would the minister be willing to look at whether it might be possible to remove those loopholes and at how that would impact on the real situations that tenants face?

Patrick Harvie: We are keeping the operation of the 2022 act under continual review. We will report on it regularly to Parliament, as the act requires us to do.

The member will recall debates during the passage of the legislation on the question of rent arrears. I made the case that, although the

arguments are balanced in some ways, the help that people with rent arrears need is not simply to be stuck where they are as they build up ever more unpayable debt. The form of help that they need is direct assistance, and that is what the Government has made available in other ways.

Rather than thinking that we will go back and unpick the legislation, which was passed with the support of Labour colleagues, let us make sure that we continue to operate it as effectively as we can to give tenants in Scotland the protection that they so badly need, and which is so completely lacking in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Poverty (Older People)

7. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent report by Independent Age, which states that one in seven people in Scotland over the state pension age live in poverty. (S6O-02122)

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): The Scottish Government is, of course, concerned about anyone who is living in poverty. It is committed to tackling poverty and recognises the specific inequalities that apply to older people.

The Scottish Government has consistently called for the United Kingdom Government to provide additional support to assist people with the cost of living crisis. However, the chancellor has failed to deploy the full range of powers available to him to make a real difference to people's lives.

The Scottish Government recognises the pressure on household budgets, which is why, last year and this, we have allocated almost £3 billion to support policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible during the on-going cost of living crisis.

Colin Smyth: I thank the minister for her answer and wish her well in her new role.

Too often, there is a misconception that older people are well off. However, the minister will know that the number of people in later life who are living in poverty in Scotland has risen by 25 per cent since 2012. Therefore, as well as looking at more immediate action to combat that rise in poverty, I ask the minister whether, in her new role, she will give serious consideration to the recommendation in the Independent Age report and the longstanding call by Age Scotland for the establishment of an older people's commissioner for Scotland to properly amplify older people's concerns, including that all-too-often-hidden problem of poverty in later life.

Emma Roddick: I absolutely appreciate the concerns that the member is raising, but we do not have plans at the moment to introduce legislation

to establish an older people's commissioner. There are existing commissions that protect the rights of older people: the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission. They already play a role in relation to the rights of older people in respect of age as a protected characteristic.

In addition, we continue to work closely with the older people's strategic action forum on a range of priorities for advancing age equality. We are committed to promoting the rights of older people and ensuring that they benefit from all that we are doing to improve people's lives. That is why we provide more than £2.2 million to support older people's organisations, to tackle inequality and discrimination and support our aim of promoting the rights of older people.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the minister to her place. As all MSPs are aware, the state pension is reserved to the UK Government. Under successive Labour, coalition and Tory Governments, the pension has been one of the lowest relative to wages in Europe. Does the minister know of any commitment by the Labour Party, which seeks to continue Westminster control of pensions, to significantly increase the state pension—the most effective way of reducing pensioner poverty—or is that just more Opposition grandstanding?

Emma Roddick: I am not aware of any substantive proposals from the Labour Party that would reduce pensioner poverty, which was a major issue for older people even before the current cost of living crisis. As the member will know, the levers to reduce pensioner poverty, including control of the levels of the state pension and pension credit, lie with the Government at Whitehall. Only with the full powers of a normal independent country could we properly tackle that, but we will continue to call on the UK Government to ensure that all pensioners are encouraged to take up the benefits that they are entitled to, in full.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): One of the facts that is sometimes not taken into account in arguments around older citizens is the fact that they are often undertaking caring roles in our society for loved ones including grandchildren and great grandchildren. When, specifically, does the Scottish Government intend to deliver the national kinship care payment, which it has committed to, and the extension of the period of time for which carers allowance will be paid following the death of a cared-for person?

Emma Roddick: The member raises a very important point. I will ask the minister with specific responsibility for that portfolio to get in touch with him with a full response.

Local Services

8. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it will work with local authorities to ensure access to local services, including leisure facilities, for local communities. (S6O-02123)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): The Scottish Government believes that everyone should have access to local services, particularly leisure facilities that help to support the physical and mental health of the nation.

We will work in partnership with local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive high-quality public services. We understand the challenging financial circumstances that local authorities are facing largely because of the cost of living crisis, so we have increased the resources that are available to local government by more than £793 million in 2023-24. It is, however, for locally elected representatives to make decisions on how best to deliver services in their communities.

Maurice Golden: The minister will be aware that Dundee has been without a local swimming pool since the Olympia shut down for repair in 2021. The facility was only opened in 2013 and yet taxpayers are now footing a £6 million repair bill. With so much disruption and money at stake, it is just common sense to hold an independent inquiry, so it is bizarre that the SNP-led council refuses to do that. Does the minister agree that Dundee residents deserve answers that only an independent inquiry can provide?

Joe FitzPatrick: I am well aware of the circumstances in Dundee and the challenges that it is facing. The council is working hard to make sure that people continue to have access to swimming facilities and is particularly focusing on making sure that children can learn to swim using the network of swimming pools in Dundee schools and the leisure facility in Lochee.

On the point about scrutiny and an independent inquiry, the matter has rightly been scrutinised by the council's scrutiny committee, which is led by opposition councillors. The convener of that committee is the leader of the Labour group and the two deputy conveners are the leaders of the Liberal Democrat group and the Conservative group. If we are talking about independent scrutiny, I cannot see how an opposition-led committee has not managed to do that.

That said, I absolutely get that people are frustrated and I am hopeful that it will not be too long before the Olympia reopens.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes portfolio questions on social justice, housing and local government. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow the front-bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Deposit Return Scheme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Lorna Slater on the deposit return scheme. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

14:22

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I welcome this opportunity to update Parliament on the deposit return scheme following the First Minister's statement earlier this week. Scotland's deposit return scheme is an ambitious and transformational upgrade to Scotland's recycling infrastructure. It has already seen hundreds of millions of pounds invested across the country and is creating hundreds of new green jobs in the recycling industry, with many more to come. It will reduce litter by one third, increase the recycling rate of single-use drinks containers to 90 per cent and cut CO₂ emissions by 4 million tonnes over 25 years.

That is the kind of change that we need to see if we are to remain true to our commitment to tackle the climate emergency and to leverage private investment behind a green and circular economy. However, as the First Minister and I have said this week, we cannot deliver on this ambition without an exclusion from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. With just four months to go, the UK Government has not issued that exclusion, which makes a delay to the scheme unavoidable.

We have also heard the concerns expressed by businesses, particularly small businesses, and we want to do more to support them. With that in mind, I will today set out the new timetable for Scotland's DRS and provide an overview of a new package of measures to simplify the scheme and support businesses to participate, and I will finish with next steps on our engagement with the UK Government.

Significant progress has been made by businesses large and small in preparing for the scheme. Around £300 million of investment has been committed in systems, infrastructure and staff time, with many businesses fully prepared to launch the scheme.

The scheme administrator, Circularity Scotland, has developed the logistical network that will support the operation of the scheme, and ground has been broken on sites across Scotland, including sorting centres in Aberdeen and Motherwell that are creating up to 200 new green jobs. I am very grateful to everyone who has helped to make that happen. However, in recent

months progress has stalled. Presiding Officer, the primary cause of that has been the uncertainty created by the continued failure by the United Kingdom Government to issue an IMA exclusion. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, I said that there should be no interventions or interruptions. Minister, please continue.

Lorna Slater: Together with public briefings against the scheme from the Secretary of State for Scotland, the effect has been corrosive, undermining confidence, stalling progress and halting private investment. Some businesses have said that they will simply not join the scheme because of the UK Government's position, and there has been extensive feedback from industry that they are not willing to proceed with investments until they have clarity.

This is an ambitious, major infrastructure scheme that affects thousands of businesses and everyone in Scotland. Readiness for August was always going to be challenging, particularly given the difficult conditions that the industry has faced in recent years, but the chilling effect of Westminster's position has made it impossible. Scotland's deposit return scheme will now go live on 1 March 2024. This gives the time needed for the UK Government to fulfil its duties, and it gives businesses a full 10 months from now to get ready for launch.

Earlier this week I met with representatives of producers and retailers to outline the new timetable. I acknowledge their constructive response and the suggestions that they have made to ensure that these 10 months are used to full effect, and I look forward to continuing to engage with them to ensure that we make the progress that we need to make. I have also asked partners in the scheme—CSL, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Zero Waste Scotland—to work with my officials and with businesses to deal promptly with any remaining issues, to allow businesses to prepare.

Although Scotland's DRS is an industry-led scheme, just as similar schemes are across the world, the Scottish Government has consistently worked in partnership with businesses to facilitate progress and ensure that a pragmatic approach is taken to implementing the scheme. That is why we are removing the obligation on the vast majority of online retailers to provide take-back services; it is why, earlier this year, CSL brought forward a £22 million package of support to improve cash flow for producers; and it is why we have listened carefully to the suggestions that small businesses, in particular, have made in recent weeks with a view to developing a package of measures that are fair and pragmatic and that support the overall aims of the scheme.

The key elements of that package are as follows. First, all drinks containers under 100ml will be completely excluded from the scheme. That will benefit businesses in the soft drinks, wine and spirits industries—the latter has raised particular concerns about miniatures—while removing just 0.2 per cent of articles from the scheme.

Secondly, products with low sales volumes will be excluded from the scheme. That change applies to any product that sells fewer than 5,000 items a year. That will apply to all businesses, so a large business that has a niche product line with low sales volume will not need to apply a deposit to that line and a small business that sells a low volume of products will not need to apply a deposit to any of their products. That change will remove only around 0.5 per cent of articles from the scheme but will remove the need for around 44 per cent of businesses to apply a deposit to their products, effectively removing many of the smallest producers from the scheme.

Thirdly, we plan to exempt all hospitality premises that sell the large majority of their drinks products for consumption on the premises from acting as a return point. Regulations already exempt premises that exclusively sell drinks on site, such as restaurants, pubs and nightclubs. However, many hospitality businesses also sell a small proportion of drinks to take away. Where that is the case, we agree that they need not operate as a return point, given that they will already be operating a closed-loop system for drinks on sale. We will engage with hospitality businesses on the proportion of sales to which that will apply, in order to ensure a balance between support for businesses and accessibility for customers.

In addition, in partnership with Zero Waste Scotland, we have simplified the online process for retailers to apply for an exemption from operating a return point, following feedback from businesses that have used the online application system.

I am aware of the concern that some businesses have around the size and complexity of the producer agreement with Circularity Scotland. To help with that, I have asked Circularity Scotland to develop a short-form producer agreement, which will help to reduce the burden on those businesses.

Throughout the process of developing the DRS, we have worked closely with officials in the UK Government. However, the UK Government has still to issue an internal market act exclusion, even though we first raised the need for one in 2021. We have followed the agreed process and have provided all the material that has been asked of us. I had expected to finally get a decision at the most recent meeting of the interministerial group, on Monday of this week. However, no decision

was forthcoming and ministers were unable to provide a timeframe for one. [*Interruption.*]

Let me be clear: Scotland's DRS is within the devolved competence—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister. Could you resume your seat for a second?

I said at the outset that there should be no interventions or interruptions while the minister is speaking. There will be opportunities to ask questions after the minister has concluded her statement.

Lorna Slater: Let me be clear: Scotland's DRS is within the devolved competence of the Scottish Government and Parliament. It is not for Westminster to undermine our democracy in the way that it is doing. Following my statement, we will write to the UK Government to inform it of the new timetable and support package and to request—once again—an urgent decision to allow the scheme to proceed as I have outlined.

I am confident that that will happen, because there is no reasonable justification for our request being refused. It is the right outcome for businesses, for Scotland and for the UK, which will benefit from our scheme leading the way. We remain committed to continuing to share lessons with the UK Government.

Alongside our work to obtain an IMA exclusion, we are working with the UK Government on issues related to trading standards, which are important for producers and retailers. Businesses need answers on those issues in short order. Again, I ask the UK Government to work with us, businesses and regulators to resolve those critical issues in a timely manner.

I and this Government are committed to Scotland's deposit return scheme. That commitment is unwavering, because I believe in climate action. I believe in investing in green infrastructure and in creating the green jobs of the future, so I call on members across the chamber who share those values to put an end to their increasingly desperate attempts to undermine Scotland's deposit return scheme.

Right now, it looks as though colleagues in the Labour and Tory parties have given up on recycling, on tackling the litter crisis, on the climate emergency and even on the authority of this Parliament to make decisions in devolved areas. That is what this comes down to. Scotland's Parliament legislated to make deposit return happen and I, as a minister of the Scottish Government, am delivering on that democratic mandate—[*Interruption.*]*—*but a Tory Westminster Government that Scotland did not vote for appears

to be using the post-Brexit powers that it gave itself to stop this vital scheme in its tracks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I am sorry to interrupt again, but please resume your seat.

This is the third and last time that I will say this. The minister is making a statement. As is the common practice when ministers make statements, there are to be no interventions or interruptions.

Minister, please conclude.

Lorna Slater: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Labour and the Tories might have given up on devolution, but we have not. I and this Scottish Government will work tirelessly to deliver on our mandate and to protect this Parliament's right to work for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I ask those members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak button now.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of the statement. The only parties in the chamber that have given up on recycling are the Scottish National Party and its partners in the Greens, having not met the 2013 household recycling target that the Scottish Government set.

Today's statement confirms the SNP-Green approach: constitutional grievance first and business second. The Scottish Government had been sitting on the scheme since 2009, before it finally got round to introducing regulations and setting a launch date of April 2021. Then we had a delay, then another delay and then, this week, with the minister having lost control of the scheme, the First Minister had to step in and announce yet another delay.

The minister will not be happy with that, having said that

"no one with any credibility"

would delay the scheme again and that it would be a

"kick in the teeth"

to industry.

The minister has made such an almighty mess of the scheme that she has now had to effectively rewrite it. Today's changes should have been made months ago. Businesses cannot have confidence in a scheme that sees continual delays and massive changes at the last minute.

Let us be clear: this is not an industry-led scheme. The Scottish waste sector has been excluded, small businesses have been excluded from membership of the scheme administrator and, in any case, Donald McCalman of Circularity Scotland said today:

"We're not running the scheme. I think that's an important misconception to address."

Can the minister provide a helpful answer? I am not interested in pre-scripted flimflam telling me information that I already know. Will registered producers be held liable for advanced months payments during this delay, yes or no?

Lorna Slater: I am sorry: due to the noise around me, I could not hear the question. Will the member repeat the last bit?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before Mr Golden stands up to ask his question again, that question would have been heard if members on the front bench and in the other parts of the chamber that I am looking at directly had not heckled him while he was asking his question. That is perhaps a salutary lesson for everyone today: members must let the person who has the floor be the speaker at that particular time.

I call Douglas Lumsden. No, I call Maurice Golden. Even I am getting confused.

Maurice Golden: I am much younger than Douglas Lumsden.

My question was, will registered producers be held liable for advanced months payments during this delay, yes or no?

Lorna Slater: The member asks an interesting question about the agreement between producers and Circularity Scotland, which is a contract that they have signed. The member may be reassured to hear that only the very largest producers are liable for costs under that contract.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance notice of her statement, although I am deeply disappointed by its tone and content. I put on record that the First Minister's response yesterday to my letter was merely a political attack, which the minister is, unfortunately, repeating today.

Businesses, the hospitality sector and recycling companies are stressed and have been highlighting their concerns for months. Being told by the minister, for the past few months, to go to a website has not cut it, especially when the information that they sought was not even there. Now that we have this inevitable delay, we need a grown-up approach from both the UK and Scottish Governments to ensure that we get a scheme that will not disadvantage Scottish businesses and consumers.

We at Scottish Labour are absolutely clear in our support for the principle of a DRS scheme. Such schemes have been successful in other countries and in the debate later today we will highlight our commitment to stronger action on the climate emergency. But, even now, there is no admission in the statement that the scheme has been wrongly designed. That is why we have been asking questions for months.

I want a response from the minister on the key issue of the implementation of the scheme. She has again said that responsibility for that has been given to the private company Circularity Scotland, which does not represent small businesses and has no accountability or parliamentary oversight. Circularity Scotland has already given the contract to Biffa, a company now owned by a US hedge fund, which will put jobs in local recycling companies at risk and will give Biffa a monopoly over the prices to be charged in future.

Will the minister now roll back on that? What remains a concern to businesses is the exact detail of how the scheme is to be implemented. Will the minister now commit to meeting those producers, members of the hospitality sector and recycling companies, who will still face major challenges even with the changes that she has announced today?

Lorna Slater: I continue to meet producers and members of the retail and hospitality sectors, and I am happy to meet recyclers as well. Engagement with industry and business has been a core part of how we have been delivering this. Indeed, after the First Minister's statement on Tuesday, I held rapid meetings with producers, retailers and the non-governmental organisations in the sector that very afternoon. That is just a continuing example of the kind of engagement that we have had all along.

I will go through some of the timeline, because I think that it might be useful for the member to understand that. Since last year, we have developed considerable momentum towards what was intended to be the launch in August this year. That has included working with industry on its concerns with regard to the scheme.

The regulations that this Parliament passed were deliberately broad to allow industry to make those adjustments and decisions that were right for industry. The scheme is paid for by industry and delivered by industry. I suppose that this Parliament could have passed a scheme that would have been paid for by the taxpayer and controlled by Government, but that is not what it passed. However, within the scope of delivering the scheme, there are some key partners, which include the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. We passed the regulations, SEPA enforces them, and industry's job is to adhere to

them. Circularity Scotland is a private not-for-profit business that has been created by industry to enable it to comply with the regulations as passed by this Parliament.

Throughout the process of delivering this project, industry has come back to me, as a representative of the Scottish Government, and said that it would like us to clarify, provide detail on and improve certain elements of the scheme, so we have done that. We clarified the process for streamlining exclusions. We got rid of online take-back for most people who would have been responsible—

Maurice Golden: We know.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Answer the questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, please show some courtesy.

Lorna Slater: We worked with Circularity Scotland, which, in March, delivered £22 million-worth of cash-flow support. Today, I have announced significant adjustments to the delivery of the scheme that have been asked for by industry. Industry asked us to exclude miniatures. We have done so. Industry asked us to look at what could be done for small producers, and 44 per cent of them will now not be required to apply a deposit.

The member should be clear that I have systematically worked through and delivered on what industry has asked for. We now have 10 months before the new launch date, and I am looking forward to working with industry to get to that successfully. The businesses that I engaged with on Tuesday had some very constructive suggestions—I thank them for that—as to how we might work together to do that, and I will continue to do that work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I point out that we need succinct questions and indeed answers, minister, in order to allow me to call as many members as possible in the time that we have available.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I am having difficulty hearing the minister. I think that time would be best spent on questions and answers. It has been taken up by a lot of noise from the Conservatives. [*Interruption.*] It takes up time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Everything takes up time, Ms Hyslop. I will try to deal with that as best I can. Please continue.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Can the minister now suggest that SEPA and Circularity Scotland provide clarity on the scheme for small hospitality businesses—such as

DreadnoughtRock in Bathgate, which I visited recently—that already recycle 100 per cent of their glass bottles, cans and other waste and use existing SEPA systems of recording such recycling? What consideration has been given to closed-loop hospitality venues that have difficulty in securely storing waste that is destined for recycling? The same company may be designated by Circularity Scotland to collect in the future, but currently it will do so only from the public main street, which will bring serious security issues in relation to what will be a valuable commodity.

Lorna Slater: All scheme articles will bear a deposit, which hospitality businesses will have paid when they purchased the materials. Hospitality businesses can only redeem that deposit by ensuring that scheme articles are returned, so removing them from the scheme is not possible. The scheme will allow closed-loop hospitality businesses to have their material collected for free, saving them money while keeping up the high levels of recycling. I am aware that CSL continues to work with the hospitality industry to ensure smooth working of the scheme.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The minister was asked whether there might be liabilities arising and she confirmed that there will be. Can she, therefore, tell me what is the total liability, expressed as a figure, for registered producers and retailer contractual commitments for reverse vending machines resulting from this delay?

Lorna Slater: That is a matter relating to the contractual agreement between Circularity Scotland and the producers. The member can be assured that only the very largest producers—those making more than 10 million units a year—are required to underwrite the cost. It is an agreement between a private company and their customers; it is not a matter for the Scottish Government.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Prior to Brexit, which, of course, Scotland did not want, we had regulatory divergence, and this Parliament could be secure in legislating in devolved areas. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee has consistently raised concerns about the lack of transparency about the frameworks and the nature of the relationships between the Governments and how those are developing. The UK Government's two-year delay with regard to its decision about exclusions to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 under the common frameworks can only leave us with the impression that it is trampling over the devolution settlement. Does the minister agree?

Lorna Slater: I share the member's deep frustration. Let me be clear: this should not be how

devolution works. I am deeply concerned about the broader implications of the UK Government using its powers under the 2020 act in that way to undermine the common frameworks and the devolved decisions that are taken by this Parliament, and I know that the Welsh Government is also concerned about that.

The common frameworks were meant to provide a means of resolving issues such as these, and my ask of the UK Government is clear. We need to follow the agreed, published process, engage constructively and agree an exclusion quickly. That is the best outcome not only for Scotland and Scottish businesses but for the UK as a whole.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): In February this year, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity claimed that there were 500 new jobs out for recruitment as part of the deposit return scheme, including 60 in Aberdeen, all of which would contribute to our just transition; and, in March, the minister announced that 664 businesses had registered with the scheme ahead of the August launch. Can the minister share what assessments the Scottish Government has made of the impact of the significant delay on those new jobs, and of the implications of the cost to those businesses and organisations that have already invested in changes to their operations as part of the scheme?

Lorna Slater: The member is right to say that many businesses in Scotland have invested heavily towards the August launch date. That investment includes recruiting people, setting up information technology systems and getting ready to install reverse vending machines. The delay, which has been caused by the prevarication of the UK Government in relation to issuing an exemption from the 2020 act, which we asked for two years ago—I stress that we are weeks away from the when the scheme was meant to be launched—has been frustrating for me and for those businesses that have made that substantial investment.

Maurice Golden quoted me accurately earlier: I think that the delay on the part of the UK Government is a kick in the teeth for the businesses that have worked hard towards the launch of the scheme. However, the businesses can be assured that that investment is not lost. It will be valuable as we work towards our 1 March launch, because the Government is committed to the deposit return scheme and we will be working towards a successful launch in March next year.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The minister mentioned trading standards. Could she expand on exactly what agreement she needs from trading standards? Does that include the question of how deposits will be displayed in the

price, and is the UK Government being constructive in that regard?

Lorna Slater: That is an important question that affects Scottish businesses and businesses across the UK as they implement their deposit return schemes.

Trading standards officers have indicated that their interpretation of the price marking legislation is that the deposit must be included in the price displayed for a product. We believe that that approach risks confusion for customers. We believe that it is important that it is clear that the deposit on products is refundable and, therefore, we believe that it should not be included in the price that is displayed but instead should be highlighted separately, as the deposit return regulations require. That is the approach of deposit return schemes in other countries.

Trading standards is a resolved policy area, so we cannot adjust the regulations ourselves. However, we have called on the UK Government to amend the relevant legislation, which does not explicitly cover deposit return schemes, to make it clear that the deposit price can be displayed separately. Scottish Government officials are working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Welsh Government and the Department for Business and Trade to seek a consistent approach to deposit pricing across the UK, particularly as we believe that Westminster will want a similar approach to the one that we are proposing when it launches its own scheme.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Circularity Scotland's role is to deliver the scheme as per Government instruction. SEPA is the regulator of the scheme. However, despite the hundreds of questions that have been asked of the minister, we are still unclear as to her role. Will she take this opportunity to tell us what her responsibilities are, and will she finally commit to working with MSPs of all parties—who, incidentally, are supportive of a workable DRS scheme—ditch the positive squirming, and listen to affected industries when they raise legitimate concerns?

Lorna Slater: As I went through in detail when Mercedes Villalba asked a question, I have engaged effectively with businesses—producers and retailers—and I have spoken with MSPs in the chamber. I have done extensive engagement. That is how we have made changes to the operation of the DRS, which we have done specifically to address what industry has asked for. I have given extensive detail—I am sure that the Presiding Officer does not want me to go through it again—of exactly all the ways in which we have listened to businesses to get ready for the launch.

Ten months are ahead of us before our launch date of 1 March. On Tuesday, I again had constructive engagement with retailers and producers as to how we are going to work together to become a really effective delivery body in order to launch the scheme successfully on 1 March—and I look forward to doing just that.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I note that the minister has recently met representatives of producers and retailers, which is good, but has she met the Resource Management Association Scotland, as I have? It represents 400 companies—small and medium-sized enterprises—that operate in waste management, with 6,690 employees. It has concerns, given that Biffa has a monopoly, that those businesses will be put out of work and that those jobs are at risk.

Lorna Slater: I met the RMAS some time ago, albeit not specifically on this matter. I share the member's concern about the impact on existing recyclers and waste companies. My officials have been in discussion with CSL about that, and we are clear that we must harness the opportunities for existing recyclers within the DRS.

CSL has indicated that, as part of Biffa's responsibility for building and operating an efficient and effective collections network, it is in active discussions with several existing waste collection companies to explore how those organisations can work with Biffa on the DRS. It remains keen to engage with other such companies and has a dedicated form on its website to allow firms to make contact and open discussions. I urge recycling and waste companies to do just that: to get in contact with Biffa.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The minister's statement was a remarkable exercise in blame shifting that was both ill advised and lacking in self-awareness. Over the past two years, I have spoken to many businesses, not one of which has mentioned the UK Government but all of which have criticised the Scottish Government's approach.

The minister said that she has set out further changes today. She has insisted that the scheme is genuinely led by industry. Will she therefore confirm that she will be open to considering any other changes that small businesses in particular believe are still required?

Lorna Slater: I have engaged with businesses large and small and with trade associations, and the number 1 concern that businesses have raised with me is the uncertainty around the scheme—in particular, the uncertainty that has been created by the UK Government not issuing an internal market act exclusion. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Lorna Slater: Specifically, businesses are asking why they should invest in a scheme that Alister Jack of the UK Government says he might veto—why should they put millions of pounds of their money on the line when the UK Government is creating such uncertainty? The businesses that I have spoken to have either paused their investment or told me that they are not willing to participate in the scheme until the UK Government gives them that clarity. We need that clarity first.

However, as I have outlined today, I have listened clearly to businesses at all stages. The simplification measures that I have announced are significant, particularly for small producers. That limit of 5,000 units applies to producers of all sizes but is of particular benefit for small producers that do not wish to have a deposit on their items. They could have a deposit on the items if they wanted to—they can still opt in—but the change means that 44 per cent of those smallest producers will not have a deposit on their articles. That is a significant support and exactly the kind of measure that small businesses have been asking for.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Across the country, I can see DRS facilities appearing in supermarkets, sorting centres being built and hundreds of jobs being created. With over 95 per cent of the market for cans and bottles already signed up, businesses and the minister should be congratulated on getting the UK's first deposit return scheme so close to being launched. Given the huge private sector investment that has already been delivered in our communities, what has the reaction from those businesses been to the continued failure of the UK Government to grant an exemption from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020? *[Interruption.]*

Lorna Slater: Despite all the moaning and groaning and theatrics to my left, it is a fact that we need an exclusion from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 issued for the scheme to be launched. That is an absolute fact.

I absolutely share Mark Ruskell's deep frustration. Let me be clear: this should not be how devolution works. Businesses work best when they have certainty. That is what they have asked us and the UK Government for. The continuing uncertainty on the UK Government's position is undermining progress. We are hearing that businesses are pausing their preparation and investment until a UK Government decision is agreed. I continue to urge the UK Government to agree the exclusion as soon as possible to provide certainty for businesses.

On a happier note, I, too, am excited at starting to see reverse vending machines in shops and what is actually happening. People tweet when

they see those in shops, and it is exciting to see that starting to happen.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The minister mentioned devolution. Surely the aim of devolution is to do things better, not just to do things differently for the sake of it. Does she agree that the main two outstanding business asks are that glass should be removed from scope, as is the case in the UK, and that, given the further delay—which I predict will be extended—there should alignment with the UK, thereby removing double costing, double labelling, 700 lost jobs that will happen in the waste management sector and all the detritus of the dire complexity of a broken and defective scheme? *[Applause.]*

Lorna Slater: I often forget that Fergus Ewing is not a member of the Conservative Party, given the support that he is getting from it. That was quite an impressive round of applause for him.

Greenpeace has said:

"In what kind of world is collecting glass drinks containers not an essential part of a system designed to collect drinks containers?"

Honestly. Of the 44 schemes around the world that already exist, 40 of them collect glass. It is normal for glass to be part of the scheme. Indeed, Maurice Golden wrote an extensive blog post about that, which he has since deleted. However, I can quote from it, if anyone is interested in hearing what Maurice Golden used to say about the benefits of including glass before he rethought his position:

"I am of course very disappointed that the UK Government has chosen to exclude glass from the scheme"—

Maurice Golden: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat for a second, minister. Maurice Golden has a point of order.

Maurice Golden: I have not deleted any article ever, and it is outrageous to be accused of that by a minister in the Parliament. I have not changed my position on DRS, and there is no way that I should be slandered in the Parliament by a minister of the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Maurice Golden for his contribution. That was not a point of order, of course. It does not engage me as the Presiding Officer in the chair. However, the member has made his point, and it is on the record. Please resume, minister.

Lorna Slater: I presume that anybody can therefore go on to the web and find that quote from Maurice Golden's blog post. He said:

“This is an opportunity to create an ambitious and inclusive UK wide ... scheme, including glass, which will tackle litter and improve recycling rates.”

Obviously, I am disappointed that the UK has not chosen to go with the global norm of including glass in the scheme. That will reduce the environmental effectiveness of the scheme. Glass is among the most common items to pollute our beaches and public spaces. It is also among the litter items that cause most concern, particularly among parents and pet owners, because of its potential to cause injury. In Scotland, we will continue to include glass in our scheme, because that is the right thing to do.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): As the gap between any Scottish scheme and one in the rest of the UK continues to narrow, will the minister use the next 10 months to seek to ensure that any Scottish scheme aligns as closely as possible with other schemes in the UK in areas such as labelling and product size exemptions, because my South Scotland constituents on the border who routinely purchase products on either side of the border in their daily lives should be able to return those products to either side of the border wherever they purchase them?

Lorna Slater: Absolutely—I can reassure the member that we are committed to the interoperability of the scheme and today’s announcement on 100ml containers is part of that alignment. Of course, I am very much hoping that the UK will align with us and include glass in its scheme.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The minister’s statement will be welcomed by smaller producers such as Williams Brothers Brewing Company, based in my constituency, which I met earlier this week—particularly if the extended consultation works closely with SMEs.

Although I agree with and endorse what the minister has said about the fact that the Tory party does not know whether it wants to support the scheme, oppose it or just play constitutional politics in order to obstruct the process, can the minister also give reassurances that discussions will take place with supermarkets and other retailers to ensure that smaller producers, which are excluded from the scheme, are not adversely impacted by retailers only stocking registered scheme articles?

Lorna Slater: It is important to note that even the small producers whose items are excluded from the scheme need to register with SEPA and give it information on their quantities so that they can be properly excluded in accordance with the rules.

It is a commercial decision for individual businesses whether they wish to participate in this important environmental scheme by selling products on the Scottish market, but we would encourage any business to contact Circularity Scotland in the first instance for support and to discuss any concerns that they have about participating in the scheme.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I apologise for arriving slightly late for the statement.

Despite some concessions today, Lorna Slater is still just kicking the can down the road. Can she explain what compensation she is considering for small hospitality operators who may have already incurred considerable costs and, while climb-downs are the order of the day, will she now do the right thing and exclude small pubs and restaurants altogether?

Lorna Slater: As I have already outlined in relation to the exclusions for hospitality businesses, small pubs and nightclubs and so on that only operate as a closed loop were already excluded from acting as return points. They have to be part of the scheme as a closed loop, because when they buy those items, they will make a deposit, and by participating as a closed loop, they get that money back. However, we are exempting them from acting as a return point and today’s announcement means that further hospitality businesses where most of their products are consumed in-house will not be obliged to act as return points. That simplifies things a great deal for hospitality businesses.

Those closed-loop hospitality businesses will have those materials collected for free, which is a substantial cost saving to those businesses. That is how we are supporting the hospitality industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the statement, which I allowed to run on for a bit longer because there was such interest from members across the chamber wishing to ask questions. I apologise to the few members I was not able to fit in. We allowed the statement to run on quite considerably to accommodate as many members as possible.

Maurice Golden: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The minister referred to a blog post that I had written. I have never written a blog and therefore I could not have published a blog and then subsequently deleted it. I would appreciate it if the minister would correct the official record and apologise, because it is outrageous to suggest that I have done something that I have not done and it might be considered an abuse of ministerial privilege to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Maurice Golden for that contribution. A correction of the *Official Report* is a matter for the member

concerned. That is all that I can say as the Presiding Officer.

Mark Ruskell: On a further point of order, Presiding Officer, I think that it is important that members provide accurate information on the record. I have just been sat here at my desk reading the said blog from Maurice Golden, from 2019, which I believe is in an archive. It makes for very interesting reading. It is important that all members are accurate and truthful about their previous positions on matters of policy as well as their current positions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would advise Mr Ruskell that that is not a point of order either. Thank you.

I believe that it is time to move on to the next item of business. [*Interruption.*] Quiet, please, Mr Kerr.

There will be a short pause to allow front-bench teams to change positions should they so wish. Thank you.

Climate Change and Just Transition

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08626, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on delivering climate change and the just transition. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:05

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): I am delighted to open the debate in my new role as Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition. Those matters coming together, side by side at Cabinet level for the first time, is instructive. For me, net zero is about acknowledging the unavoidable truths that we face a global climate and nature emergency, and that we must be prepared to take action that is commensurate with the scale of that challenge.

Putting that side by side with the just transition at the top of government makes clear the Government's commitment to taking that action and to doing so in a way that is carefully managed, fair, learns the mistakes of the past and leaves no one and no community behind. Let me be clear: the Scottish National Party-led Government will never allow to happen to Scotland's oil and gas workers what was done to our steel and coalmining communities under Thatcher, when unplanned change left families and communities devastated.

The First Minister and I visited Aberdeen earlier this month and saw some of what the Government's £500m just transition fund is supporting. Our commitment to the north-east is in stark contrast to the United Kingdom Government, which has repeatedly refused, again as recently as last week, to match our investment, despite the hundreds of billions of pounds that have flowed from the North Sea into the UK Treasury since the 1970s. All the while, it continues to refuse to match our investment in the Scottish Cluster.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I presume that the cabinet secretary will acknowledge that the UK Government's £16 billion North Sea transition deal is 32 times the size of her Government's just transition fund.

Màiri McAllan: I acknowledge and welcome every bit of support that flows into our north-east because of its importance to the future of our economy and to climate targets. However, that amount is small in comparison with the figure that I quoted—the hundreds of billions of pounds that

have flowed from the North Sea to the UK Treasury.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's sixth assessment synthesis report—"Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report"—which has been called a "survival guide for humanity", could not have been clearer that the window of opportunity for the deep and urgent emissions reductions that the world needs is rapidly closing. For me, that summarises the urgency of net zero. Equally, a couple of experiences that I have had this week have summed up to me the importance of a just transition.

First, on Monday, in my role as MSP for Clydesdale, which is a constituency that is steeped in industrial history, I was invited by the excellent Douglasdale REAL Group to visit woodlands that it has recently acquired on behalf of its community. As we headed through the quiet wooded area, its members explained to me how, on the land where we walked, as wild as it was, once stood the busy mining town of Douglas West—a town that was complete with rows and rows of houses, a school, a train station and, I was told, the first mining pit baths in Scotland. Naturally, I had 101 questions for the members of the Douglasdale REAL Group. I am grateful to them for answering them and for sharing their memories of spending time in Douglas West. I thank them and pay tribute to all the people and workers of the lost mining town of Douglas West.

That story speaks to the need for a just transition. So, too, does the day that I spent yesterday at Grangemouth with Ineos, union representatives and Forth Ports. The Grangemouth complex epitomises the need for a just transition, because it is so critical to our everyday life and so central to our economy and to many workers and families. At the same time, it is responsible for significant industrial emissions that have to be rapidly driven down. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to visit the complex and to hear about its net zero plans and just transition strategies.

I have spent a bit of time setting the context—it is important to do that when we come into post—which is what the Government has done this week in its prospectus "Equality, Opportunity, Community: New leadership—A fresh start", but having set out my mission in this portfolio as I see it, I would like to spend the rest of my time identifying some of the ways that we will fulfil the task, and I will draw on our prospectus to do so.

Before I do that, I want to make it clear that we remain in the grip of another crisis as many Scots struggle with the increased cost of living as the cost of energy, food and basic goods are at extraordinary levels and the UK is an outlier. We

have to take every opportunity that we can take to help to alleviate that burden.

One of the first acts of the First Minister was to build on our commitment to double the fuel insecurity fund. His commitment is now to triple it to £30 million this year, which will help people who are at risk of self-rationing, or of self-disconnecting from, their energy. That is so important, and it is another example of why fairness has to be at the heart of everything that we do.

Our 2020 "Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018-2032" contains more than 200 policies and proposals to drive down emissions. Since then, our focus has been on delivering them at pace. We are now developing our next full plan, with a draft being due in Parliament by the end of this year, covering the period to 2040. The goal is to have driven emissions down by 90 per cent from the 1999 baseline by then. There is no denying that achieving that target, and all our annual targets up to that point, will be extremely challenging. The targets that the Parliament sets are—rightly—ambitious, so we will have to collaborate if we are to meet them.

However, amid the challenge there is undoubtedly social and economic opportunity. Our next climate change plan will fully embrace the opportunity to transform our country for the better. For example, we will enhance our energy security and economic resilience by investing in renewable energy; we will insulate our homes to reduce energy consumption; we will tackle fuel poverty and create jobs across the country; and we will make public and active transport more accessible in order to reduce car use and improve air quality, with all of the benefits that that, in particular, brings to public health.

I look forward to updating Parliament as we develop those policies, and to working with members across Government and the Parliament. I will do that as part of the climate change plan action group that I chair, which has on it representatives of every party in the Parliament.

As a former environment minister, I intimately understand the critical role that our environment must play in the transition to net zero. The twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change are intrinsically linked, and our forthcoming land use and agriculture just transition plan will help to ensure that we make the changes that are needed while providing assurance for workers and communities that will be touched by the transition in the sector.

To achieve a nature-positive net zero Scotland, we know that on our land and in our sea we will need to balance competing demands. On land, farmers and land managers must be empowered to lead the change to sustainable and regenerative

practices. We also need to increase tree cover and to restore habitats, including through the quarter of a billion pounds that we have committed to investing in restoring 250,000 hectares of peatland by 2030. We have made significant commitments to protect and restore biodiversity, and through our new Scottish biodiversity strategy we will act to reverse biodiversity loss by 2045 and will begin the process of introducing at least one new national park over this Parliamentary session.

At sea, we will develop our new national marine plan to manage resources and enhance the marine environment, and I will take the opportunity to build just transition principles into that. We will continue to implement our future fisheries management strategy and we will use our forthcoming aquaculture vision to support marine sectors to transition to net zero. I will work with coastal and island communities and our fishing sector as we develop marine protection.

We understand—how could we not?—that those changes will not be easy to achieve. However, I believe that developing them with communities can result in a better quality of life, in fair work, in resilient rural, coastal and island communities and in a better natural environment for future generations.

I mentioned our land and agriculture just transition plan. In the next year, we will publish four draft sectoral just transition plans: for land use and agriculture, buildings and construction, and transport, alongside the finalised energy strategy and just transition plan, which was published in draft in January. We are also committed to developing a just transition plan for the Grangemouth energy cluster in 2024 to provide clarity and support to workers and the community during this period of transformation.

Our plans will be informed by the just transition commission, businesses, communities and workers and their trade unions across Scotland, as well as—crucially—by the people who are most impacted, including those who have experience of discrimination, poverty and wider inequalities.

On the draft energy strategy, one of the key areas that I will be focusing on for the final draft is skills and the setting out of a clear pathway to secure the skilled labour that is required to drive forward our transition. There is no doubt that our education and skills system must adapt to meet the transformation that we are facing, as a country.

Likewise, in buildings and construction, the transition will change the way that we approach planning and design, the choices that we make about construction materials and methods, operation, on-going maintenance, and the way that we use and repurpose buildings and the

places that they have occupied. Our plan will help to maximise the opportunities for the people of Scotland to live and work in buildings that are cheaper to run and warmer, and have a positive impact on our health and wellbeing.

In transport, we have key opportunities to reset the existing inequalities in our current system, including in relation to safe access to sustainable modes of transport. We have committed to reducing car kilometres driven by 20 per cent by 2030, and we are building to deliver that commitment fairly by designing a future transport system that is accessible for people with differing needs and circumstances. While we do that, we are working to ensure that a higher proportion of vehicles on our roads will be zero-emissions vehicles, and that the private sector plays its part in investing in the charging and refuelling infrastructure that our communities will need.

Participation is critical to the just transition. That is why we have supported the Scottish Trades Union Congress with £100,000 of funding so that our unions, and the workers whom they represent, have capacity to fully engage in the process. Our approach to delivering a just transition puts co-design at the core of planning and calls on a diverse range of perspectives to develop solutions that are fair and sustainable. I truly believe that, when we reach 2045, if we have got there via a just transition, the solutions will be more sustainable.

During the development of the energy strategy and just transition plan, we engaged with around 1,500 people at events across Scotland, stretching from Dumfries to Thurso, and we engaged through online engagement. We will continue to draw on that engagement.

I have tried to touch on a number of the aspects that constitute the wide range of challenges that I will be working on with colleagues. Before I conclude, I welcome my colleague Gillian Martin to her role as the Minister for Energy. I know that she as a committed north-east MSP, will bring significant experience to that role. I am sure that she will want to reflect on energy, in particular, as she participates in today's debate. For my part, on energy, I see a nation with rich natural energy assets that others would dearly love to have, in onshore and offshore wind, in hydrogen, in wave and tidal power, and in carbon capture, utilisation and storage. All those will be key and will have to be seized as we move to tackle climate change.

As we fairly transition from our natural wealth in oil and gas to our wealth in a green economy of the future, the question for the people of Scotland is about who they want to lead that change. In whose hands do they want our energy powers to rest? Do they want them to be left in the hands of successive UK Governments that have

squandered our oil wealth, or do they want to be an independent nation, with those powers being in the hands of the people of Scotland, through the Governments that they elect?

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the scale and the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for Scotland to show continued global leadership in a Just Transition to net zero; further recognises that the draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan sets out a just and fair pathway to maximise the opportunities of that transition; acknowledges that a highly-skilled workforce will be required to deliver the opportunities of a net zero economy, including Scotland's existing oil and gas and construction workforces, and that upskilling, reskilling and attracting new talent should be a key just transition priority of the Scottish Government; celebrates the significant contribution of those who manage land and marine areas, including those working in farming and fishing, to food security, the economy and the environment; agrees that Scotland's economic potential as a net zero nation is vast, including world-leading clean energy sectors and supply chains, its nature-based sectors and food and drink, through innovative green technology and services, including finance, and by maximising Scotland's strengths and potential in the decarbonisation of transport and the built environment; endorses that Scotland's sectoral Just Transition Plans must be co-designed by those most impacted by the transition, including workers and trades unions, and anticipates the contribution that Scotland's next Climate Change Plan, and both site and sectoral Just Transition Plans, will make on the journey to a fairer, greener Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Liam Kerr to speak to and move amendment S6M-08626.2, for around eight minutes.

15:18

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new role. We, too, recognise the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. That is why the UK's success in nearly halving carbon emissions and cutting carbon emissions from electricity generation by 73 per cent between 1990 and 2021 is so welcome. We also agree on the need to get to net zero through a transition that is just—not only for the workforce but for communities in Scotland, the UK and around the world.

When it comes to the workforce transition, the Government has to recognise that when its energy strategy promises 77,000 low-carbon jobs by 2050, people are sceptical.

In 2010, the Scottish Government pledged to create 130,000 green jobs by 2020; in fact, it delivered marginally over 20,000. We also heard that it remains unsure of its definition of "green jobs"—gaming the definitions, presumably, to hit the targets. It is just that sort of magical thinking, which lacks evidential, data-driven and scientific analysis, that permeates the energy strategy and makes people, particularly in the north-east,

dubious about this Government's ability to deliver a just transition.

Professor Skea of the just transition commission said of the strategy that he was

"deeply concerned about the lack of evidence of adequate policy actions to deliver a just transition for the Energy sector".

That is writ large, in that we know that demand for electricity is expected to nearly treble by 2050. We know from Scottish Government figures that oil and gas made up nearly 80 per cent of Scottish energy consumption and more than 90 per cent of Scotland's heat demand in 2020. We know from this Government's own figures that the decline in Scottish oil and gas is steeper than the decline required globally to keep temperature rises below 1.5°C, and we know that natural gas from the North Sea—

The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin): Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: In two seconds, please.

We know that natural gas from the North Sea emits less than half as much greenhouse gas as liquefied natural gas imported from countries such as the USA, Qatar and Russia. Finally, we know that, in 2021, Scotland generated 30 per cent of electricity from nuclear.

Gillian Martin: I am keen to work with north-east MSPs on all this, and I am hopeful that we will have a constructive relationship.

Does Liam Kerr agree that part of the issue is that we need new systems to take the amount of electricity that we could potentially generate in Scotland, and that there needs to be a total upgrade and a real resetting of the contract for difference process so that we can get Scottish green electricity to market?

Liam Kerr: I am grateful for the intervention. I very much look forward to working with Gillian Martin, whom I have previously worked with productively. I genuinely look forward to that engagement.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has been looking into exactly that issue—how we generate our power, how we get it to market and what the grid will look like. That is on-going work that we are doing very productively in the committee, which I have no doubt that the minister will be interested in, as it is on exactly that point.

However, the problem is that even against all the facts that we have given, and even against the minister's intervention about how we get the power generated, the draft energy strategy states:

"In order to support the fastest possible and most effective just transition, there should be a presumption against new exploration for oil and gas."

It goes on to say:

“We do not support the building of new nuclear power plants”.

To fail to set out how baseload will be replaced; to fail to set out how jobs will be transitioned and to what; and to fail to state what will replace a zero-emission source such as nuclear, when the answer will likely have to be imported fossil fuels, is negligence on an industrial scale. It completely ignores that the best way to a just transition is to work with our successful North Sea businesses, not against them.

The energy strategy ignores that BP is providing £18 billion to invest in projects such as wind, electric vehicle charging and hydrogen; Shell is providing up to £25 billion for low and zero-carbon projects and its girls in energy scheme; Technip is investing in an independent company generating marine power; and Equinor is not only producing oil and gas but powering UK homes with wind and helping to build a hydrogen economy. We cannot achieve a just transition without the North Sea, so shutting it down to appease a cabal of ideologically driven Green Party MSPs is as short-sighted as it is ignorant.

What needs to happen was set out by Lord Deben. He said:

“There needs to be a very clear programme ... step by step ... how Scotland is going to achieve the targets that it has put forward”.—[*Official Report, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee*, 20 December 2022; c 10.]

In my view, that means an assessment of what might be restricting entrepreneurialism in Scotland and whether, for example, having a regime of higher taxes than elsewhere in the UK is restricting talent. It means reviewing whether Skills Development Scotland and the enterprise agencies are doing their jobs properly and have sufficient resources to do what we ask them to do. It means the creation of a genuine energy strategy that asks: what will demand be, and how much energy do we need to generate to service it? From there, we can define the totality of the technologies that will be required to satisfy that demand. An industry is not created on a single project; businesses and investors need a pipeline.

From there, we can answer precisely what professions and skills we will need to satisfy those projects. That will allow us to answer questions about where we intend to train those people and, thus, what courses we need the colleges and universities to run. That will ensure that those colleges can be properly funded and that places in them can be created, instead of having a situation in which colleges have had to cut over 151,000 places since the SNP Government began in 2007. That will allow us to talk meaningfully about funding those places and, given the results of the

energy sector workers survey, to perhaps provide bespoke support for transferring oil and gas workers.

Having worked out what we need and who we need to do it, the Government strategy can assess and provide for a supply chain. It can begin by asking: what do we have in Scotland, what can be repurposed or restarted, what materials do we need and where can we source them? For instance, can we source the rare metals for electrical vehicle batteries from companies such as Aberdeen Minerals, instead of outsourcing our responsibilities to areas of the world and regimes with much less attractive practices? At the moment, our supply chain is not being considered in the round, nor is it being backed. The obvious example is the sourcing of two ferries from a company in Turkey, which, I discovered through a portfolio question, has contracted one—I repeat, one—Scottish company to supply it out of its 58 suppliers.

Where all that gets us to is that this Government must stop patting itself on the back for its magical thinking, stop offshoring our responsibilities, stop denigrating our world-leading North Sea energy industry and start taking a science and evidence-based approach to ensuring a just transition. It must also become much better at communicating that these are the high-value, green jobs of the future, as well as at articulating the costs to the consumer of failing to get to net zero. In short, that is what the amendment in my name calls for, and that is why I have pleasure in moving it.

I move amendment S6M-08626.2, to insert at end:

“; recommends that a science and evidence-based approach be taken to deliver on national net zero targets and ensure a just transition; emphasises the need for Scotland to act as a responsible global partner by contributing to global efforts to support mitigation, adaption, and green technology projects, and not offsetting carbon emissions to other nations; asserts that collaboration with the UK Government and other devolved nations is essential to delivering a just transition; argues that the draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan lets down the people of Scotland and fails to provide a fair and just pathway to maximise the opportunities of that transition; notes that greater efforts are required to improve circularity within the Scottish economy, and believes that a workable Deposit Return Scheme, which addresses the current flaws, must be delivered.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sarah Boyack to speak to and move amendment S6M-08626.1.

15:27

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): First, I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new role. Scottish Labour will be constructive. We will work to hold the Scottish Government to account. When

we believe that more action is needed, we will be absolutely clear about what extra proposals we have to deliver on our climate targets.

I am proud of the fact that the Scottish Parliament passed world-leading climate legislation. I know that my Labour colleagues over the years have made contributions to both the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019.

However, we are at a point where we need to see the heavy lifting of implementation happen now, and not in a decade. That is why I am keen to amend the motion that has been lodged by the SNP-Green Government.

We need stronger action now—the climate emergency demands it. We need to see action on the recommendations from the UK Climate Change Committee's recent report and from Audit Scotland's analysis of where we need more action.

The UKCCC's report from last year highlighted significant failures in meeting our climate targets. Key areas were identified: making our homes and buildings fit for the future, decarbonising our transport, and action on land management, in particular getting reforestation right and restoring our peatlands. Given last week's worrying report on the loss of biodiversity, we need action that is joined up so that it tackles not only the climate emergency but the nature emergency.

Audit Scotland's briefing is also clear that we are not seeing the joined-up action across Government that the cabinet secretary talked about in her speech. There are major failings on the monitoring and co-ordination of work on climate change, and not enough of a focus on risk assessment, which I think is really important. We also need more action on adaptation, to ensure that our communities are given the investment that they need now to address the climate change that is already happening, such as in flooding.

As I said at the start of my contribution, Scottish Labour will be constructive. We will propose changes that we think need to be made, and we will talk to people with experience outwith the Parliament.

A key issue that needs to be joined up with our response to the climate crisis is tackling the cost of living crisis. Those have to be addressed at the same time. We have to make sure that the jobs and the investment deliver for all our ambitions.

On housing, for example, I congratulate Alex Rowley on persuading the Scottish Government to adopt the principles proposed in his Passivhaus member's bill. However, we need to see a massive step up in making our existing homes energy efficient. That means urgent action right

across Scotland, which is why it is so disappointing that, in the middle of a cost of living crisis, when 25 per cent of our children are living in poverty and families cannot afford to heat their homes, last year the SNP-Green Government failed to deliver the proposed £133 million of investment in energy efficiency. That would have been a classic win-win, tackling poverty, creating supply chains and skilled jobs right across our communities and reducing climate emissions.

We need practical action. We also need to see more incentives to support the use of renewables technologies in our homes and communities, such as developing heat networks and using the range of proven technologies to heat and power our homes. It is a massive transition, but we need clear plans and we also need ministerial leadership.

It also means doing heavy lifting such as thinking through how, in practice, we can help tenement and other flat owners to access the investment that will enable them to decarbonise their homes. Families could save hundreds of pounds—£500 on their energy bills—under the plans that UK Labour has been developing to deliver investment for extra insulation in our homes. That would be a commitment if Labour got into power at UK level, and it would benefit us in Scotland, too.

We also need to see a big expansion in community renewables work. Again, the opportunity is there, but we need to see leadership from the Scottish Government, sharing best practice, supporting our councils and giving them the investment that they need to make sure that we can be innovative in planning and investment. The Scottish Co-operative Party has done some fantastic work on how renewables can deliver for communities and how community renewables systems can help reinvestment in communities. Money is being made across Scotland that should be invested into our communities. That would need a lot of work, but we can learn from other countries. We just need to look at what Denmark has done over the years on community heat networks that are owned by councils and on moving to low-carbon networks.

We need a joined-up approach right across our governments—our UK Government, our Scottish Government and our councils—to deliver the just transition that we need. Our green prosperity plan would give us that clean power system right across the UK within seven years, and the new publicly owned energy-generation company would mean that the profits, jobs and benefits of our natural resources in Scotland are not offshored but practically benefit local communities.

There is so much more that we could do now. We just need to look at the ScotWind project,

which is a massive missed opportunity in terms of the profits that companies will make, which is so ironic given the SNP's ambition to learn from our Nordic neighbours. We could be doing that now, not missing the opportunity.

I want to briefly mention the decarbonisation of transport, which was also mentioned in the cabinet secretary's speech. I was glad that it was mentioned and it is good that our trains and buses are going low carbon, but we need more reliable, affordable and accessible services. People need to be able to get to work, regardless of the time of day, with decent public transport options. However, we have actually gone into reverse because we have seen huge numbers of bus services being lost right across the country. That has been exacerbated by, but is not due to, Covid.

The lack of access to local bus services means that people cannot get to work or access services without using cars. We have to give them that opportunity. This morning, in the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, we discussed how the lack of transport services is stopping people from accessing culture and creative opportunities, particularly in our rural areas. That has to be fixed.

In the spirit of being constructive, I ask what the Scottish Government is doing to implement the amendment that Scottish Labour lodged to the bill that became the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to support municipal bus companies. We have not seen that progress or additional investment given to local authorities to let them achieve the innovation and services that our communities desperately need. A lot could be learned from what Lothian Buses does that could be rolled out across different areas in Scotland.

As we move to electric vehicles, we need to see more choices for people, such as more car share schemes so that people do not always have to buy a car to use a car. There is a lot more that this Government could be doing. Supporting local authorities is absolutely critical and a joined-up approach is fundamental.

It is not just about councils working on their own. They need support and funding from the Scottish Government so that they can do what they want to do now, not in 10 years. This is an emergency.

I am proposing a member's bill on wellbeing and sustainable development that will enable us to do more of that joined-up thinking. I thank all those who have contributed to my consultation and I hope that ministers will look at the potential bill because it could also be a game-changer. We need to act now. The Scottish Government needs to act on the Audit Scotland recommendations. We also need to see action on the UK Climate Change Committee's recommendations. Our

coastal and island communities will be particularly vulnerable to the climate emergency, and we need action on flood prevention now.

We are approaching a tipping point and we owe it to young people to secure their future. Last week, I was shocked to read about the extent to which young people are now worrying. Their mental health is being impacted by thinking about the climate emergency. It is their future that is at risk and we as politicians have to act now. We do not have to agree on everything, but we have to try to get cross-party agreement on radical action.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to be winding up.

Sarah Boyack: We need leadership, investment and new jobs across Scotland. We need to use public procurement and make sure that the just transition works for people across the country, and we need to take action to make the change that our communities need. That is what we need to do. We need to work together.

I move amendment S6M-08626.1, to leave out from "further recognises" to end and insert:

"notes the damning report from the UK Climate Change Committee, which states that the Scottish Government's targets are "in danger of becoming meaningless", and that more action must urgently be taken; agrees that the Scottish Government's plans are insufficient to meet Scotland's climate change targets and believes that a stronger emphasis on adaptations to address climate risks is needed; recognises Scotland's huge potential as a net zero nation and considers that it is well placed to realise the opportunities of a net zero economy, with its highly-skilled workforce, including in the oil and gas and energy sectors; believes that, if the Scottish Government is to deliver a just transition for these workers and communities, it must increase efforts in upskilling, reskilling and attracting new talent in these sectors; celebrates the significant contribution of those who manage land and marine areas, and is concerned that they must not be left behind in the transition to net zero, and therefore calls for greater support for community-based projects; recognises the huge benefits that could come to Scotland through the Labour Party's proposed Green Prosperity Plan, which would create a clean power system across the UK by 2030, and supports the proposals to create a publicly-owned energy generation company so that the profits, jobs and benefits of Scotland's natural resources are no longer offshored but benefit local people."

15:36

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new role.

Had my amendment been accepted, it would have called on the Scottish Government to address the volume of sewage overflowing into Scotland's waterways. We know that the volume of sewage overflowing across Scotland is at least equivalent to that of more than 18,000 Olympic swimming pools—and that figure comes from only the 4 per cent of overflows that are monitored. The

release of sewage into Scotland's waterways on at least 14,000 occasions in 2022 is unacceptable. We must have the infrastructure and a monitoring regime that can keep those who use our beaches, lochs and rivers safe while safeguarding the natural environment.

We are supportive of the principles of the unamended motion, but they need to be followed up with action. Audit Scotland's report on the Government's delivery of climate goals indicated that there are "gaps in reports", with

"no workforce plan for climate change since the Net Zero department was established in late 2021."

We need to get to grips with tackling the climate emergency with a laser-like focus on the environment. We would like to see the launching of an emergency nationwide insulation programme for homes and buildings, to improve energy efficiency; the introduction of measures to boost the uptake of EVs; and the removal of barriers to the faster roll-out of solar power.

Our overarching concern is that the Scottish Government's policy on climate change and net zero lacks sufficient detail and misses emissions reduction targets. Those gaps are holding Scotland back from achieving our climate goals.

There is so much to discuss about the topic, and it is important for the future of all life on the planet that we get it right. I will therefore focus on carbon emissions caused by transport and on securing a just transition.

Transport is currently the highest-emitting sector in Scotland. The latest figure of 26 per cent is from 2020, which encompasses the lockdown, while pre-Covid the figure was 36 per cent. All islands, including Shetland, rely on transport connectivity, whether by air, sea or vehicles. Those lifeline services are used every day for social, health and economic activities. Cars are a necessity in areas in which bus connections do not meet the realities of the geography.

Ferries are a large contributor to carbon emissions, and we welcome plans to switch to a more sustainable fleet. Plans to make the passenger vessels on the Northern Isles to Aberdeen route more sustainable must be balanced with plans for added freight capacity on the route, which is vital to Shetland's economy as it helps us to punch above our weight in contributing to Scotland's economy as a whole. Seafood exports are one example of that.

Inter-island ferry connections contribute additional emissions for which Scottish mainland communities do not have an equivalent. In Shetland, short tunnels connecting island communities would benefit the national and local economies. Tunnel action groups in the isles are

making the economic and environmental case for the benefits of tunnels, given the carbon emissions of the ferry services on those routes.

On cars, plans to move to electric vehicles are welcome. The key thing to get right is the charging infrastructure across Scotland, especially in rural locations, which are often the most reliant on private cars. Being stranded miles from the nearest charger cannot be an option if EVs are to help us to reach our net zero targets.

Looking at the just transition for the workforce, renewable energy projects in Scotland will be vital in enabling us to reach our net zero targets. Shetland, centred geographically at the crossroads of the North Sea, is well placed to be the energy hub to support future developments. Shetland's infrastructure and workforce across engineering and marine skills are ready to adapt. Roles in the sector are highly attractive to those at the beginning of their career as well to the current, traditional energy workforce. Oil and gas employees have a wealth of knowledge and experience, which is transferable to technologies such as green hydrogen and renewables.

Training and upskilling must continue at pace if we are to take full advantage of the opportunities to build the workforce for the future. The north-east and the Highlands and Islands made a significant contribution to Scotland by adapting to make the most of North Sea oil and gas. People in those areas are now looking for future opportunities as livelihoods and communities adapt to the emerging renewables sector, both onshore and offshore.

Workers and communities cannot be left on the scrapheap, as happened in previous decades. We must ensure that everyone gets the opportunity to gain skills for the future, as well as the support and retraining that they need in order to thrive. That skilled workforce is vital to a just transition.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, there is so much to discuss. I am a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, and all our work considers in some way how we will ensure future sustainability. That will be especially important when we consider the proposed agriculture bill and how we will ensure sustainable farming and food security. We were reminded yesterday in the committee that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report fears that we are close to not meeting the Paris agreement to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Time is running out.

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

15:42

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I welcome this timely debate on the urgency to deliver on tackling climate change and to ensure a just transition. We have to reimagine behavioural and cultural change. Change can be uncomfortable but we have to accept some discomfort, because the alternative is much worse.

Across the SNP and Green seats, we talk about setting high ambitions for Scotland to tackle the causes of climate change—we are the most ambitious nation in the UK. Younger generations and generations yet to come are relying on us to deliver on that vision. We need to act on that ambition.

Liam Kerr: How does what the member has just said square with Audit Scotland saying that the Government has no clear plan for reaching net zero?

Kaukab Stewart: I will come on to speak about some of the actions. The cabinet secretary has already mentioned those plans.

Last year saw the hottest temperatures that Scotland has ever recorded. It was a staggering 35.1°C in Kelso. Unfortunately, as Beatrice Wishart mentioned, it is now looking extremely likely that we will pass the 1.5°C marker in the early 2030s. However, knowing that we are likely to pass the marker does not mean that we should give up. We must be wary of an “It’s going to happen anyway, so there’s nothing I can do” attitude. Many people will adopt that pessimistic way of thinking, because it is the easiest approach in the short term, but doing so would continue to condemn everything we know. As Sir David Attenborough put it,

“What humans do over the next 50 years will determine the fate of all life on the planet.”

If we reach 2°C above pre-industrial levels, the risk to human life is much higher. Diseases such as malaria will spread much more quickly, food security will be volatile at best, and economies across the world will suffer greatly, pushing yet more people into poverty.

My constituency was home to the 26th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP26. Nations from across the world met and agreed on statements around reducing carbon to net zero, achieving a just transition to greener energy and protecting nature. No one nation can do it alone, but we can do our bit here, at home.

Glasgow City Council agreed that 2030 should be the target for bringing the city to net zero carbon emissions. That is no mean feat, because our nation’s largest city is home to many great and varied industries, and hundreds of thousands of people commute into Glasgow on any given

working day. Most arrive by car—recent figures show that nearly 70 per cent of people travel to work by car or van, as either the driver or a passenger.

Glasgow City Council has done and is doing much work to change people’s attitudes and behaviour when it comes to moving around the city. We hear a lot about modal shift, whether that be moving people on to public forms of transport, such as our rail, bus and subway networks, or encouraging people to take a more active travel path by walking or cycling to work.

As of June, Glasgow City Council will be enforcing a low-emission zone throughout much of the city, the chief aim of which is to reduce extremely dangerous levels of air pollution. Unfortunately, two of the highest recorded levels have been in my constituency of Glasgow Kelvin. I have no doubt that the LEZ will encourage some to consider taking other modes of transport into the city, thereby helping us to reduce our commuter carbon footprint.

However—I say this as an ardent supporter of any measures to tackle the human impact of climate change—we must accept that, for many people, a car will remain the most appropriate mode of transport for getting to work. Those people include people with mobility issues and people who live in rural areas.

Cars are and will remain a major presence on our road networks for some time to come, and we need to get even more creative about how we manage and reduce the impact that they have on our environment. A move to electric vehicles is an obvious answer but, currently, they are too pricey for many people. Incentivising car-sharing schemes might alleviate the need for multiple cars to make the same or similar journeys. That is part of the answer to Glasgow reaching net zero by 2030, but it is only part of the answer. Home energy retrofitting, district heating, decarbonising industry, moving to hydrogen or electric transport and protecting and growing natural solutions for carbon sequestration all have a major part to play in Glasgow’s journey to net zero.

I put on record my thanks to and appreciation of our hard-working councillors in Glasgow—particularly Councillor Angus Millar, who chairs the climate, Glasgow green deal, transport and city centre recovery committee. Councillor Millar and his colleagues are very much alive to the challenges that we have before us as we seek to meet the 2030 target, but they have shown a determination to get the work done. However, that work comes with a very high financial burden. To date, central Government has put its money where its mouth is, but much more will be needed if we are to reach our 2030 targets.

As I understand it, there are opportunities to tap into alternative finance options but there are not the appropriate structures in place to enable local government to procure what it needs, at a fast pace, in order to meet timescale demands. I would be grateful if the minister, in summing up the debate, could say more about what work the Government is doing to free up councils to work more flexibly with external partners to reach their climate goals.

It is a no-brainer. Last year, parts of the UK were literally on fire. Let us not weather this storm; let us beat it.

15:48

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to such an important debate.

I will start by quoting a commitment by the Scottish Government. It says:

“as we reduce our emissions and respond to a changing climate, our journey is fair and creates a better future for everyone—regardless of where they live, what they do, and who they are.”

Those are warm words about admirable targets—we are constantly told that the Government’s targets are world leading—but that is exactly what they are: warm words and targets. They come without outcomes or a route map to those outcomes.

As I have said many times before in the chamber, hitting those targets is absolutely crucial, because not doing so will mean that Scotland’s contribution to keeping 1.5°C alive will fall short. If making self-congratulatory statements about world-leading targets was a carbon-negative activity, the Scottish Government would already have single-handedly decarbonised most of the developed world.

Let us look at the Scottish Government’s commitment to a better future for everyone, regardless of where they live, what they do and who they are. That is not the case for those who live in rural Scotland, where transport links continue to crumble, running an EV is incredibly problematic and there is a dearth of EV charging points, rail links and bus routes.

I want to highlight the role of the blue economy in the route to a just transition. It is the lesser-known cousin of the green economy but it has more carbon contained within it and more ability to sequester carbon than the green economy. Marine ecosystems worldwide store and recycle an estimated 93 per cent of the earth’s CO₂, and the sequestration of carbon by seagrass is 35 times faster than that by rainforests. The blue economy also provides a fantastic renewable food source,

which must be properly managed if we are to maintain food security.

However, the poor launch of the Scottish Government’s consultation into highly protected marine areas has highlighted the need to look in more detail at a just transition for our blue economy. We needed direct consultation that would allow local communities a say. It is obvious that coastal communities and Scottish industries within the blue economy feel left behind and that the Scottish Government is not delivering on its promise of a just transition for them. It is disappointing that the Scottish Government did not take a more direct approach to consulting communities on a policy that will directly impact their livelihoods and viability. It is easy to see that an online consultation with online workshops was a poor choice as a means of engagement.

As our blue economy grows and new technology becomes available, Scotland’s seas are under pressure for space. We need space for renewable energy, to minimise gear conflicts in fisheries and for aquaculture, including finfish, shellfish and the growing seaweed industry. With 90 per cent of the world’s goods traded on maritime routes, we need space for shipping lanes and transportation, as well as space for tourism and for conservation.

Industries including tourism, fishing and aquaculture, along with non-governmental organisations and community groups, have all called for better spatial management plans that take advantage of local and historical knowledge and that can better balance the needs of industry with the need for conservation and nature-based solutions. Many of those stakeholders cite inadequate funding, unclear objectives and a lack of data as key barriers to the proper implementation of marine spatial planning.

Much of the Scottish Government’s current marine policy is driven by the ideology of the Scottish Green party and by the use of misleading international comparators rather than by science-based evidence. The Scottish Government has admitted as much in response to portfolio questions, saying that it does not have the data to validate its policy choices but, instead, has policies that are based on

“how we can develop policy in the absence of science and data.”—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2023; c 4.]

Similarly, Scotland’s marine assessment 2020 explicitly stated:

“There are insufficient data to allow detailed assessment”.

That is no way to approach important legislation that could have a significant and potentially detrimental impact on communities that rely on a robust and sustainable blue economy. They are being offered Scottish Government guesswork.

Developing HPMA with very little evidence of their impact on temperate waters is not just ridiculous, it is hugely irresponsible. It is tempting to say that the SNP Government is all at sea on the issue, but that would require it to successfully build a boat.

The Scottish Government's warm words increasingly look like hot air, and it is time that it stopped talking the dream and began living the reality. Only then can Scotland make a meaningful contribution to keeping 1.5°C alive.

15:53

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary to her role and want her to succeed, but, to do so, she will have to work very closely with the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy. Màiri McAllan seems to lead on energy demand, while Neil Gray seems to lead on energy supply. I am genuinely interested to see how she will deliver a just transition without direct responsibility for budget and policy regarding energy production, jobs, supply chain support, skills and the enterprise companies.

Climate change and the biodiversity crisis are global crises. Biodiversity and climate change programmes can and must support each other. A just transition matters to both those global crises and must be responsive and fair to local communities.

On 14 March, as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I raised the concerns that fishers in the Western Isles have about highly protected marine areas. Scotland's existing network of general marine protected areas already covers 37 per cent of our seas. The new global target from the 15th United Nations biodiversity conference of the parties—COP15—is for 30 per cent of seas to be in effective management by 2030.

A just transition is not just for energy and it is not just for the north-east, which is why the Parliament's Economy and Fair Work Committee is carrying out an inquiry into what is needed for the Grangemouth just transition plan.

Liam Kerr: I am listening very carefully to what the member is saying. I wonder whether she can explain the logic of splitting out energy from the net zero portfolio, because I do not think that it quite makes sense.

Fiona Hyslop: I have given my view on the logic, but I am sure that the Government can explain that itself.

The member is also taking part in the inquiry into a just transition for the Grangemouth area. It is clear that the community, local businesses and

workers need to be part of that just transition and that there needs to be place-based planning. I hope that the cabinet secretary will find our recommendations, when they are finalised, helpful.

The Grangemouth transition requires the approval of and funding for the Acorn CCUS project but, despite every indication that they might be announced on the UK Government's green day, we are yet to hear about them. The clock is ticking and not only Scotland but the UK need the project in order to meet their net zero targets.

Communities must be involved in the just transition. I welcome the fact that Blackburn, in my constituency, was selected as one of the Scottish Government's seven climate action towns. The Blackburn community consultation showed that jobs and skills is the main issue. I hope that wholesale early heat pump installation will be a priority, as it will develop skills and jobs. I urge the cabinet secretary to drive momentum, energy and resource into the climate action towns so that community empowerment results in action. We need to start delivering at scale now, transforming heat in buildings, and we need construction skills and recognised qualified electrical engineers and electricians. Surely, at the very least, we should be starting with our climate towns now.

On transport, bus services in semi-rural areas are reeling from patronage numbers that are lower than before Covid and a worsening shortage of drivers. I have villages in my constituency that will, in effect, be cut off from May due to changes in bus services, and we are yet to see West Lothian Council's local priority routes for subsidy. The growing village of Winchburgh has two new secondary schools and a newly-opened road junction on to the M9, but it currently offers no way of getting to work other than by car. If we are to be serious about net zero, we need buses and a rail station in Winchburgh in order to meet commuters' needs so that they do not resort to car use. As the cabinet secretary has overall responsibility for transport, I say to her that we need an effective bus and rail network if we want to reduce car use in commuting constituencies such as mine.

Innovation is also needed to tackle climate change. Energy powers and funding are mainly reserved to Westminster, and I was pleased to learn that Invinity Energy Systems, which is based in Bathgate in my constituency and which manufactures utility-grade energy storage systems, was recently awarded an £11 million grant from the UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. That money will be invested to deploy a 30MWh vanadium flow battery. Invinity already supports energy storage from hydrogen in Orkney and it is featured in the Scottish

Government's draft energy strategy, which was published earlier this year.

The Climate Change Committee has said that there is a need for more new storage solutions, beyond the simple use of batteries. Most critical is the use of surplus generation to produce hydrogen through electrolysis, or green hydrogen, which provides long-term storage so that it can be used later to generate electricity. Scotland is extremely well placed in that regard, but we must harness ourselves to hydrogen decisively and soon in order to do that. Exporting hydrogen will also help other countries to reach secure net zero, but it is not a UK Government priority.

The Climate Change Committee has stated that, in order to support the UK Government's target of up to 50GW of offshore wind power by 2030, it will have to install in the next seven years more than five times the amount of transmission infrastructure that has been built in England and Wales in the past 30 years. Grid transmission for power that is generated is key, which is why the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee is currently examining our infrastructure needs. Our inquiry has heard concerns about how the grid can meet the requirements for Scottish renewable energy production. Scotland has the energy. We just need the power, and that power is independence to make Scotland a powerhouse for its people with available, affordable renewable energy.

The IPCC report makes it clear that all Governments must make major changes. The UK Government was forced to publish its "Powering Up Britain" strategy after the High Court judged in July last year that its current plan was not detailed enough to deliver. Further, the Scottish Government's revised climate change plan, which is due later this year, must have deliverables, as the Auditor General for Scotland's report set out this week, not just targets and aspirations, or it will also lay itself open to challenge.

I trust that I have set out my priorities clearly for the cabinet secretary. I look forward to her response and to working with her.

16:00

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

The Scottish Government's just transition commission is a rather measured, moderate group of people, but even they felt compelled to write to the minister responsible for just transition just a few weeks ago. In their letter, they pulled no punches. They said that addressing inequalities should be a core strategic objective of just transition and that there should be an audit of who

benefits, of who pays and of which groups in society will pay more and which groups will pay less. They called for co-design and meaningful engagement and a stable and settled workforce, which they said demands a step-change in skills, credible road maps and an investment prospectus and plan.

We can hear their growing impatience and rising exasperation that, four years on from the Government declaring a climate emergency, they are still having to ask

"how existing constraints to financing, skills and workforce capacity can be addressed."

No wonder their patience is running out, and it is not only the just transition commission; it is the audit commission too. The Auditor General's new report, published just today, is scathing about the SNP-Green Government. He says:

"The Scottish Government does not routinely carry out carbon assessments or capture the impact of spending decisions on its carbon footprint in the long term ... The Scottish Government does not assess how far the policies outlined in the Climate Change Plan Update will contribute to net zero ... The Scottish Government does not know how much the policies proposed in the current Climate Change Plan Update will cost".

However, what everyone in the country knows is that there are choices to be made, and they know that these are not technological choices but political ones, because the path that we must follow is not about technocratic fixes and scientific solutions; it is about what type of society we live in. It is about how we live and how we might live, and it is about how we overturn the deep divisions of class that hold us back. It involves a choice about whether we help the weak or the strong; whether we plan our economy or rely on the market; and whether we simply deal with the effects of the economic system or set about changing the current economic system. Those are the choices that the Government must make.

On Tuesday, the new First Minister arrived in Parliament with a document under his arm entitled, "Equality, opportunity, community: New leadership—A fresh start". He spoke of trade unions and of fair work, declaring:

"We will take the workers of the northeast ... with us on our just transition journey."—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2023; c 14.]

As we heard, on Wednesday the new Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition visited Ineos in the morning and Forth Ports in Grangemouth in the afternoon to meet "key stakeholders". The cabinet secretary met senior managers from Ineos—Ratcliffe's people—and the trade union representatives there, but she did not meet the trade unions at Forth Ports. This afternoon, let me warn the cabinet secretary not to pander to the Jim Ratcliffes of this world—Jim

Ratcliffe who, as well as still wanting to frack across the central belt of Scotland, now wants to build a nuclear reactor right in the middle of Grangemouth. Let me warn her that a just transition that really is just means that we do not pander to those vested interests but, rather, we take them on—those whose only interest is in making money and a quick profit.

A just transition that really is just means that we will tilt the balance of power in the economy in a new and better direction. There will need to be a whole-system change, a decisive shift, a new kind of economy that includes public ownership, not least in energy. It will need to be bold—bolder than we imagine—because, in truth, we will be accused by future generations not of going too fast or of taking people by surprise but of going too slowly, nibbling away at the problem and not being decisive enough.

In “A Dream of John Ball”, William Morris wrote:

“Hard it is for the Old World to see the New”.

We want an earthly paradise—why not? We should draw on the great unused reservoir of human talent and potential—why not? We are world citizens, with an obligation as well as a right to speak out, because our common humanity should unite us—why not? We can change the fundamental relations of power in the economy and in production through radical and rational reform—why not?

But all of that requires not only vision; it also demands leadership. It cries out for urgent Government action and, in the end, it must be based on an understanding that these things will not happen spontaneously. They will not naturally evolve—certainly not under the logic of capitalism. We will have to plan for them. It also requires an understanding that this is not just an economic, an environmental, an ecological, a social and a political imperative but a moral imperative.

16:06

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I take the opportunity to welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition and the Minister for Energy to their roles.

The SNP Scottish Government has demonstrated that it is committed to tackling climate change and to delivering a just transition. That is crucial in the face of the global climate and nature emergencies.

In the Scottish Government’s policy prospectus, the cabinet secretary, working with her Cabinet colleagues, has made a commitment that, by 2026, the Scottish Government will have

“Driven down Scotland’s greenhouse gas emissions further – our new Climate Change Plan will clearly set the pathway to achieving Scotland’s world leading commitment to be net zero by 2045.”

In addition, it will set out its plan

“for building resilience to the impacts that climate change is having and will increasingly have on communities and businesses, in our Adaptation Programme”

and

“Co-developed a series of just transition plans in support of, and together with, sectors and communities most affected by the net zero transformation, and delivered direct support through our £500 million Just Transition Fund. We will also have consulted on net zero conditionality for significant public sector investment, including proposals to support businesses”.

Those are important steps, and I will focus my contribution on the just transition, not least because of the need to have a fair and just transition away from complete reliance on North Sea oil and gas.

Scotland is taking lasting action to secure a net zero and climate-resilient future in a way that is fair and just for everyone. The latest emissions data for 2020 show that Scotland’s emissions are down by well over 50 per cent since the 1990 baseline, which is more than halfway to net zero. Action that is being taken now will deliver significant reductions in emissions in years to come.

The transition will require a truly national effort from all sectors of the economy, including significant private sector investment in net zero and climate resilience to ensure the long-term strength and competitiveness of our economy.

The Scottish Government has been clear that a just transition is an opportunity to go beyond delivering our very necessary climate goals, to bring a nationwide, cross-industry transformation to build a greener and more equal Scotland. The national just transition planning framework sets out how the Scottish Government will work with others to manage the economic and social impacts.

I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to developing just transition plans across sectors and regions—beginning with the Scottish Government’s “Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan”, which was published in January 2023.

The first £20 million of the Scottish Government’s just transition fund for the north-east and Moray was identified as part of the 2022-23 budget. Although that is welcome, I request further information from the cabinet secretary on how that fund will address employment transition in the north-east, including for my constituents in Aberdeen Donside.

It is interesting to note that the UK Government's green jobs task force recommended that that Government sets out how it will match support that is available through the European Union's just transition fund. That has still not been acted on. The UK Government has refused to match the Scottish Government's £500 million just transition fund, despite the £300 billion that has gone to the Treasury from North Sea oil since the 1970s. That is shocking. I call on the UK Government to match the funding and take action in the face of the global climate emergency.

Liam Kerr: I will not make the same point again about the £16 billion North Sea transition deal, but does Jackie Dunbar welcome the fact that the UK Government has awarded £27 million to Aberdeen's energy transition zone to support the development of green energy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Jackie Dunbar the time back.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I am just fair forfochen—I am sorry; that is a good old-fashioned Doric word for being exhausted—haein tae explain tae Liam Kerr that money is money. I am an Aberdonian, and I will appreciate any money that we can get, but I ask him to ask his UK Government colleagues whether we can get some of the £300 billion back. That would be exceedingly helpful, too.

I am sorry about the shocked look that you just had on your face until I explained what my Doric word meant, Deputy Presiding Officer.

We are transitioning to a net zero emissions Scotland for the benefit of our environment, our people and our prosperity. We also need to adapt and build resilience to the impacts of climate change alongside our actions to reduce emissions.

The Scottish Government is committed to ending its contribution to climate change in a way that is fair and leaves nobody behind. The actions that are needed to become net zero by 2045 will transform all sectors of our economy and society, and they will require rapid structural change.

In Scotland, we have seen how unplanned structural changes in the past have left intergenerational scarring and deprivation—most notably in our former coal mining communities. Our transition to net zero must be managed differently. If we plan ahead and act, ending our contribution to climate change presents a unique opportunity to improve the collective wellbeing of our nation. Everyone—including those who work in oil and gas—must be engaged with and brought on board.

The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 embeds the

principles of a just transition. That means that, as we reduce our emissions and respond to a changing climate, our journey is fair and creates a better future for everybody, regardless of where they live, what they do and who they are.

I again welcome this debate, and I welcome the steps that are being taken in Scotland's just transition. If we all work together, we will reach our net zero goals.

16:13

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I warmly welcome the cabinet secretary and the minister to their new roles, and I look forward to our joint work ahead, particularly on the forthcoming climate plan.

It is clear that no Government anywhere in the world has responded to the climate emergency with the scale or the speed that is needed to keep to the 1.5°C promise. Our current climate plan in Scotland is not on course to meet the 2030 targets, so the next plan must bring in fresh thinking, especially on delivery.

As a former convener of the Environment and Rural Development Committee, Sarah Boyack will remember the conclusions of the Parliament's first-ever climate change inquiry back in 2005. The committee recommended in its report that

“a radical response on a huge, almost unprecedented, scale must start”

to be entrenched in policy now.

It also recommended actions that included a call on ministers to develop and introduce road user charging by 2015 at the very latest. There was unanimous cross-party support. Some members of the committee went on to join the Government; others were spokespeople for their parties in the years that followed. However, the Parliament's inability to lead a consensus on necessary measures such as road user charging really saddens me.

As soon as even moderate measures such as workplace parking levies—or a deposit return scheme—are proposed, they are kicked around as political footballs. Where did that cross-party desire go for a radical response on a huge, almost unprecedented scale? It always gets lost in the short-term gain of political calculus. Opposition from any quarter is seen as creating an insurmountable crisis; calls are then made for policies to be abandoned or watered down, and then ministers have to be moved on. That then chills the political ambition for the new, progressive ideas that are desperately needed to tackle this crisis.

This Parliament—the Parliament that brought in the smoking ban, the plastic bag tax and even the

abolition of section 2A of the Local Government Act 1988—is in danger of becoming cautious and kowtowing. As Edwin Morgan said at the opening of this very building, a “nest of fearties” is not what the people want; nor do they want a “symposium of procrastinators”.

I am saddened, because if Governments in Scotland and the UK had acted together with the scale of ambition that was outlined in that 2005 report, we would be in a very different position today. Instead, in 2023, we must pick up the pace dramatically to make up for nearly two decades of lost ground. Step changes are needed, which means breaking with policies that were damaging the climate in 2005 and have continued to do so in the years that have followed.

If we prioritise road-building projects and increase vehicle mileage, it will break our climate targets while emptying our transport budgets; if we allow air miles to increase, it will wipe out the climate gains that are being made by reducing the cost of public transport or by increasing cycling; if farming upland management and fishing are not radically reformed, we will continue to release thousands of tons of carbon from our soil and sea beds every year; and if we push on with maximum economic recovery of oil and gas, it will delay the just transition and result in a dangerous and unmanaged collapse of jobs in the years ahead.

However, I think that the pathways to energy transition are getting clearer by the day. Commissioned as a result of the Bute house agreement, the independent just transition review of the Scottish energy sector is a genuinely groundbreaking and extensive study by world-leading experts. It informs the energy strategy and is a rare example of an oil and gas-rich nation recognising both the challenges and the opportunities of transition rather than pretending that business as usual is a viable option.

I recommend that members look at that study because it examines in depth how North Sea oil and gas production will decline regardless of Government policy and how undeveloped reserves will become increasingly hard to exploit. There is simply no return to the oil and gas boom, no matter how hard some members may wish for it.

The study shows us that there is a viable route to meeting our Paris commitment and to protecting jobs. However, that will not happen by itself. It requires brave, bold and early investment and policy intervention to power the transition. Perhaps it is on that point that I sense from all the contributions that there is a consensus in the Parliament on the need to get that specificity and to get those investment plans ready.

This is about harnessing the opportunities that we have in Scotland in wind, renewable hydrogen and supply chains for electrification, creating jobs that are lasting, secure and fulfilling for generations to come. This is about a green transition that is also rooted in justice—trade unions and workers need to be at the heart of discussions about a just transition—and we need to aspire to have better conditions for all, not just for more of the same. This is, rightly, about bringing communities with us, so although I am optimistic that the new energy strategy can set the right level of ambition, what is needed on the back of it are those detailed, grounded plans for transition that are rooted in communities.

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Ruskell: If I have got time, I will.

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

Sarah Boyack: I very much appreciate Mark Ruskell taking my intervention.

I totally agree with the member that we know that community energy schemes work, but we need support for local authorities and the leadership to make those schemes happen. Does he think that we should be pushing harder on that?

Mark Ruskell: Absolutely, and I think that the starting point of local heat and energy efficiency strategies that councils are working on right now will create opportunities for communities to own their energy as well, and to create an energy generation revolution that will be in our communities and owned by them—that is the prize. However, it cannot happen without Government intervention; it cannot happen without that drive and that leadership. Mr Harvie is listening and nodding away just behind me.

We need those site-specific just transition plans for sites such as Mossmorran, too. The work to develop a site-specific plan for Grangemouth is great, but we need to go further and faster: we cannot leave any communities behind.

Back in 2005, we promised to meet the challenge of the climate crisis by standing together as a Parliament and taking bold action. I still believe that that greener, fairer future is possible, but we have a responsibility in the Parliament to work together to achieve that. That is the challenge that brought the Greens into Government. We look forward to working with all MSPs who share that spirit.

16:20

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The plans and strategies that the

Government has laid out are certainly ambitious for Scotland, as they should, and must, be if we are to achieve our ambitions for 2030 and 2045. Running alongside those plans are the views and recommendations of the Climate Change Committee, which are robust and challenging, as well as those of Audit Scotland, which released a report this morning. Let us not forget that, no matter what we all do, we cannot do any of it without taking our communities along with us on the journey—which Mark Ruskell made a point about a second ago.

We are talking about making major changes to the way that people live their lives, how and where they work and, crucially, how they move around this wonderful country to go about their business. That journey is well under way, and the credit is due to the efforts of many in Government, industry and at home, too. Emissions are down by more than 50 per cent from the 1990 baseline, and we are over halfway to net zero. However, it has to be said that the Climate Change Committee tells us that the pace of change must accelerate and that, currently, we are not on track to make the kind of systemic changes that are required for the next half of the journey.

It might be hard to believe but, having run a couple of marathons, I know that the first half is comfortable enough, but the last miles take the most effort and make the most difference. The Climate Change Committee's opening comments in its report are encouraging. It states that the 2020 interim targets have been met, but it is also quick to point out that the travel restrictions during Covid probably helped us over that particular line. Surely, it is also fair to say that Covid hampered progress in some of the key areas that we wanted to achieve. A recurring message in the CCC's report is that we need quantified delivery plans that set out the details of how we are to achieve the various targets that we are setting—a point that has been repeated by Audit Scotland and is recognised and accepted by the Scottish Government.

On the issue of reducing car kilometre miles by 20 per cent by 2030, I had a look at the draft route map. It looked detailed enough to me, with 50 pages or so backed up by more analysis and a number of ingredients that I recognise are already in place or are on the way, such as extending free bus travel, establishing low-emission zones in our cities, investment in the rail network and—our latest announcement—removing peak rail fares from October. All those measure are helping, and will help even more to coax people away from their cars and on to buses and trains.

Sarah Boyack: On the issue of bus services, I agree that transport emissions went down during Covid as so many of us stayed at home. However,

we now have an issue that there are fewer bus services for people to use. Do we not need to make that a real political priority across the country so that people have a choice and that they have decent bus services that they can use?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Mr Coffey the time back for that intervention.

Willie Coffey: I totally agree. It will take time to get back to anything like the normal levels of bus usage, but I agree that we need to do everything that we can to encourage it.

I am no expert, though, so I will go back to the CCC's view of the road map and what is still required. If it is to quantify the impact of the measures as we go along, then fair enough. Perhaps the cabinet secretary might say a wee bit more about that when she sums up.

In looking at the process of hastening the transition to electric cars from diesel and petrol, I can see contradictions that could be confusing to the public. On the one hand, we want people to transition to electric cars but, on the other, we want them not to use cars and to switch to bus and rail services instead. Which option is the Government asking the public to embrace?

A significant event took place in Ireland during the past few weeks: sales of electric cars have now exceeded sales of diesel cars for the first time ever. The Irish Government still offers £5,000 on new EV car purchases, and that kind of intervention has been significant in achieving that change. The number of electric cars that I saw in Dublin last week was huge, and it far exceeded what I have seen in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Government intervention can mirror that impact at this most difficult phase of our net zero journey.

I reserve my last observation for the railways and their part in helping us to tackle the effects of climate change. How can we expect to deliver a rail service that is fit for people in the 21st century on a rail track network that still looks much the same as it did in the 19th century? It takes far too long for people in my constituency to get to places in Glasgow in reasonable time and comfort. The current train journey takes longer than the steam train did in the 1940s. As for travelling to Edinburgh, the network makes that an almost impossible task, as people need to change trains and stations to get there. It still takes more than two hours to travel 60 miles. That is not good enough, and it will ultimately hamper our progress to net zero if we do not solve those problems to meet the needs and expectations of the modern traveller.

Let us see whether we can build on all the plans, take onboard recommendations from all colleagues who want to achieve the same end and fully meet the needs of the local people that we

serve. If we do that, we can look forward to the successful transition to net zero that Scotland and the rest of our planet so badly need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Maurice Golden, who is the final speaker in the open debate, after which we will move to closing speeches, when everybody who has participated in the debate will be expected to be in the chamber.

16:27

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Just last month, the IPCC delivered the final part of its sixth assessment report calling for urgent action to avoid “irrevocable damage” to our environment. As the UN secretary general put it,

“Our world needs climate action on all fronts: everything, everywhere, all at once”.

That certainly rings true in Scotland, where we are sadly behind in taking the action that is needed. The latest circularity gap report shows that the UK economy is 7.2 per cent circular, which is above the global average. However, Scotland is trailing far behind, with a circular economy score of just 1.3 per cent. In other words, 98.7 per cent of the resources that we use are from virgin sources. That statistic should deeply concern the SNP, given that it has had 16 years to build a circular economy. In all sincerity, I say to the new cabinet secretary and the new First Minister: let us do better.

A good start would be to introduce circular economic buying standards for the public sector. Match that up with promoting better product design to bake in reuse from the start, and we can drive forward a market for reusable, repairable and refurbished goods.

If members want to know what that looks like in practice, they should look no further than Advanced Clothing Solutions in North Lanarkshire. It is at the forefront of renting, repairing and reusing clothes, all while providing high-quality jobs to new entrants to the workforce, those who are reskilling and those who are looking for another chance in life. In other words, it is an example of the just transition that we want to see across Scotland.

Textiles are a particularly important issue. Zero Waste Scotland reports that they make up 4 per cent of household waste, but they account for almost one third of household waste emissions, yet the Scottish Government’s response has been to abolish the textiles programme, reinstate it, abolish it again then launch a textiles fund, which at the time was not available for anyone to apply for.

We can go even further by supporting farmers to grow native fibres for our textile industry. That is an area in which the Scottish Government has not shown enough interest; it does not even know how much Scottish wool is used in textile manufacturing. Support must be ramped up behind the textiles innovation fund to create a thriving closed-loop industry—one that has a sustainable environmental footprint that helps secure rural economies. That last point is especially important in securing a just transition for communities beyond the central belt.

There is an opportunity for plastic, too. Just 2 per cent of plastic waste is recycled in Scotland, so let us get a new facility in place to improve our recycling capability, keep valuable resources within Scotland and even attract recycling businesses from elsewhere.

We should also consider system design. For example, the development of streaming platforms made materials associated with DVD players and DVDs redundant. Sadly, the Scottish Government has done nothing in that space, despite my call to link education, academia and business in exploring circular economy design principles.

The ability of environmental policies to generate jobs and wealth offers a huge opportunity, but we must be careful that we do not miss out on it. For example, in relation to renewables, not every community can host a project, which is why I have championed renewable energy bonds to allow Scots to invest in and reap the rewards of our £5.6 billion renewables sector, regardless of where they live.

Earlier this week, the First Minister said that, on climate change, the SNP

“not only talk the talk”.—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2023; c 21.]

He claimed that the party is also walking the walk, but the evidence says otherwise. The SNP has failed on seven out of 11 emissions targets. Waste incineration has more than tripled since 2011. The SNP has failed to deliver its renewable heat target. It promised 30,000 green jobs by 2020, but then delivered marginally more than 20,000. There is also the 2013 household recycling target that has still not been met a decade later.

This is not point scoring—others have raised concerns, too. The Fraser of Allander Institute points out that, despite the Scottish Government’s declaring a climate emergency,

“there are no clear signs of this emergency affecting internal Government processes in any serious way.”

That point is reinforced by today’s report from Audit Scotland, “How the Scottish Government is set up to deliver climate change goals”, which states:

“key elements of good governance are missing from the Scottish Government’s climate change governance arrangements or are used irregularly and inconsistently”.

The same report also makes it clear that

“The Scottish Government cannot achieve net zero targets and adaptation outcomes alone”.

I therefore say to the new cabinet secretary: let us work constructively to avoid more failures and to deliver the just transition to net zero that we all want.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches.

16:33

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government motion that we have been debating asks us to recognise that

“the draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan sets out a just and fair pathway to maximise the opportunities of that transition”.

However, the consultation for that draft plan has not yet closed and the Scottish Government has already come under sustained criticism for the inadequacy of its plans. As was highlighted by my colleague Richard Leonard in today’s debate, the Government’s own just transition commission is frustrated with the pace and detail of the Scottish Government’s plans. Labour therefore cannot support today’s motion; instead, we urge members across the chamber to support our amendment.

In opening today’s debate, the cabinet secretary acknowledged the importance of avoiding another betrayal of workers of the scale that was seen during Thatcher’s attack on miners, but recent independent analysis of the Scottish Government’s own energy system transition plans raised major concerns about the need for rapid development of domestic jobs to ensure that communities are not devastated by an unjust transition—not least in my constituency, North East Scotland, which has 98 per cent of direct oil and gas jobs.

Màiri McAllan: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Mercedes Villalba: I would like to make some progress.

Although Scotland has a significant share of Europe’s onshore and offshore wind capacity, we are manufacturing hardly any of the infrastructure for it here in Scotland. Consecutive reports and analyses make it clear that Scotland must develop domestic supply chains or our communities’ wealth will be piped abroad, just as our oil is.

The risk to communities such as those in the north-east is huge, yet the Government repeatedly leaves those workers and communities out of its

plans, despite claiming in its motion today to include them. The reality is that it is taking environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth Scotland to draw up transition demands through its “Our Power: Offshore Workers’ Demands for a Just Energy Transition” consultation. Workers have told us that they want public investment in energy companies, safety, security and fair pay across the industry to enable them to move from oil and gas into renewables. Therefore, the Scottish Government must commit to working with the workers in those industries, who make up the communities that are most at risk in this time of change, and it must be led by their needs.

Gillian Martin: It is not true to say that only environmental organisations have been engaging with workers. When I was a back bencher, I had a survey out, as did the Scottish Government, which had a tremendous response. A great deal of work has been going on to engage with workers and unions.

Mercedes Villalba: Let us see those consultations turned into action for workers.

In addition to the lack of urgency around protecting communities from economic collapse, the Government is consistently overpromising and underdelivering on climate change and biodiversity improvement measures. My colleague Sarah Boyack highlighted the UK Climate Change Committee’s concerns about Scotland failing to meet targets, especially in peatland restoration and protection, which the Government does not mention in its motion. Peatlands are an essential carbon sink, as well as sites of biodiversity, so I welcomed the First Minister’s promise on Tuesday to deliver 110,000 hectares of restored peatland. However, that is less than half of what the Government promised only two years ago, when it pledged a quarter of a billion pounds to restore 250,000 hectares by 2030.

That downgrading of the promise on peatlands has come after we found out in January that the Government had achieved in 2021-22 only 28 per cent of its annual goal of restoring 20,000 hectares. It also came after the Government inflated its own figures by 40 per cent, thereby underestimating its own shortcomings, until NatureScot corrected it. Peatlands should be offering substantial carbon capture, improved habitats for our native wildlife, resilience to extreme weather and vital green jobs; yet, according to the Government’s own figures, 80 per cent of our peatlands are damaged.

NatureScot has also shown that many of our native species still struggle as they face the combined effects of biodiversity loss and climate change. The average abundance of our 2,803 marine and terrestrial species is still well below

historical figures, and species continue to be damaged by extreme weather, habitat loss and scarcity of food.

We all know that our natural environment is a complex ecosystem with interdependent parts. That means that there are significant knock-on effects of the Government's failure to improve our native biodiversity, our habitats including peatlands, and our air and water quality. All that must be rapidly addressed to ensure that Scotland meets its ambitious targets on the climate and the environment.

It is positive that the Government's Scottish biodiversity strategy, which was announced last year, promises to reverse biodiversity loss by 2045. That is an ambitious target that would, if it were met, have a significant effect across Scotland. However, given the Government's consistent inability to keep its promises, it is hard to have confidence that biodiversity targets will not go the way of the peatland target—a great dream, but far from reality.

What we now need is not more promises but action—action to address the current and future challenges that are faced by our communities, our habitats and our climate.

Labour agrees with the Government on the urgency of the climate crisis as well as on the need to make sure that the transition to a net zero future is just. We will always work constructively across parties to achieve the change that Scotland needs. However, today's self-congratulatory motion from the Government will not help us to meet our goals. It does not give clarity about the Government's approach and it does not instil confidence that the SNP is the party to guide the country through the challenges ahead.

I urge all members to support the Labour amendment, which would strengthen Parliament's commitment to urgent and whole-hearted tackling of climate change in order to ensure that all the communities of Scotland are brought with us in the transition.

16:40

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I will be supporting the amendment in the name of Liam Kerr.

There is no doubt that every party in Parliament views the climate emergency as having the importance that it deserves. How we achieve a truly just transition over the coming years and decades is an issue on which there is far more disagreement.

There are several areas of the Government's net zero plans on which we still require to see more detail. When it comes to the just transition, perhaps the biggest of those areas is skills. In its December 2022 report, the Climate Change Committee stated that the ability to shape our workforce to meet the skills demands of the just transition will be one of the biggest factors in our ability to deliver net zero.

The Government's motion is right to talk about the importance of a highly skilled workforce and of reskilling and attracting new talent to Scotland. The Government's "Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan 2020-2025" does, at least, attempt to set out how that might be achieved. At this stage, the plan is not yet fit to tackle the huge skills challenges that are just over the horizon, some of which we have heard about in the debate.

Let us take the UK offshore energy sector workforce as an example. Around 20 per cent of that workforce is currently involved in the low-carbon energy sector. By 2030, that is projected to increase to about 65 per cent of the total offshore workforce, despite the fact that the total workforce is expected to increase from 160,000 to 200,000 over the same period. As around half of that workforce will be based in Scotland, it is clear that reskilling and retraining will need to take place on a large scale. The onus is therefore on the SNP Government to engage with the energy skills alliance as it continues to advise on what skills the sector will need in the long term.

We also know that there are thousands of jobs in sectors including construction and transport for which reskilling will be required. The construction industry has warned that it still lacks confidence and needs more time to fully invest in its workforce.

For the transport sector, the climate emergency skills action plan acknowledges that some of the required retraining will be in baseline skills and can be made available through colleges. After years of underinvestment, the college sector now requires further support to perform the key role that is being asked of it. It does not currently have the ability to do so, given the detrimental things that have happened to it in the past.

Those are just some of the outstanding issues that need to be dealt with in order for a just transition to take place.

I will talk about some of the contributions that we have heard in the debate. My colleague Liam Kerr spoke about green jobs and the ability to deliver them, but as he said, the Government must be able to set out what it will provide. We all want there to be green jobs: we see the benefit of them. We also know that we are behind the curve when it comes to producing them. Work with our oil and

gas sector will be only one way of ensuring a just transition, but we need to work with that industry, because if we do not the just transition will not be achieved.

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely welcome the focus on skills and I agree that provision of jobs for the future is essential. I will just take this opportunity to point Alexander Stewart in the direction not of Scottish Government figures, but of EY's independent analysis, which sets out that we could, by 2050, be looking at about 25,000 jobs in offshore wind, just under 8,000 in onshore wind, 2,000 in hydro power and nearly 2,000 in residual professions.

Alexander Stewart: I thank the cabinet secretary for the intervention. We know that we need to have a plan and it is good to see issues coming forward, but if we do not already have the workforce and the skills, we will not achieve the targets that we expect to achieve.

Brian Whittle spoke about warm words and about the targets that have been set by the Scottish Government, but rural Scotland does not have the network that is needed for transport. That is already missing from the process. Mr Whittle also talked about the poor launch of the blue economy. Scotland's seas are under pressure and industry wants better blue balance, but there is a lack of data, funding and priorities.

Maurice Golden spoke about our being behind in the action that is needed and said that Scotland needs to do better. I agree that Scotland needs to do better; it needs better priorities, better decisions and better ways forward. We need to be on the front foot when it comes to reskilling, not on the back foot. He touched on the industries that need action, including textiles, and on how farmers need support to ensure that the just transition happens. Work on plastics also needs to be better, and system design could be much better. Jobs and wealth are possible, but only if we achieve the targets that can make them happen.

There is much more to be done in order to ensure that Scotland achieves its climate targets and a just transition. However, warnings have already been made and are coming from all directions. The Fraser of Allander Institute has highlighted that, without significant changes within Government, progress will be "insufficient". Audit Scotland highlighted in its report that

"key elements of good governance are missing from the Scottish Government's climate change governance arrangements",

and the Climate Change Committee has stated that there is "no clear delivery plan" for how the Scottish Government will achieve its net zero targets. All that is set out very clearly and talks about how we can achieve the targets and how, if

we truly want to make a just transition, we cannot afford to leave people and communities behind.

In conclusion, I say that it is time for us to be bold with words and to stop talking about evidence—we need solutions. This is also about practical realities and making sure that we still invest in oil and gas. That is still required in order to ensure a just transition. Only then will the Government have a plan that the Scottish public will truly be able to come on board with.

Industry needs support. Rural communities need support. The Scottish Government has the potential—we already know that—but Scotland might lose out because the Government has not got the will and the drive to achieve it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Gillian Martin, to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government for around nine minutes.

16:47

The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin): The debate has made clear how much potential a just transition to net zero can unlock for Scotland's economy and people. Members have made that clear throughout all their speeches today. We have heard criticisms, but we have also heard examples of where the just transition is already happening across Scotland.

It could have been one of a range of ministers responding to the debate, which just goes to show the Scottish Government's approach. We could have had somebody here from transport or housing, because a range of ministers have net zero and a just transition in their portfolios, which all feed into one another. However, I am glad that it is me, and I am obviously going to concentrate on energy, as members would expect me to do in my first speech as a minister.

Scotland is a renewable energy powerhouse, and we have the potential—with our rich natural resources, highly skilled workforce and expertise—to transform our economy from one that is run on fossil fuels to one that is run on renewable energy.

It is crucial that we seize this moment. I agree with Sarah Boyack, who said that we cannot take a decade. I would say that not the next decade but the next seven years will be absolutely crucial, because we are looking not at 2045 but at 2030. That is where the most strenuous targets are and where we have to make the most inroads. To do that, we will all have to collaborate with one another within the chamber, because, although we may disagree quite a lot on how to get there, we all voted for the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill, which is now

an act, and we wanted that act and the targets in it to go further.

I totally agree with Mark Ruskell that targets are meaningless if there is no action behind them. When bold policies come forward, we all have to take a bit of responsibility and ask, “Is this bold decision what is required?” Sometimes, decisions that it might take a wee bit of time to get people on board with are actually going to get us to net zero. I totally agree with Mark on that, because the path to net zero will not be straightforward—nothing that is worth doing ever is.

Those challenges will come with opportunities. We have a long history of rising to meet challenges with hard work and innovation. Scotland has been an engineering nation for centuries. We have always been able to pivot, and we will pivot again and again. We are pivoting from fossil fuels to renewables, just as we pivoted from mining and shipbuilding, but this time we will do it through a just transition that does not leave communities behind.

I see that innovation and hard work every day in my constituency and its neighbouring constituency. Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire are at the forefront of our renewable energy revolution. We now have the opportunity to be the net zero capital of the world, and the opportunities will stretch all over Scotland.

Brian Whittle: The minister talks about the next seven years as being crucial. Does she agree with me that those who will be the real innovators in seven years’ time are still at school and that it is important that the real battleground is where we wave the green economy into our education system, which we are yet to do?

Gillian Martin: I totally agree, although I would not say that they are solely in our schools. They are—absolutely—in our schools, but we have innovators working right now in our existing industries and sectors. There are such people in colleges and universities, but, of course, we have those young people in our schools and the Government needs to be giving signals about the kind of jobs that those young people should be thinking about skilling up for and the opportunities that they need to take as they go into higher and further education and then into the workforce. That was a good intervention, and I completely agree with it.

Fiona Hyslop was absolutely right to say that the just transition is not only for the north-east and is not only about energy. The tentacles of the just transition will have to go throughout Scotland, and, in the past three weeks, I have been hearing about things that are happening in renewable energy outwith the north-east. It is also not only about energy but about every single area in which we

have to decarbonise. Massive areas of Scotland continue to see carbon-intensive activity, such as at Grangemouth. There also has to be a just transition there—that is absolutely crucial.

I will mention some of the contributions that members have made, and I want to be positive and constructive, because that is how I mean to go on. Liam Kerr ran through a list of companies that are based in the north-east. I hope that he will not mind my saying that he couched his comments in terms of oil and gas companies that think they will no longer exist. He talked about companies being shut down, for example. However, those companies are diversifying into renewables. Let us look at how the ScotWind round attracted collaborations between small and large companies and between blue chip companies and smaller companies. For decades, their core business has been in oil and gas, but they are not oil and gas companies any more—they are energy companies that know that it makes business sense to move into renewables. They see their businesses being a potential mix of everything as we transition. They see that the North Sea basin is a declining basin—everyone sees that—and that they would be mad not to diversify. They also have a transferable workforce. They are well placed. I see that every day when I speak to those companies about how they are pivoting towards those new opportunities.

Liam Kerr: I acknowledge the point that the minister is making. She is reflecting what I was suggesting—that we are now talking about energy companies. The problem that I was getting at is that, if the Government’s energy strategy takes the position that there is to be no more exploration and production such that those companies will get no revenue and development from the core business, that business will decline and the transition might therefore decline. Does the minister not recognise that that is an issue?

Gillian Martin: The consultation is still open, and the draft that has been put out has been researched, but it has to be a draft. We have to collaborate. I would say to absolutely everyone in the chamber that, if they have views on the consultation, they have to participate in it. That is the only way that we can go forward as a Parliament towards achieving net zero and put in place a decent energy strategy. That chance is open to all of us. Mercedes Villalba kind of dismissed the draft, but it is still a draft and we are here to improve things. We are here to work together and collaborate on ideas to make things better.

Mercedes Villalba: The point is that environmental organisations have come up with very clear and tangible demands in consultation with workers. The Scottish Government likes to consult, but where is its substantive action?

Gillian Martin: We have the just transition commission, for one thing, and we have a range of policies.

I am watching my time, as there are a lot of members I want to mention, including Kaukab Stewart—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, we have a few minutes until decision time.

Gillian Martin: Excellent. I say to Kaukab Stewart that, if Glasgow could be a net zero city, that would be an absolute game changer. I really applaud the work that the council there is doing. She mentioned air pollution. This is a bit of a hangover from my previous job as the convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee: investment in reducing air pollution is an investment in the nation's health, and it is preventative spend in the health portfolio area. That is an important point.

I share Fiona Hyslop's enthusiasm for hydrogen. She will have seen that my very first visit as a minister was to the hydrogen hub in Aberdeen, and I will make lots more similar visits. We must be very aware that it is not just the production of hydrogen that we need to be heavily involved in. I agree with her that we need to look at the manufacture of electrolyzers, so that we are in a position not only to export our hydrogen but to do so with our own supply chain for the manufacturing process.

I say to Richard Leonard that, in the way that he couched it, he sounded a bit "doom and gloom" on the issue of skills. We should look to our colleges. I cite the example of Forth Valley College, which, for starters, is doing great work in the communities around Grangemouth in upskilling people and developing the skills of the young workforce for Grangemouth's future, particularly in hydrogen. The college is also working with Falkirk Council.

Richard Leonard: Will Gillian Martin take an intervention?

Gillian Martin: I do not have time. I want to mention some more members, if that is okay.

Jackie Dunbar asked what will be done for the workers in her area, so I point her to the energy skills passport. There are an awful lot of oil and gas workers in her constituency, it being Aberdeen Donside. She will be aware of the fact that I did a lot of work as a back bencher to bring the energy skills passport to fruition. I have now seen a prototype of it. It will be a game changer for people in the high-carbon industries, who will be able to map their existing skills to new and emerging technologies.

I say to Maurice Golden that the issues that he raised around textiles are not lost on me. ACS Clothing Ltd is a terrific example, but it is one of

many examples in that area. It is a growing entrepreneurial stream that we must nurture.

We estimate that there will be 77,000 jobs in the low-carbon energy sector in 2050, which is up from 19,000 jobs currently. That number can absorb the 57,000 skilled oil and gas jobs and create a lot more.

We are at a pivotal moment in Scotland's story. This is the decade—or the seven years, as I said—and our opportunity to build the foundations for stable and sustainable employment and prosperity for generations to come, with energy and the north-east of Scotland at the heart of that, but with the tentacles spreading prosperity throughout the whole of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on delivering climate change and the just transition.

Motion without Notice

16:58

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.59 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08626.2, in the name of Liam Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08626, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on delivering on climate change and the just transition, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:59

Meeting suspended.

17:02

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-08626.2, in the name of Liam Kerr. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08626.2, in the name of Liam Kerr, is: For 47, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08626.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08626, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on delivering on climate change and the just transition, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
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 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
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 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caitness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08626.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, is: For 16, Against 93, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08626, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on delivering on climate change and the just transition, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is now closed.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My device would not connect to the server. I would have voted yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms McKelvie. Your vote will be recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-08626, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on delivering on climate change and the just transition, is: For 94, Against 0, Abstentions 16.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the scale and the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for Scotland to show continued global leadership in a Just Transition to net zero; further recognises that the draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan sets out a just and fair pathway to maximise the opportunities of that transition; acknowledges that a highly-skilled workforce will be required to deliver the opportunities of a net zero economy, including Scotland's existing oil and gas and construction workforces, and that upskilling, reskilling and attracting new talent should be a key just transition priority of the Scottish Government; celebrates the significant contribution of those who manage land and marine areas, including those working in farming and fishing, to food security, the economy and the environment; agrees that Scotland's economic potential as a net zero nation is vast, including world-leading clean energy sectors and supply chains, its nature-based sectors and food and drink, through innovative green technology and services, including finance, and by maximising Scotland's strengths and potential in the decarbonisation of transport and the built environment; endorses that Scotland's sectoral Just Transition Plans must be co-designed by those most impacted by the transition, including workers and trades unions, and anticipates the contribution that Scotland's next Climate Change Plan, and both site and sectoral Just Transition Plans, will make on the journey to a fairer, greener Scotland.

Points of Order

17:08

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. During First Minister's questions today, the First Minister, in reply to a question from Jamie Halcro Johnston about the Corran ferry, said:

"it is our MOD. Our Scottish taxpayers' money helps to fund the MOD".—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2023; c 25.]

That implies that there would be no cost if the Ministry of Defence helped with the Corran ferry. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Members, I need to hear Mr Mountain's point of order.

Edward Mountain: For the purpose of clarification, I point out that the MOD is charged to defend the United Kingdom and has a budget for that.

However, the request for assistance with the Corran ferry has been made through a military aid to the civil authorities request. My understanding is that MACA assists civil authorities and it is up to the military to ascertain whether the assets are available and fit for deployment. It is normally up to the civil authorities to cover the costs of such deployments, in line with HM Treasury rules, although the MOD may, of course, defer costs. It is therefore unclear in this case whether the costs will be met by the Scottish Government or Highland Council.

Presiding Officer, I raise this point of order because I believe that the First Minister may have inadvertently misled the Parliament. [*Interruption.*] If members do not like to hear the point of order—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mountain—

Edward Mountain: —they can leave. Implying that no payment is required—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mountain, please resume your seat for a second. I say to members that a member has the floor. That member has the right to speak, and the other people in the chamber do not speak when somebody else has the floor. Mr Mountain, please continue.

Edward Mountain: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I raise the point of order with you as the First Minister may have inadvertently misled the Parliament, implying that no payment would be required if the MOD were deployed. I would therefore be grateful if you could set out how the First Minister may correct the record if that is the case.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Mountain for his contribution. I advise that that is not a point of order. It is not a matter for the chair. I believe that the process for correction of the record is well known to members across the chamber. Thank you.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. During the ministerial statement today, the minister Lorna Slater suggested that she applied to the UK Government for an exemption in 2021 and that the delay to the deposit return scheme is because of that. I can inform the Parliament that I have checked that. Ministers only received that formal request for a UK internal market act exclusion for the Scottish Government deposit return scheme on 6 March 2023. Since then, the Scottish Government has been reviewing and it has now paused the scheme, so it has not been possible for the UK Government to fully assess the impacts of the exclusion request on cross-UK trade, business and consumers.

I seek your advice, Deputy Presiding Officer, because surely that is misleading Parliament. We all know that it was done on 6 March 2023 and not in 2021. I would ask if the minister could come in and correct the record, please.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Whittle for his contribution. That is also not a point of order. It is not a matter for the chair. I presume that the mechanism by which the record can be corrected is also well known to Mr Whittle.

There will be a short pause before we move on to the final item of business.

Eurasian Lynx

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate, on motion S6M-07598, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on bringing back the Eurasian lynx to Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the recent campaign for the Eurasian lynx, a medium-sized wildcat native to Scotland, to be reintroduced; understands that lynx have been extinct in Britain for around 500 years; is aware that this was probably caused by widespread loss of woodland, the collapse of wild deer populations and hunting by humans; acknowledges a study carried out by the Lynx to Scotland partnership, made up of Trees for Life, Lifescape and Scotland: The Big Picture, which sought to assess the social feasibility of potential lynx reintroduction through consultation with stakeholders and communities in the Cairngorms National Park and Argyll, and found that there was sufficient support for lynx reintroduction among stakeholders and a desire among others to further investigate the potential, to warrant a continued exploration of feasibility; considers that the case for lynx reintroduction is both moral and ecological and that lynx would make Scotland's ecosystems richer and stronger; believes that lynx are an important species due to their role in maintaining balance and diversity in an ecosystem, as they help regulate numbers and behaviour of deer and some smaller carnivores; is aware that lynx are mainly crepuscular animals, and pose no danger to people; considers that attacks on livestock such as sheep are uncommon; is aware that lynx have slowly spread across mainland Europe in the last few decades, and have been reintroduced in several European countries, including Germany, Switzerland and France; believes that lynx could also act as high-profile ambassadors for nature-rich landscapes, attracting valuable tourism revenue in Scotland's rural communities, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to rectify lynx extinction in Scotland by a controlled reintroduction, once the necessary ecological and practical assessments have been undertaken.

17:14

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank the colleagues who signed my motion and made this debate possible, and those who will contribute to it.

We live in a country that is among the most nature-depleted in the world. The biodiversity intactness index, which estimates the percentage of natural biodiversity remaining across the world, found that the United Kingdom is in the lowest 10 per cent of nations globally for biodiversity and is at the bottom among the G7. Worldwide biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history.

However, recent years have seen some notable improvements, both nationally and globally. Across Europe, increased awareness, hunting bans and habitat restoration have thankfully resulted in a gradual return of many native species.

In Spain, the Iberian lynx has gone from being the world's most endangered feline to being the greatest triumph in cat conservation anywhere in only 20 years, with numbers rising from fewer than 100 to more than 1,100. Spain has invested to save the lynx, which it calls the "Iberian jewel" and has even built wildlife underpasses so that lynx territories are linked and the cats are less likely to be struck by cars. The animal is popular even with farmers and landowners, who now realise that Iberian lynx do not prey on lambs or domestic animals but displace the foxes that do. Many landowners have even launched tourism ventures that offer visitors an opportunity to see those beautiful animals in the wild.

Here, the reintroduction of beavers, ospreys and sea eagles, and action to save wildcats and otters, coupled with new measures to tackle wildlife crime, are all very positive measures that show a commitment to conservation. However, any debate on biodiversity cannot ignore the fact that the UK is one of the few countries in Europe with no apex predators, casting doubt on our appetite to play a role in addressing the recovery of degraded ecosystems. We cannot expect Africa, Asia and Latin America to save rare species without saving and restoring our own.

The European Union's biodiversity strategy for 2030 is a comprehensive, ambitious and long-term plan to protect nature and reverse ecosystem degradation. The strategy aims to put Europe's biodiversity on a path to recovery by 2030 and seeks binding restoration targets for specific habitats and species, protecting up to 30 per cent of European land and seas. The UK should be able to do at least as well.

Eurasian lynx are part of the solution and have already been successfully reintroduced in Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland—countries that are all more densely populated than Scotland. Research has confirmed that our Highlands have enough habitat and suitable prey to support a population of around 400 lynx.

Eurasian lynx are one of four lynx species found around the world and were originally native to Scotland, where the last were exterminated in the southern uplands in 1760. The lynx is a shy, crepuscular, medium-sized wildcat, inhabiting dense woodland and mountain slopes far from human settlements. The demise of the lynx was caused by human activity, including hunting, the collapse of wild deer populations and the widespread loss of woodland. The fact that

Scotland has undergone partial reforestation over the past century, coupled with a massive growth in our deer population, means that we now have both ample habitat and prey for lynx to thrive.

Reintroducing the Eurasian lynx is not only morally right but would contribute to nutrient recycling and carcase provision for other species, as well as the regeneration of vegetation and trees.

Any lynx reintroduction programme must, of course, meet strict environmental and policy tests laid down by the Government conservation agency NatureScot, and by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. NatureScot rules require licence applicants to prove that a reintroduced species can survive naturally, avoiding conflicts with local land users, such as sheep or chicken farmers, and not causing

“unacceptable harm to people’s wellbeing, livelihoods and recreational activities”.

The partners in the Lynx to Scotland group—Trees for Life, Lifescape and Scotland: The Big Picture—support a five-year trial reintroduction of lynx, recognising that that will rely on navigating complex social, cultural and perhaps political obstacles. Any reintroduction must be preceded by careful discussions between all stakeholders, including gamekeepers, foresters, farmers, conservationists, landowners, tourism businesses and rural communities. During 2023, the lynx focus group will explore the barriers to lynx reintroduction, aiming to build trust between stakeholders and to address areas of disagreement over science and local knowledge.

We face a climate emergency and must be bold to rectify the damage done by our unsustainably high carbon emissions since the industrial revolution. The Scottish Government’s draft climate change plan proposed ambitious targets for future woodland expansion, with 21 per cent of Scotland to be covered by woodland by 2032.

Forestry and Land Scotland plants between 15 million and 24 million trees each year, replanting sites where timber is harvested, creating woodland and replacing dead trees. Unfortunately, a major hindrance to that is that most young trees are vulnerable to deer for up to five years. Forestry and Land Scotland surveys specifically for deer damage to productive crops. Last year, the rolling three-year average of trees—even those protected with environmentally harmful plastic covers—damaged by deer was 20 per cent, a rise from 15 per cent in 2017.

The Eurasian lynx is a big game hunter that preys predominantly on medium-sized woodland deer such as roe and sika and on red deer calves. As a highly efficient predator of deer, its reintroduction will help to reduce, or at the very

least redistribute, deer populations and ease the pressure on our woodlands.

Understanding those hunting patterns is also key to addressing the concerns of some farmers and gamekeepers about possible lynx attacks on sheep. According to Dr David Hetherington, who works as the nature networks manager at the Cairngorms National Park Authority and is a leading expert on Eurasian lynx, the presence of four or more deer per square kilometre of forest usually means little scope for sheep predation. Scotland’s density currently sits at more than 10 deer per square kilometre. Dr Hetherington described sheep predation in countries in which sheep graze in flocks in open pasture alongside woodland as

“small-scale with one or two local attacks”.

I encourage colleagues to attend Tuesday evening’s parliamentary reception on lynx reintroduction, which is sponsored by Ariane Burgess. At that reception, they can talk directly to Dr Hetherington about what it would mean to live alongside lynx in Scotland.

Public support is key. The latest research, led by the charities Scotland: The Big Picture, Trees for Life and Vincent Wildlife Trust, involved a year consulting a range of different stakeholders and local communities in Cairngorms national park and Argyll. There was sufficient appetite to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the potential for lynx reintroduction to warrant further exploration.

Discussions should also focus on important practicalities, such as compensation schemes in case of livestock predation. In Switzerland, where there are 250 lynx and fewer deer, the predation of sheep has remained at under 50 animals a year across the whole country since 2006. That has fluctuated slightly in response to changes in the deer population. Problem lynx—that means those that take 15 or more sheep in a year—can legally be shot under licence, but that has not happened in 20 years. To put that in perspective, only a fortnight ago, a dog killed 16 lambs in Fife.

Like many colleagues, I greatly enjoyed watching the landmark “Wild Isles” David Attenborough series on the BBC. It highlights the important work that has been undertaken to halt the alarming decline in nature, wildlife and habitats across the British Isles. Sir David Attenborough said:

“we all need to urgently repair our relationship with the natural world. We now have a few short years during which we can still make a choice.”

For many decades, conservationists have worked hard to save our dwindling wildlife. Now is the time to move beyond just saving existing species by taking a more proactive approach and

reintroducing native species that have been driven to extinction by human activity.

Lynx will prosper in Scotland. There is plenty of food and habitat. Whether they will do that is ultimately down to societal choices and our willingness to share space with other species. Reintroducing native species such as the Eurasian lynx is not a panacea when it comes to biodiversity loss, but it can be a positive measure to boost the health of our natural world, and it can help to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss in the process.

17:22

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I have been a farmer for over 40 years, and I have been involved in managing the countryside for a period of that time.

I do not think that Mr Gibson will be surprised when I say that I am not one of those people who would like to see lynx reintroduced to the Cairngorms. Lynx have been away from this country for 500 years, and now is just not the time to bring them back.

As far as I can see, as an MSP who represents the Cairngorms, there is no appetite for the reintroduction of lynx, except among some conservation organisations that are interested in single species and the reforestation of the Highlands. Rather than talking about introducing new species, we ought to be managing the species that we are in danger of losing.

In the Cairngorms, one of those species is the capercaillie, which is vitally important. We have pumped millions of pounds into protecting the capercaillie. The RSPB has had Abernethy reserve for a considerable period of time and has done nothing to reverse what has happened. We should be spending more time on the capercaillie. I fear that lynx would attack that ground-nesting bird in the same way that other predators that have come in recently, such as the pine marten, have.

Kenneth Gibson: Research has actually shown that lynx keep down the number of foxes, which are more likely to kill capercaillies. You talk about not reintroducing species. Does that mean that you do not think that we should have reintroduced the beaver, the sea eagle or the osprey back in 1971, for example?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should speak through the chair, please.

Edward Mountain: I will come to a lot of species, if I may.

Along with capercaillies, there are the other important ground-nesting birds that we see around the Cairngorms. That does not include just curlews and birds that nest on grassland outside woodland edges; it includes shanks and pipers, which would nest in areas of afforestation, exactly where they would be found by lynx.

We have an appalling track record when it comes to the reintroduction of species. I will talk about beavers, as Mr Gibson mentioned them. We should not forget that beavers were illegally reintroduced into this country in Tayside and that they have spread out since. In fact, I was on the committee that heard Roseanna Cunningham explaining that, if we allowed them to go further, they would not be spread by humans beyond that—they would have to spread out naturally—and that lethal control would still be part of the positive management action that would need to be undertaken in relation to that species.

We now have a minister who has changed all that. We are allowing beavers and talking about relocating beavers into areas such as Glen Affric, where they have never been before. I can proudly hold up my hand and say that I have been managing managed land around Glen Affric and have personally authorised the culling of approximately 30,000 deer to allow the trees to grow. Now we are going to bring in an animal that will eat them and knock them all down. That does not make much sense to me.

Mr Gibson mentioned sea eagles. We brought sea eagles back and they are great because we can actually see them. We rarely see beavers, but we can see sea eagles. However, they come with problems. They take lambs and sheep, and farmers on Skye contact me regularly about the need to control sea eagles and prevent them from taking the lambs from their hefted flocks, which prevents farmers from carrying out future activities. In fact, we are paying farmers quite a lot of money when it comes to the loss of lambs.

On other species that we are trying to protect, I want to mention the wild cat. It is a personal issue for me to see wild cats reintroduced. I have spent a huge amount of time going to the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland to make sure that we are getting wild cats back. They will be in direct competition with lynx and lynx are not going to do them any favours.

So when it comes to the lynx, we in the Highlands are seeing the central belt saying that it is fine to put lynx up into the Highlands, while in the Highlands farmers are despairing at the suggestion that lynx are going to be brought in. Conservation bodies for important species such as capercaillie and wild cats are despairing when it comes to reintroducing lynx because the very

species that they are trying to protect will become prey.

A lot of noise is made about how beavers are going to increase tourism. I want to know how many tourists have actually seen a beaver, and if lynx were to come back, I want to know how many tourists would actually see one. I doubt very much that there would be many.

On the reintroduction of the lynx, the previous minister for agriculture said at a conference, “Over my dead body”, but I hope that we do not see Fergus Ewing’s dead body as lynx are railroaded into the islands. I send out this message as my final point. Keep your lynx ideas and your lynx effects to yourself. We do not want them in the Highlands.

17:27

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank Kenny Gibson for securing this debate, which I see as a contribution to our national conversation about whether we are ready for the reintroduction of Eurasian lynx. In the face of the nature and climate emergencies, we need all the help that we can get from nature. Lynx can help us in our efforts to restore nature, especially in our forests, which in turn will help us to bring down the rising temperatures of our climate. However, any reintroduction must be done with the people who are involved in land management understanding why bringing the lynx back to Scotland is necessary. I commend Trees for Life, Lifescape and Scotland: The Big Picture for their proactive work on this in Argyll and the Cairngorms national park

Under a range of international agreements, countries around the world have signed up to do the work of reintroducing species that were once present and, as Kenny Gibson has said, we have evidence that lynx once made Scotland their home. Coupled with those commitments, we now have biodiversity obligations to protect and restore 30 per cent of Scotland’s nature on land and at sea by 2030, which is just a little more than six years away.

We now understand that nature plays a central role in reducing and stabilising rising temperatures in our climate. Supporting land managers to work together in landscape-scale nature restoration will be key, but we have much work to do and some of it will have to be done by allowing nature to get on with it. That means that we need to create the conditions for natural regeneration, and the lynx can play a key role in creating those conditions.

Reforestation Scotland is essential. Barren mountains and moors are not natural and in most cases they are the result of overgrazing by deer. As we have heard, we have four types of deer in

Scotland, including two that are native—the smaller roe deer and red deer—and we currently have an average of 20 deer per square kilometre, when our land has a carrying capacity of about two per square kilometre. Lynx would be a natural predator for the smaller roe deer.

However, it is not only reducing deer numbers that the lynx can help with. In nature, predators help to shape the landscape by simply being present. Deer will not go to places where they know that lynx are present. In that way, the grazing pressure is reduced and natural regeneration can take place. There is a world-class example of that. When wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone national park in the United States, their presence alone stopped the deer from grazing specific areas of the park, which allowed forest to regenerate. In Scotland, we now have the right conditions for the introduction of lynx—we have enough of the right habitat and enough food.

Edward Mountain: Will the member take an intervention?

Ariane Burgess: I am aware that, as Edward Mountain has said—I am not going to take an intervention from him—people who manage our land are concerned about the reintroduction of lynx, and I think that we need to bring them into the conversation. As Scotland’s leading expert, Dr David Hetherington, has said, when people hear about lynx, they tend to conflate them with wolves and to describe wolf behaviour. We must get curious about the lynx and want to understand it. Although lynx are a top predator, they are different from wolves. They live in forests, where they are safe undercover, and that is where they prefer to hunt. They are elusive and tend to stay away from humans.

In the Jura mountains in Switzerland, which we have already heard about, where lynx were reintroduced in the 1970s, they have rarely caused problems for land managers and farmers. We could have regulations similar to those that are in place there, whereby if a lynx becomes a problem—that is, if it kills more than 15 sheep in a year—a licence can be applied for to shoot that lynx. In the Jura mountains, a licence has not had to be authorised since 2003.

I invite everyone who participates in the debate and everyone in the Parliament to continue to be curious about how the lynx can help us by joining me next Tuesday evening in the Holyrood room, where we can explore whether Scotland is ready for lynx and hear from Dr David Hetherington.

17:32

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

Ariane Burgess mentioned the reintroduction of wolves, I thought that Edward Mountain was going to fall off his chair.

I congratulate Kenneth Gibson on securing this intriguing debate. I say to Edward Mountain that that does not mean that the reintroduction of the lynx is imminent, but it opens up the debate to what I hope will be informed and tolerant discussion.

I will reference the detailed research by the Lynx to Scotland partnership, which sought to assess the social feasibility of the potential reintroduction of lynx to Scotland through consultation with stakeholders and communities in two focal areas—the Cairngorms national park and Argyll. I understand that that work represents the first effort to assess social feasibility, which is of central importance for the proposed reintroduction of a large carnivore that has been absent from Britain for a period of time equivalent to multiple human generations.

I will provide some graphic but relevant information. The lynx is, of course, a pure carnivore. Depending on the region and the availability of prey, it hunts cloven-hoofed animals such as roe deer, as well as young red deer, small mammals such as hares and rabbits, and in rare instances, smaller predators such as foxes are also on the lynx's menu. It hunts mainly in the evening, when its prey is also active, and its territory is heavily wooded and afforested areas.

When hunting, the lynx is aided by its excellent sensory organs, which enable it to see six times better in the dark than a human, and it is able to spot a rabbit from a distance of 300m. With its finely tuned ears, it can also hear the slightest rustle. It is a stalk-and-ambush hunter that catches its prey just like a cat does. However, I understand that, if a surprise attack fails, the prey is not pursued. It seizes its prey with its front claws and kills it with a bite to the throat.

If a lynx has killed a deer and is not disturbed, it will return to its prey over several nights until it has completely consumed it. A lynx needs to kill about one deer a week, which equates to around 60 animals a year. Therefore, the lynx could—I simply say "could"—provide a natural means of keeping deer numbers down. It could also predate on foxes, which, in turn, predate on ground-nesting birds.

Having been driven to extinction in parts of Europe since the beginning of the 19th century—

Edward Mountain: I totally appreciate that other predators, such as foxes and wildcats, could be killed, but the lynx are also going to kill ground-nesting birds—in the Cairngorms, the very ground-nesting birds that we are red listing as an endangered species: the capercaillie. Does

Christine Grahame accept that capercaillie would be put under increased threat by lynx?

Christine Grahame: My information from many good gamekeepers in my part of the south of Scotland is that their concern is about foxes preying on ground-nesting birds. Foxes nipping out of the woods are the problem. I ask Edward Mountain to hold his peace, because he will be happy with my conclusion, I hope.

There were diverse views, as expected, on the benefits and disbenefits of reintroduction, and that is rightly the case. Indeed, there was a proposal for the trial reintroduction of lynx to the Kielder forest by the Lynx UK Trust in 2018, which was rejected by the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for, among other reasons, insufficient engagement with key stakeholders and communities.

The overall objective of the Lynx to Scotland study was to provide an evidence base to inform the discourse among stakeholders about the feasibility of reintroduction, to be clear about the range of views of stakeholders, and to gain a clearer understanding of public belief and perceptions around reintroducing the animal. Four hundred and thirty verbatim statements were initially selected from interview transcripts. Those were refined to a set of 52 statements and then considered. Community groups were also invited to engage.

The view was reinforced that roe deer have become hugely problematic over recent decades and difficult to hunt under woodland cover. It was thought that, in an ideal world, lynx would have a regulatory impact on smaller carnivores that negatively impact protected species such as the capercaillie, as I have said, and it was questioned what role lynx might play in contributing to nutrient recycling in woodland.

However, the view was also expressed that red deer are commercially very valuable to the Highland economy and that lynx might be detrimental to that. A potential consequence of lynx reducing red deer abundance was thought to be a loss of grazed heath, with knock-on impacts on protected species and perhaps an increased risk of wildfire on the peatlands. Questions were also asked about the growth dynamics for lynx populations and what limited their numbers in Europe.

The main body of discussion concerned the potential impact of lynx on sheep farming in Scotland. Naturally, farmers want to protect their sheep from traumatic and unnecessary death.

I hope that Edward Mountain is listening, as I have selected three recommendations from the study. First, it states:

“It is not currently appropriate for proponents of lynx reintroduction to submit a licence application for reintroduction. At present, there are significant areas of contestation with regards to the feasibility of lynx reintroduction, and if these are not satisfactorily addressed, there is strong potential for the escalation of existing conflicts.”

Secondly, it states:

“A group with cross-sectoral representation should be established to appraise the findings of this study ... The process should seek to integrate local and scientific knowledge in appraising and addressing these areas, and the output from this group should inform the ... processes.”

I will not quote all the recommendations but, thirdly, it states:

“A comprehensive risk assessment for protected species and rural industries is required, in order to address divergent perceptions over the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of lynx reintroduction.”

I conclude by saying to Mr Mountain that, although I understand his concerns, he should look at that considered report and see that it proposes not that lynx should be reintroduced now but that much more detailed research must be done to satisfy all stakeholders if and when the Eurasian lynx might be reintroduced to Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Ms Grahame. I know that we can rely on you to provide graphic information, if not to stick to your time limit in a members’ business debate.

I invite Lorna Slater to respond to the debate—for around seven minutes, please.

17:39

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, including Kenneth Gibson for bringing it to the chamber. It is lovely to hear support for conservation and nature restoration. I was interested to hear about the data on the Iberian lynx. I did not know that lynx compete with foxes—it is not an area of speciality for me, so this has been a good opportunity to learn about it.

Mr Gibson rightly highlighted the damage to trees that deer can cause, which underlines the importance of deer management to effective conservation and the promotion of biodiversity.

Edward Mountain highlighted the risks to capercaillie, which we in Scotland are very concerned about right now. I therefore appreciate his highlighting that extremely endangered species, which we are doing much to protect given its iconic status here.

I return to beaver management. Of course, I do not support the illegal introduction of any animal species. The illegal reintroduction of beavers to the Tayside catchment basin caused innumerable

problems that have set back the acceptance of the species by a long way. However, some 50 stakeholders have now produced Scotland’s beaver strategy, which aims to reintroduce beavers to appropriate areas across Scotland where stakeholder engagement has been carried out. I appreciate that the way in which things were done in Tayside was not right and should not happen again.

Edward Mountain: I want to be clear about the minister’s views on the management of all species. Do you believe that lethal control should be part of the management options?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please, Mr Mountain.

Lorna Slater: I am sorry, but I did not catch part of the question.

Edward Mountain: I was asking whether the minister believes that lethal control should be part of the management options when species are reintroduced.

Lorna Slater: The member raises a good question. At the moment, lethal control is still used overwhelmingly in beaver management. We have managed to relocate only a handful of them in Scotland. Lethal control is still the main management tool, which is unfortunate, but that is the reality of the situation that we are in. Of course, wherever possible, we want to translocate beavers to appropriate sites under licence.

The regional member for the Highlands and Islands Ariane Burgess somewhat contradicted Mr Mountain’s claim that people in the Highlands do not want this to happen. I thank her for providing an alternative view on that.

I welcome Christine Grahame’s point about opening a debate with all stakeholders, and her enthusiasm for full and effective community engagement. As Ms Grahame said, the start of such a debate can be interesting. Recently, I attended an event in Parliament with many environmental stakeholders. I spoke to a gentleman who, for the previous 25 years, had wanted to reintroduce beavers to the UK. When the first reintroductions were done—I believe it was in 2009—that began a process that led to our now having the strategy for those to happen all over Scotland. For him, that was a sort of epiphany, in that his lifetime’s work had come to fruition. Children in Scotland will now grow up alongside beavers in their natural environment. That is wonderful, and it is a significant achievement for us.

The Scottish Government fully recognises that appropriate reintroductions of native species can be beneficial to ecosystems and restoring biodiversity. Those include the successful

reintroductions of sea eagle, beaver and red kite. Lynx can bring benefits, such as their ability to reduce deer numbers naturally, as well as the creation of new opportunities for wildlife tourism.

To respond to one of Mr Mountain's points, I have seen beavers in the wild, but only in Canada. I have not yet seen the beavers in Scotland, because there are simply not enough of them, but I look forward to doing so when there are more. They can be seen at dawn and sunset. When I saw one in Canada, it was in broad daylight, but there we go.

I return to the subject of lynx. The reintroduction of an apex predator such as the lynx can profoundly change the ecology of an area in various ways, as Ms Burgess alluded to. A key consideration in understanding how reintroduced lynx might affect the current ecological balance centres around their interactions with other carnivores. The most notable of those would be with the Scottish wildcat, red fox, badger and pine marten, as all those species have existed in Scotland for hundreds of years in the absence of a top predator such as lynx.

Alongside the potential benefits, we must consider the negative effects that lynx might have. For example, farmers would understandably be concerned about the possible impacts on livestock, and on sheep in particular. Although it is expected that roe deer would make up the vast majority of a lynx's diet in Scotland, other species might be taken. Those are likely to include rarer and iconic species such as capercaillie, red squirrel and the Scottish wildcat. There might also be risks to the critically endangered Scottish wildcat, through either interference or killing rather than consumption by predators.

We have always been clear that any reintroduction of a species such as lynx could take place only following full consultation that ensured that the views of people who were most likely to be affected were properly taken into account. Anyone who wants to release any new species such as the lynx would require a licence from NatureScot, which would assess any such application in line with the Scottish code for conservation translocations. It would also consult the national species reintroduction forum, which has an advisory role, as well as the Scottish Government and other stakeholders prior to reaching any licensing decision.

The Lynx to Scotland study noted that major barriers would need to be addressed satisfactorily before any such reintroduction could be progressed. It demonstrated that reintroduction projects are often complex and require careful consideration and planning to ensure that national and international best practice guidelines are met. Any proposed application would also require a

substantial amount of work to be undertaken to fill the current knowledge gaps, as Ms Grahame alluded to.

The Scottish Government remains open to constructive and informative conversations and debates such as this one, which can help us all to understand more about the potential impacts of lynx reintroductions in Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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