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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 24 May 2023

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# Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 24 May 2023

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

## Portfolio Question Time

### Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. Again, I make a plea for succinct questions and answers, in order to allow as many members as possible to get in.

Question 1 was not lodged.

#### Wellbeing Economy (Rules and Incentives)

**2. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on what rules and incentives are central to a wellbeing economy. (S6O-02261)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):** As we transition to a wellbeing economy, we will maximise the powers that are currently available to us, in order to grow a fairer, greener economy, seize the opportunities of net zero, create better communities, tackle poverty and embed equality, inclusion and human rights in everything that we do.

Our national strategy for economic transformation and our energy strategy, including our approach to fair work and conditionality, set out many of the actions and investments that we are taking forward to deliver that vision. We will continue to make the case that, with independence, we can do much more to realise our vision for a wellbeing economy.

**Craig Hoy:** A thriving local high street is vital to the wellbeing of communities and the economies in towns such as Dunbar, Haddington, Penicuik and Melrose, right across the South Scotland region. Can the minister explain how the decision to impose the disastrous deposit return scheme on cafes, pubs and restaurants is in any way sensible rule making? How can the Government's abject failure to pass on the 75 per cent business rates relief to Scotland's hospitality and retail operators be viewed as an incentive for them to grow and invest in a wellbeing economy?

**Neil Gray:** The hospitality and tourism industries are represented on the new deal for business group that I co-chaired along with Dr Poonam Malik last week, and we are taking representations on the non-domestic rates situation. Obviously, we have a very generous non-domestic rates offering, as well as the most generous small business bonus scheme anywhere in the United Kingdom, which helps to support our high streets.

With regard to the deposit return scheme, we are looking to develop a circular economy. It is important for our net zero journey, but if we can get recycling right, it is also an economic opportunity. We have a huge commodity in Scotland, and one of the central aims of the deposit return scheme is to harness that and take it forward well.

#### Support into Work (Parents)

**3. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to bring people with children back into work. (S6O-02262)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):** Parental employment support seeks to increase parental income from employment. Our eligibility recognises different family structures, such as kinship carers and those who are parents but are not living with their children.

Responding to the fact that more than two thirds of children in poverty live in working households, we broadened eligibility to ensure that parents in low-income employment can access person-centred support to help them to increase their income.

We work with local partners to promote employment as a route out of poverty and to attract parents to the support that is available by ensuring that employment opportunities are fair and flexible to family circumstances.

**Christine Grahame:** I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer regarding local partners. Does the cabinet secretary have discussions or engagement with private and public sector employers regarding home working and, separately, regarding the provision, where practicable, of the 1,140 hours of free nursery care, including to home workers?

**Neil Gray:** Yes. Although the legal powers that govern flexible working are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, we remain committed to improving access to flexible working in all sectors of the economy. We welcome the progress of the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill through the UK Parliament, but we feel that it does

not go far enough in giving all employees and, therefore, employers confidence that requests for flexible working will be given thorough consideration.

Asking employers to offer flexible working from day 1 of employment has been a requirement of our fair work first criteria on public spend since October 2021 and, since August 2021, all councils have been offering 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare to all eligible children. The most recent ELC census shows that more than 92,500 children were accessing funded ELC across Scotland in 2022. The estimated uptake rate of funded ELC for three and four-year-olds was 99 per cent in 2022. We will continue to work closely with local government to embed the benefits of expansion as more families come forward, to ensure that childcare is flexible, affordable, accessible and high quality.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Private and voluntary nurseries are often able to offer a greater degree of flexibility in childcare hours than local authorities, which is especially important for shift workers such as nurses. However, the funding model undermines their ability to retain experienced staff in the sector, especially during a cost of living crisis and with increasing pay levels. When will we see a change to help people with children who wish to return to work?

**Neil Gray:** I have received representations from the PVI sector, and I know that Natalie Don has met representatives of the PVI sector to discuss the issues that Beatrice Wishart raises. I hope to meet PVI representatives soon as well, so that we can cement the fact that a strong childcare provision is central to our economic aspirations. I will look to provide an update as soon as I can.

### Just Transition (Offshore Workers)

**4. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the energy minister has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the recommendations to the Scottish Government contained in the report, "Our Power: Offshore Workers' Demands for a Just Energy Transition". (S6O-02263)

**The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin):** The Scottish Government welcomes the report and agrees that listening to and acting on recommendations from offshore workers is critical to ensuring a just transition. That is why we have provided £100,000 in funding to the Scottish Trades Union Congress, to ensure that workers' voices are at the very heart of our just transition planning.

My colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, advised that the recommendations that are provided in the report would be considered in full during the consultation period for the "Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan", and responded to in the final draft. A range of ministers will continue to work closely together on that, given that it requires cross-portfolio and cross-sector working.

**Mercedes Villalba:** The minister will be aware that a key demand from offshore workers in the "Our Power" report is that the Scottish Government create an offshore training passport that aligns standards across the energy industry. That passport has already been delayed by the Government and, just today, the general secretary of the STUC warned the Government to "get to grips" with the transition.

Can the minister reassure offshore workers and their trade unions that the energy skills passport will align offshore basic safety, sea survival and firefighting standards? I am looking for a cast-iron guarantee from the Government on this point. Will those standards be aligned—yes or no?

**Gillian Martin:** I thank Mercedes Villalba for bringing up the offshore skills passport, because I want to say that it has not been delayed by Government. An industry-led body is taking it forward, and the Government's role is to help to fund it. We have awarded £5 million from the just transition fund to OPITO, which is leading on the digital energy skills passport. A key milestone was reached with the development of a prototype, which I have seen.

Mercedes Villalba will know that, in addition to the report that she cites, I did my own report on the issue, and it came out loud and clear that, for anything to do with an energy skills passport, the industry and sectors have to be at the heart of it. I am meeting OPITO next week to see what progress has been made.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** Yesterday's energy transition report highlighted how damaging to a just energy transition this Government's demonising of the North Sea oil and gas industry is. That was epitomised by minister Patrick Harvie saying that only the "hard right" supports new oil and gas. Does the minister recognise the report's findings, will she amend the energy strategy to stop the damage that it is doing to our industry, and will she join us in supporting domestic oil and gas exploration and production?

**Gillian Martin:** I was smiling as Liam Kerr delivered his question, because he knows full well that I very much have a foot in every part of the energy mix. My interest in keeping the energy mix vibrant, working and employing people until we transition is very much something that I prioritise.

Liam Kerr refers to the energy strategy, the consultation for which has closed. It will be reported on in the coming months. I am actively involved, along with my cabinet secretary and other cabinet secretaries, in looking at that and at how we can give confidence to all energy sectors that the Scottish Government fully supports them and their workers.

### Community-owned Energy Generation

**5. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to expand community-owned energy. (S6O-02264)

**The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin):** We want to realise as many opportunities as possible for community energy and lasting benefits for communities from the transition to net zero.

Scotland has made good progress against its 2GW community and local energy target, and we continue to invest in our community and renewable energy scheme—CARES—which has, to date, provided more than £60 million in funding for communities and has supported shared ownership opportunities.

We have recently commissioned research to explore how we maximise the contribution of community energy to a just transition. That will inform future policy development and the support that is provided through CARES.

**Colin Smyth:** The Government's "Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan" has a target of 2GW of community-owned energy generation by 2030, as the minister has mentioned, but a clear route map and the actions to deliver on that target are missing.

The Scottish Co-operative Party has set out 11 recommendations to double community energy from creating a new ring-fenced Scottish National Investment Bank fund that includes quotas for community energy when it comes to local authorities bulk buying energy. What new measures does the Government plan to take? Will the minister give careful consideration to the Co-operative Party's proposals in the Government's final energy strategy and just transition plan?

**Gillian Martin:** Colin Smyth could almost have been a fly on the wall in the meeting that the cabinet secretary and I have just been to with the onshore wind strategic leadership group, as that issue came up for discussion. We discussed how, through CARES, we can provide more support—particularly legal and financial support—to communities and build on the learning from other communities that have involved themselves in community energy projects in order to get more communities invested in those. That is one of the ways in which we must share learning, because

communities are doing that work voluntarily and we need to give them as much support as possible.

The issue that the member raises is very much a live discussion. In fact, the discussion is probably still going on—we had to leave the meeting to answer questions here today. Our partners in that group will be discussing that issue, and we will report back on its recommendations.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Recently, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly Committee C—the committee that deals with energy—which I am a member of, visited Penpont micro-hydro scheme as part of our current energy inquiry. The scheme provides community energy to the local area and is a great example of how community-owned energy works. Does the minister agree that we must see more schemes like that rolled out? Will she agree to visit Penpont, to meet the development trust that secured the project?

**Gillian Martin:** I thank Emma Harper for that intervention—and for her invitation, in particular. I was going to say that I would like to visit the project.

To return to my response to Colin Smyth, this is about learning from other communities that have been through the process and about how we can build on the support that is given and make it streamlined, better and more supportive for communities that are yet to make that investment.

### Fair Work (Support for Public Bodies)

**6. Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting public bodies to implement fair work principles. (S6O-02265)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):** Public bodies and their spending power are key to making Scotland a leading fair work nation. We have developed fair work first guidance to support all employers, which includes specific advice for public bodies.

We have engaged extensively with public bodies on removing barriers for racialised minorities, following the Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee's 2020 report into race equality, employment and skills.

We recognise the important dual role that public bodies play as employers and stewards of public funds. Working with Scottish Enterprise, we have developed an online support tool for employers, to benchmark fair work practices and to receive tailored advice and resources.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Colleges are public sector organisations, so they are expected to

abide by the principles of fair work, too. City of Glasgow College is undertaking a series of compulsory redundancies in the absence of any guidance on good higher education governance. For weeks, the website has said that the publication is imminent. When will that guidance be published?

**Neil Gray:** I hope that that will come forward in due course.

For Labour to be taken seriously on fair work, it must be consistent. Although Pam Duncan-Glancy is, quite rightly, standing up for employees at City of Glasgow College, on Monday at Westminster we had the spectacle of more than 30 Labour Party members abstaining from the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill. It is no wonder that no one knows where Labour stands even on workers' rights when Sir Keir Starmer could not even be there to vote on that bill, including on an amendment that would have seen Scotland being exempted from that legislation.

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** Interesting developments in the fair work space are happening around the world, including mechanisms to break contracts and withdraw funding if poor labour conditions, data breaches or environmental offences are identified. Those include Germany's Act on Corporate Due Diligence to Prevent Human Rights Violations in Supply Chains, which holds companies legally responsible for human rights abuses in the supply chain. The cabinet secretary will know well my support for tight pay ratios to close inequality gaps. With the devolved powers that Scotland has, what more can we do to ensure that public money does not go to those with wide pay ratios and those who do not pay sick pay and holiday pay for hourly contracted staff?

**Neil Gray:** With employment law being reserved, there are limits on the actions that we can take. However, we are committed to using all the levers that are available in order to drive fair work across Scotland. We already apply fair work first criteria to effect the positive change that we want to see through public sector funding. In the Bute house agreement and the national strategy for economic transformation, we committed to developing our approach to conditionality within the constraints of devolved competence, which will be a key focus for the next phase, when the real living wage and effective worker voice conditionality in grants is fully rolled out after July. Public sector funding should lever wider benefits, including the promotion of fair work, to support a sustainable and successful wellbeing economy over the long term.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question seven has been withdrawn.

## **Brexit (Impact on Scottish Businesses)**

**8. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the impact of Brexit on Scottish businesses. (S6O-02267)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):** Scottish businesses continue to be held back by the United Kingdom Government's disastrous Brexit policy. The latest business insights and conditions survey shows that 44 per cent of the Scottish businesses facing challenges with exporting in April blame Brexit directly. Red tape, bureaucracy and uncertainty have become the hallmarks of Brexit, with the UK experiencing the worst exports recovery in the G7. What is more, Brexit has also contributed to labour shortages and recruitment challenges in key sectors such as healthcare, transport and hospitality. Study after study finds that Brexit is bad for trade, bad for productivity, bad for the cost of living and bad for business.

**Marie McNair:** Brexit is failing businesses and damaging our economy. Even the old Brexit Party leader, Nigel Farage, has said that it has failed. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that leaders of the new Brexit party, Keir Starmer and Anas Sarwar, do not even have the courage or vision to abandon Brexit? Given that 70 per cent of Scots think that Brexit is a disaster, they do not even need to lead. They should just follow and reverse Labour's support for Brexit.

**Neil Gray:** Neither the contenders to be leader of the next Westminster Government, Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak, nor their Scottish counterparts, Anas Sarwar and Douglas Ross, are willing to admit the extent of the Brexit disaster. While Labour and the Conservatives try to sweep the mess under the rug, violating the will of the people of Scotland, this Government understands that the only way to repair the damage is to change course and rejoin the European Union. If the UK Government, of whichever stripe comes next, does not do it then an independent Scotland will.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** Border effects reduce trade by as much as a third. That is what a 2015 meta-analysis conducted by the University of Michigan concluded. Indeed, there may be empirical evidence to that effect from Brexit, which we did not support. Has the Scottish Government asked the chief economist to form a view on the impact of border effects? Sixty per cent of Scotland's outward trade, which is worth more than £50 billion, is with the rest of the UK. How much of that would we lose if a border was imposed between Scotland and the rest of the UK?



**Neil Gray:** I am looking forward to meeting Daniel Johnson in the coming weeks. I have offered such a meeting to all front-bench spokespeople across the chamber, so that I can share the economy prospectus paper with them. The paper has many of the answers to the questions that Mr Johnson raises.

**Daniel Johnson:** How much? Give me a number.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, members. Could we listen to the cabinet secretary's response?

**Neil Gray:** In that report, Mr Johnson can see the plans that we have for cross-border trade. Of course, those are being hampered right now because of Brexit and the barriers that have been put up by the UK Government. We are looking to tear down 27 barriers to trade with the rest of the EU. Only independence can deliver that.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The minister cannot have it both ways. Breaking up is bad. Breaking up the United Kingdom would be bad, just as breaking up the European Union is bad. Why can the minister not get that? He is talking nonsense.

**Neil Gray:** No—there are huge opportunities that come from independence. I have spoken about the 27 barriers to trade that are currently in place because of Brexit. Of course there would be challenges in terms of cross-border trade with the rest of the UK, but we have an opportunity with the market in the European Union. That is currently being held back and, as I have already said, 44 per cent of businesses cite Brexit as the reason for that. We want to reverse that. We know that Labour and the Tories are on the same page regarding Brexit and our relationship with the European Union. Only independence will deliver us the reversal of Brexit and an independent Scotland rejoining the European Union.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes portfolio questions on wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. There will be a short pause to allow the front-bench teams to change position before we move to the next portfolio questions.

## Finance and Parliamentary Business

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next portfolio is finance and parliamentary business. As ever, if members wish to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. There is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries, so I again make a plea for brevity in questions and in responses.

## Local Wealth Tax

1. **Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Scottish Trades Union Congress's proposals for a local wealth tax. (S6O-02268)

**The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur):** We welcome the STUC's report and acknowledge its important contribution to the debate on tax policy. We believe in a fair and progressive approach to taxation through which those most able to afford it contribute more to sustaining public services, and we are also committed to a fair and fiscally sustainable form of local taxation.

**Ariane Burgess:** In Buckie, Speyside, Elgin and Forres, half of the land available for housing is owned by just five landowners. Does the minister agree that the land and wealth taxes that are highlighted in the STUC report could be a useful tool for tackling unequal land ownership, increasing the number of homes in rural areas and capturing for public benefit a share of the increase in land value that occurs when development is supported through the planning system?

**Tom Arthur:** The Scottish Government recognises that tax could be an important mechanism in addressing land ownership patterns and influencing the market. We are currently reviewing the evidence that has been provided in response to our recent consultation on the proposed land reform bill and we will assess that separately as part of our wider approach to tax policy. That will include consideration of representations from stakeholders on a land value tax. However, I note that the Scottish Government's ability to implement such a tax is constrained by the devolution settlement and that the Scottish Land Commission, in its advice to the Scottish Government, did not propose a single land value tax.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** What plans does the Scottish Government have to carry out a review of the efficacy of the whole tax system in Scotland, given the warnings that are set out by the Scottish Fiscal Commission in its recent fiscal sustainability report?

**Tom Arthur:** We continually keep our policies on taxation under review, and we take decisions as part of the annual budget process. Through our new deal with local government, we are committed to further collaboration and engagement with local government on local taxation. The Deputy First Minister will carry out further engagement on tax over the summer months, details of which will be provided in due course.

### Artificial Intelligence (Scrutiny of Legislation)

**2. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will propose scheduling parliamentary time to debate the potential role of artificial intelligence in the scrutiny of legislation. (S6O-02269)

**The Minister for Cabinet and Parliamentary Business (George Adam):** I am happy to be able to say to Mr Whitfield that a debate on artificial intelligence is scheduled for Thursday 1 June. That will provide him with an opportunity to contribute his views on the issue. With any use of AI, we would have to ensure that the public, politicians and stakeholders agree and are aware of that and, more importantly, that we do not find ourselves all replaced in some kind of dystopian future.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** Who says that we have not already been replaced?

**George Adam:** I heard that point from Mr Johnson. All joking aside, it is important to note that the Scottish Parliament scrutinises all legislation.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I encourage the minister to ignore sedentary interventions from Mr Johnson.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very grateful to the minister for his response. I have now discovered the power of lodging a portfolio question to get a debate.

The question of AI is very important. When the First Minister met the Conveners Group earlier today, he said that he was very open to committees asking about better scrutiny of legislation. What has the Scottish Government done to engage with AI in relation to creating and drafting legislation and reaching out to people who might be affected by that legislation?

**George Adam:** The Government considers it important to ensure that scrutiny remains sufficiently flexible to enable the Parliament to hold the Government to account in an efficient and effective manner. As I said, the public and other partners would need to be agreeable to our approach, so that they would not be surprised by any future use of AI in any shape or form. The technology would also have to be at a level at which we could trust it to deliver for us in a consistent way.

However, I recognise that parliamentary scrutiny should evolve as technology develops. I am therefore interested in hearing more about how AI might play a part in such scrutiny in due course.

### Income Tax

**3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest data reportedly showing that a majority of Scottish taxpayers now pay higher income tax than those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. (S6O-02270)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison):** According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission's December forecasts, 52 per cent of Scottish taxpayers will pay slightly less income tax in 2023-24 than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK. That will have been the case for the sixth consecutive year. The commission will publish updated forecasts, which will incorporate the latest economic data, alongside the medium-term financial strategy tomorrow.

We have always prioritised a fair and progressive approach to taxation that balances the need to raise revenue with the impact on households and the economy. That approach has resulted in additional revenue from income tax being raised for the Scottish budget, with lower earners protected from higher taxes.

**Murdo Fraser:** I thank the cabinet secretary for her response, but I fear that the data that she cited from the Fiscal Commission is now out of date, given that the most recent data shows that anyone who earns more than £27,850—the majority of Scots—is now paying more tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK.

I commend to the cabinet secretary a very interesting article in today's *Herald* by her former ministerial colleague Ivan McKee, who is, of course, now a member of the Government in waiting on the back benches. In the article, he argues for the Scottish Government to make Scotland a more attractive place for workers to come to from other parts of the United Kingdom. I think that we all agree with that, but we all hear the difficulties of the business community, particularly those in sectors such as finance, in encouraging people to come here because of differential tax rates. How can we attract more people to come and work here if they feel that they will be punished with higher taxes to make up for Scottish National Party waste and financial mismanagement?

**Shona Robison:** Each year, we publish the distributional analysis of our income tax policy in order to transparently set out the impacts. That analysis is there for everyone to see. The median wage for 2023-24 that is used in that analysis is, of course, derived from independent forecasts from the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

It is clear from analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that households with children in

approximately the bottom third of the income distribution in Scotland will gain about £1,200 per year as a result of our tax and social security policies.

At the end of the day, this is all about choices. Had we followed the choices of Murdo Fraser, who backed Liz Truss, and emulated her tax-cutting policies, we would have had hundreds of millions of pounds less available for public spending, as he knows.

On Murdo Fraser's final point, Scotland continues to have consistently positive net inward migration from the rest of the UK. Those are the facts, which stand in contrast to his earlier assertions.

We will continue to ensure that we balance the needs of households with the needs of public services. Through the summer, I will engage with people from a range of organisations in order to ensure that we listen to their views as we go towards setting the tax policy for next year's budget.

I am, of course, happy to engage with any suggestions from Murdo Fraser or his colleagues. However, the budget has to balance. As the member knows, many of his colleagues come here and ask for more money, but any tax policies that the Tories put forward have to balance with the availability of resources for public spending.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will need a bit more brevity in responses as well as in questions.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** It appears that, for the Conservatives, the ideal world would have no tax, no schools, no hospitals and no roads. Does the cabinet secretary agree that if we want all those things, we need tax, and that tax is inherently a good thing?

**Shona Robison:** It is absolutely the case that the investment in public services that results from our tax policy, makes a vital contribution towards making Scotland a great place to live, work and do business. We have access to a wide range of social security payments and public services that go significantly beyond what is provided in other parts of the UK, including free higher education, free prescriptions and our flagship Scottish child payment.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission has estimated that our income tax policy will raise £1 billion of additional revenue in 2023-24. If the Tories want to put that at risk, they need to tell us what will be cut with a different tax approach.

### Taxation Policy

**4. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact it anticipates that its taxation policy, including in relation to

businesses, will have on the strength of the economy. (S6O-02271)

**The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur):** A strong economy is vital to ensuring that the benefits of our tax policy choices are fully realised. That is why we launched our national strategy for economic transformation—NSET—in March 2022 to create a greener, fairer and more inclusive wellbeing economy.

Alongside that strategy, our new deal for Scottish business will provide an opportunity to discuss how our tax policy can support businesses and our communities and grow the Scottish economy.

We will continue to prioritise a fair and progressive approach to our tax policy and will carefully consider the impacts of our policies on taxpayers, households and businesses.

**Pam Gosal:** Scottish businesses face a real struggle. Despite the business rates revaluation, Scottish retail, hospitality and leisure businesses still face tax bills that are thousands of pounds higher than their English counterparts because the Scottish National Party refuses to provide the same discount as is available down south.

Does the minister accept that the lack of business rates discount makes it harder to do business in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, especially when the base poundage rate is only 0.1p lower than the rate in England?

**Tom Arthur:** I thank Pam Gosal for highlighting the basic property rate, which is, indeed, lower in Scotland, in response to the number 1 ask of business organisations ahead of the budget, which was that we freeze the poundage.

Decisions around non-domestic rates and non-domestic rates relief are taken in the round at budget time and are set in the context of the priorities that we undertake to deliver through the budget.

I note that around half of RHL properties pay no rates because they fall below the threshold for the small business bonus scheme, which is the most generous of its type in the United Kingdom.

Following on from questions that were raised earlier, I would be keen to hear from the Conservatives where they would choose to obtain that funding from, if they wish for provision of further relief for that particular sector in future budgets. Where would the corresponding budget reduction be?

We commit all our consequential in sum to the priorities that we set out in the budget. If members wish to see tax cuts, that will cost money; if they wish to see more money for local government, that

will cost money; and if they wish to see further relief on non-domestic rates, that will cost money. To govern is to choose, and that is nowhere more apparent than when we set budgets.

As the Conservative Government in the United Kingdom is entitled to set its policies, we are entitled to set ours, in this Parliament. If the Conservatives, as an Opposition party here, want to engage constructively, I will be more than happy to do so, but they cannot just ask for spending: they must also identify where the corresponding reduction would be.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Again, we need greater brevity, particularly in responses. There are two supplementary questions; if members are brief, I will fit them both in.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** We are aware of the significant impacts of Tory tax policy on the economy, especially following the disastrous mini-budget last October. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of those decisions on Scotland's economy, and can we agree that business and our economy more generally would be better served by full fiscal powers lying with this Parliament?

**Tom Arthur:** Persistent high inflation and the cost of living crisis are causing unprecedented drops in living standards. Brexit and the fiscal instability that has been brought on by UK Government decisions have made the problems worse.

I accept entirely that we are operating within broad local economic challenges, but a hard Brexit—which was a clear policy choice by the UK Government that is now supported the Labour Party—is inflicting untold damage on our economy. It is compounding the impacts that all countries are facing, and ultimately it is a consequence of reckless decision making by the UK Government. If we want to find ourselves in a position in which we are no longer subject to decisions that are taken against our interests by Governments that we did not vote for, I am afraid that the only means to achieve that is Scotland's becoming an independent country.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** A change that would benefit our struggling high streets would be to bring down the higher rate of non-domestic rates in line with England, so when will we see that change?

**Tom Arthur:** We have taken action following the Barclay review to move towards that. We introduced the intermediate property relief a number of years ago, which significantly reduced the number of businesses that are subject to the higher property rate. We have increased the threshold from £95,000 to £100,000 most recently, and, as per our manifesto commitment, we are

committed to achieving that parity over the course of this parliamentary term.

### **Transient Visitor Levy (City of Edinburgh Council)**

**5. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported concerns of the City of Edinburgh Council that it could still be two years away from having the powers to implement a transient visitor levy. (S6O-02272)

**The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur):** As part of the Government's priorities for Scotland announced by the First Minister on 18 April, we are committed to delivering, subject to Parliament's agreement, legislation giving councils the power to apply a visitor levy, if they choose to do so. Once any bill is introduced, the timetable for its consideration is, of course, a matter for Parliament.

**Sarah Boyack:** I thank the minister for that answer.

I have been calling for a levy for years now, so it is frustrating to see how long it is taking to get that action from the Scottish Government. The minister will be aware that many cities in Europe successfully operate visitor levies. The City of Edinburgh Council has well-developed plans to implement a levy, and it estimates that approximately £15 million a year could be raised to help to fund vital local services. Will the minister meet me and the City of Edinburgh Council to discuss the levy in detail and ensure that Edinburgh and, indeed, other areas in Scotland that want to do so can implement such measures as soon as they have the power to do so?

**Tom Arthur:** I would be delighted to do that.

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** I am also supportive of a visitor levy in Edinburgh, as are many organisations, including from the business community.

However, good implementation and development are important, so does the minister agree that it is vital that we take the appropriate and necessary time to take a bill through Parliament and give the relevant councils that wish to utilise the power, and stakeholders, adequate time to prepare and to effectively administer and collect the levy?

**Tom Arthur:** Yes, absolutely. I agree entirely with Mr Macpherson. I pay tribute to Ben Macpherson for the work that he undertook as the Minister for Public Finance and Migration prior to the pandemic, and his engagement with local authorities on the measure. Once the bill is introduced in Parliament, I will, of course, be

delighted to engage with all members and local authorities.

Of course, rigorous parliamentary scrutiny will be important to ensure that the legislation that is, ultimately, put before Parliament for a final vote is as robust as it can and should be.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Miles Briggs, but with a reminder that members need to be in the chamber at the start of portfolio questions. They can sometimes finish early, but it is roll-on business.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Does the minister believe that there might be a link between the City of Edinburgh Council being the only council that is looking to take forward a tourist tax and the fact that the City of Edinburgh Council receives the lowest level of funding per head of population from the Government?

**Tom Arthur:** I would not presume to speak on behalf of the City of Edinburgh Council, but I recognise that Edinburgh city is not just the premier tourist destination for Scotland and, indeed, the UK, but is a premier tourist destination for the world, which is something that we should all be proud of.

### Free School Meals (Budget Allocation)

**6. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated in its budget 2023-24 for the roll-out of free school meals to all primary school pupils. (S6O-02273)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison):** The 2023-24 budget has made provision for £185.8 million to be allocated to local authorities for free school meals. That funding supports our universal free school meal offer for all pupils in primaries 1 to 5 as well as meals for eligible pupils from P6 to secondary 6. It will also support the next phase of our expansion programme, which will see free school meals being made available to all pupils in primaries 6 and 7 in receipt of the Scottish child payment.

**Carol Mochan:** When I asked the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville, about this in March, she recognised that

“a number of local authorities are facing challenges in planning for that substantial expansion of free school meals.”—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2023; c 66.]

Will the cabinet secretary outline what direct support is going where in the provision to councils to overcome such challenges? Has she given consideration to calls by organisations such as

Aberlour, which asks Government to increase the eligibility threshold beyond the already promised extension to P6s and P7s in order to support low-income families?

**Shona Robison:** Carol Mochan rightly points to some of the complexities around planning for the substantial expansion of free school meals, particularly around the kitchen and dining facilities required to support that. Of course, it is not a universal picture, and some schools have more challenges than others. A lot of work has been undertaken to understand that and to make sure that the resources are going to the places that they need to go to. I hope that Carol Mochan will agree that that is a sensible set of arrangements.

It is right that the expansion is focused on all pupils in primaries 6 and 7 in receipt of the Scottish child payment. I understand the position of Aberlour, but we have to do it in a way that is deliverable and affordable. That is the best place to start as we continue with our commitment to expand free school meals to all primary 6s and 7s. We are of course also still committed to the pilot in secondary schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will take a brief supplementary from Monica Lennon.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** More secondary schools use a cashless payment system and it is difficult for school meal debt to accrue in those settings. What steps is the Government taking to assess the true level of hidden hunger in secondary schools, and the implementation of the school meal debt management guidance that was rolled out earlier this year?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** As briefly as possible, cabinet secretary.

**Shona Robison:** We rely on local authorities to ensure that they feed back any issues in relation to the guidance. We will continue to work with them to see whether any improvements can be made. They obviously have flexibility around dealing with debt in individual cases, which we would encourage them to use. Ultimately, however, it is for local authorities to advise us if there are any issues, particularly pertaining to the guidance.

### Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 (Implementation)

**7. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on implementation of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. (S6O-02274)

**The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick):** We have recently implemented substantial elements of the 2019 planning act to strengthen

Scotland's plan-led planning system. That included the adoption, on 13 February, of national planning framework 4. Just last week, regulations came into force that implemented the new approach to planning authorities' production of stronger, evidence-based and place-focused local development plans to shape future development across Scotland. We are now turning our attention to implementation of the remaining aspects of the act, including the forthcoming appointment of a new national planning improvement champion.

**Ruth Maguire:** On Monday—which, incidentally, was United Nations biodiversity day—I visited Ardeer peninsula with the community council and friends of Ardeer. The special development order, which I amended the planning bill to revoke a number of years ago, remains in place, and development and commercial activity on the peninsula are not subject to the usual planning protections.

A sand dune system is being destroyed for commercial gain, and it is a devastating loss of important ecological habitat. I understand the complexity of the matter of revocation and I appreciate the competing rights and interests of community, commerce and public bodies. However, inaction is not an option. Will the minister meet me with a view to resolving the matter sooner rather than later?

**Joe FitzPatrick:** I am aware of the specific and complex circumstances at Ardeer and the implications for the planning of the area resulting in particular from the special development order that is in force there. I am also aware that Ms Maguire has written to me on the matter; she will not yet have received my response, but I will be happy to meet her to discuss these matters in detail.

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** Across the north-east, communities are struggling with planning issues. Torry in Aberdeen might be about to lose a biodiverse green space, and its last community park, to development. In Angus, a crematorium is planned on agricultural land, without appropriate transport connections and other amenities to deal with the increased capacity and activity.

How can the Scottish Government ensure that local authorities are following the national planning framework 4 principles and guidance, and doing all that they can to protect communities' wellbeing and safeguarding nature?

**Joe FitzPatrick:** Members will appreciate that I cannot comment on any individual development proposals to be considered through the planning system. However, NPF4, following its adoption in February, took on a new statutory development plan status alongside local development plans.

That means that all decision makers are required, under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, to determine applications in accordance with the development plan, including NPF4, unless there are material planning considerations that justify a departure from the plan.

We are monitoring the impact of NPF4 and its policies as part of a programme of work to support its delivery.

### **Chancellor of the Exchequer (Discussions)**

**8. The Deputy Presiding Officer:** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and what was discussed. (S6O-02275)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison):** The most recent meeting between the Scottish Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer was at a meeting of the Prime Minister and the heads of the devolved Governments on 10 November 2022, when the economic outlook and impact of rising inflation were discussed.

I had an introductory meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 2 May, and will meet him again at the upcoming finance interministerial standing committee meeting on 22 June.

I would welcome a meeting with the chancellor himself to discuss the economic challenges facing Scotland and the constraints placed on the Scottish Government's finances. I also encourage the United Kingdom Government to do more to provide support to people and businesses during this difficult economic period.

**Annabelle Ewing:** Given in particular the ongoing negative impacts of high inflation on Scotland's fixed budget, the need for fiscal flexibility such as normal borrowing powers is ever more pressing in order to manage risk and to support economic recovery.

Can the cabinet secretary therefore advise whether the UK Government is in fact on Scotland's side here?

**Shona Robison:** Annabelle Ewing is quite right to mention the impact of inflation, which is very much being felt in the budget, as the block grant at the time that the budget was set was 4.8 per cent lower in real terms than it was in 2021-22, and the fixed nature of the budget means that we have to redirect money from other priorities to pay for things such as increased public sector pay deals.

I have made clear to the UK Government the need for greater flexibility in borrowing powers to enable us to manage risks and support economic recovery. We have consistently made the case for additional funding; in my recent meeting with the CST, I stressed the need for further clarity on what

consequentials we can expect, for example, from national health service pay in England.

While the UK Government has rejected our previous calls for greater fiscal flexibility, we remain in constructive discussions on the wider fiscal framework review.

## Ending Violence in Schools

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-09126, in the name of Stephen Kerr, on ending violence in Scottish schools. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

14:49

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** This debate is taking place because we need to address the unacceptable level of violence and disruption in our schools. My colleagues can attest to the fact that I am a very generous soul. Now my generosity of spirit extends to the Scottish ministers who are sitting opposite me because, today, I think that we have helped them. I am pleased that they have accepted the motion in my name, so I accept their amendment in the same spirit. There—it can be done. We can work across the chamber.

In her amendment, the cabinet secretary seeks to change one or two things in my motion—for example, she wants to add in a bit about what the Government is doing to collect and collate missing data. She sets out measures that I am calling for and agrees that the Government will hold a summit, which I believe will inevitably lead to the setting up of a working group, as my motion calls for.

The Government's amendment is a testament to the work of my colleagues over many months to highlight what is happening in our schools. The cabinet secretary could hardly do anything other than what she has done today in embracing the motion that the Scottish Conservatives lodged on Monday, because I know, and Jenny Gilruth knows, that what the motion sets out is what is now needed, and that the approach that is taken will be supported by teachers, pupils and parents across Scotland if and only if it leads to action.

The summit should meet without delay, and it should be inclusive.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** I declare my interest as a former employee of East Lothian Council.

Does the member agree that, although there is much to be grateful for in the Conservatives' holding of this debate and the agreement that seems to be extending across the chamber, the ending of violence in schools is a matter of urgency and delay must not come in the way of solutions being put in place?

**Stephen Kerr:** I agree with my Labour colleague that the issue is a matter of urgency.

The summit should be inclusive. It should include young people, but let us please ensure that there is representation from beyond the usual bodies and voices. There should be an action plan. Teachers and pupils should start the new term, which is less than 100 days away, with the clarity of guidance that they need. Headteachers should feel confident that they and their staff have been heard and that political leaders have responded. The cabinet secretary should return to Parliament immediately following the summit and report the urgent actions that have been agreed. Members must be kept abreast of the outcomes of the summit.

Hearing from our teachers will be key. I want to quote Catherine Nicol, the president of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association. She said that many teachers feel that providing education in our schools is

“now subordinate to managing disruption”.

She went on to say:

“At worst mob rule prevails in classrooms and corridors ... The number of violent incidents reported is increasing. A culture of accommodating the needs of the transgressor has become the default position in some places. Learners that do come to school to learn do not feel secure”.

Therefore, I cautiously celebrate the cabinet secretary’s announcement this week of a summit on school violence and disruption. However, we have demands to make of the cabinet secretary with regard to that summit.

First, the summit must meet within days. Secondly, before the summer recess, a statement must be made in Parliament on the outcomes of the summit. Thirdly, an action plan to tackle violence and disruption in schools must be ready before the start of the new school year. Fourthly, that action plan must include a new standard reporting system for cases of violence and disruption in all 32 local authorities; a plan to address the increasing issues with attendance; new guidance for teachers, staff and school leaders; and reform of the exclusions procedure to ensure that pupils who are excluded receive the support that they need.

My fifth point is that a funding package must be put in place for meaningful intervention to help every pupil who is a victim or a perpetrator of violence in school. Sixthly, a national helpline should be established to support teachers and staff who are afraid to report violence and disruption in their classroom or school. The cabinet secretary knows that such teachers exist in large numbers.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** I remind the chamber that my wife is an additional support needs teacher.

Teachers in my constituency have told me of their frustration at the Scottish Government’s failure to back its policies with funding and resource to make them real. They tell me that they are particularly frustrated with a Government that blames the situation that the member is describing on local authorities and teachers, and especially with the Government suggesting that teachers are insufficiently trained in de-escalation and making them do more continuing professional development, which they do not have time for. Does the member share my constituents’ desire that, in her response today, the minister takes ownership of those policy decisions and does not shift the blame and the responsibility for remedy on to teachers and local authorities?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We have a little time in hand, but interventions will have to be a little bit briefer. I can give you some of that time back, Mr Kerr.

**Stephen Kerr:** Liam Kerr makes a very good point. The Jenny Gilruth of last Tuesday probably conveyed that impression when she answered a topical question from my friend Jamie Greene, but I think that the Jenny Gilruth who sits before us in this chamber today, having embraced our motion and lodged a constructive amendment to it, is taking a different approach. I hope that that will be confirmed in her speech.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Does my colleague agree that the continued erosion of after-school clubs, youth clubs and extracurricular activities that has been perpetrated by this Government is a key driver of the escalation of school violence and poor mental and physical health in this country?

**Stephen Kerr:** We have to make the school experience the holistic educational experience that many of us enjoyed when we were at school. That heritage is the birthright of all Scottish pupils and it should be made a reality, but it is not a reality across Scotland.

Scottish Conservative research has found that, since 2017, there have been almost 75,000 verbal or physical attacks on staff, 20,000 of which happened in the 2021-22 school year. It is a problem that seems to be getting worse.

One of the issues with gathering that information is the difference in recording standards between schools, which is why we demand a new national reporting framework. That is something that unions have been asking for and something that we, as political leaders, should expect of Government. The Government has not even collated, let alone published, those statistics since 2016. That omission must be urgently addressed and the figures published.



A pupil in a school in my area was violently attacked by fellow pupils. Her attackers shared footage of the incident on social media, so the pupil was not only physically injured but suffered mentally, knowing that everyone at her school had potentially seen the video of her being beaten up. Those responsible are still at the same school; the headteacher felt that they could not do anything about it, as did the police. The victim now attends school infrequently and suffers from severe anxiety when she does.

Teachers want a properly regulated classroom, but they feel that they are unprotected and potentially open to legal consequences if they act against violent pupils. Too often, our school leaders feel, as in this case, that they have no sanctions. That is a key issue for the summit. Pupils know it, teachers know it and parents know it.

Removing perpetrators from classrooms is a vital first step, but that cannot be the end of the story, because exclusions must lead to something else. The offenders need help, too, and returning them straight back into the classroom is not a workable solution. There needs to be somewhere for those disruptive and damaged pupils to go. They need help, not isolation.

We also have a crisis in attendance. Alongside that, there is a growing challenge of internal truancy, where pupils go to school but refuse to go to class. The language of rights has taught some children to say that their teachers cannot force them to go to class. There must be consequences for such disruptive and disrespectful behaviour. We need parents to be involved in resolving the issue. There should never be a culture of "What happens in school stays in school." Parents must always be a part of the solution, but they can add to the problems that teachers are dealing with when they fail to back the teachers. Getting the teachers the tools and guidance that they need to deal with that will effect real change. Strengthening the authority of teachers will go a long way to resolving this important and difficult issue.

At decision time, we must—and I think that we will—unite every member of this Parliament, of every party, in supporting those who are entrusted with the teaching of our young people. We need to show them that we back them, that we appreciate them and—more importantly, with regard to this subject—that we have heard them. They need to believe that, at the summit on school violence, we will do something more than talk about getting them the help and support that they need.

The cabinet secretary told a teachers conference recently that she would work on a cross-party basis to bring about improvements in educational experience, outcomes and

opportunities for our young people. Today, in supporting my motion, the Government in which Jenny Gilruth serves is making a start on keeping that important promise to teachers and uniting the chamber in tackling violence in our schools.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that no pupil, teacher or member of school staff should suffer physical or verbal abuse and that every child and young person has the right to an uninterrupted school day, free from violence and disruption; notes the impact that the current escalation of violence in schools has had on the teaching profession, especially in relation to retention and mental health; understands that evidence relating to violence in schools was last gathered in 2016, and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to address this matter urgently by collecting data and publishing findings on a regular basis, and believes that the Scottish Government must work with parents, schools, local authorities and unions to establish a nationwide school violence working group, that will produce a national framework for reporting instances of violence and disruption within schools, update guidance on exclusions laws and policies, ensure pupil support assistants are available and issue materials that will support parents and schools, assisting them in promoting acceptable behaviour and tackling violence and disruption.

15:00

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I thank the Conservatives for the opportunity to discuss an issue that is of vital importance to the education of our children and young people. As the motion notes,

"no pupil, teacher or member of school staff should suffer physical or verbal abuse, and ... every child ... has the right to an uninterrupted school day".

I whole-heartedly agree, and I give Stephen Kerr and this Parliament an undertaking that I will work across parties on this issue, because I know how important it is that we get this right for our children.

I want to give some context to the debate this afternoon. It was only in 1987 that the last area in Scotland banned the belt in school. In fact, the relevant legislative loophole was closed only with the passing of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. I remember being appalled as my principal teacher at the Royal High school in Edinburgh explained to me how, as a young teacher, she was taught how to belt a child: lined up, the new teachers would practice by hitting a desk. The Scottish Office approved a two or three-leather Lochgelly tawse, which came in different weights, and guidelines applied to its application. One such tawse hung in the staff room of the last school that I taught in. It was framed, and the sign below it read, "In case of emergency, break glass."

I was reflecting on that memory on Sunday morning when I read this headline in *Scotland on Sunday*: "Gilruth told to get tough on classroom violence". Earlier in the week, a former headteacher wrote in *The Scotsman* about

“some wee thug who terrorises kids at break”.

I want to start my contribution today by urging members to be careful in their application of language this afternoon. Maybe, when that headline was written, *Scotland on Sunday* did not mean its readers to think of the tawse, but that is where my mind went, and the people we are discussing today are children, not thugs. Let us all remember that.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I think that I was probably one of the last people in Scotland to get the belt, as it was abolished just after I left school—I am not sure whether there was a connection.

I completely agree with the cabinet secretary. We need to deal with the root problems that young people express through distressed behaviour rather than view punishment as the solution. However, my concern is that, sometimes, teachers go in a never-ending loop of restorative discussions with some pupils because there does not seem to be any alternative available. Will she be able to address that issue in the summit?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, cabinet secretary.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I recognise Mr Rennie’s comments, although I will not comment on his experience in school. The issue that he outlines is reflected in some of my experience in the classroom. I recognise that schools need to put in place behaviour management policies that support their staff, and I agree that the experience can be deeply frustrating for classroom teachers. I heard that in Mr Kerr’s response about my comments to the teaching union’s conference on this very issue. Staff need to feel supported, and so do our young people.

I provide all of that context for where we are now, because we should all reflect on how behaviour in Scotland’s schools and the response from the authorities has changed in the past 40 years.

I have been in post for nearly two months and, during that time, I have made it absolutely clear that behaviour—that is broader than school violence—relationships and wellbeing in our schools are among my top priorities. That is why I have already engaged with the Association of Directors of Education, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and our teaching unions, and why I have visited a number of schools in the past seven weeks to ask the staff directly about their experiences of behaviour and about the culture in their schools following the pandemic.

Stephen Kerr hit on a number of relevant points, the first being attendance. I receive fortnightly updates on national attendance, and it is

interesting to look at the changes in relation to the year groups who experienced the start of lockdown measures when they were going through, for example, the transition from primary into secondary school. We are starting to see some of that show up in attendance evidence. We also know that kids from poorer backgrounds are much more likely not to attend school and not to engage with the system, so it is important that we reflect in Government that there are different challenges for different pupils in different parts of the country.

**Martin Whitfield:** Is the cabinet secretary confident that the data is identifying that small but, I would say, significant group of pupils who are struggling to return to school at all?

**Jenny Gilruth:** In all honesty, no, I am not, and I have asked officials for further advice on that. I receive the national picture, and it is broken down by local authority. I have asked officials for further advice on how we can get a more granular understanding of what is happening in our schools, particularly in relation to year groups. I recognise the point that the member makes.

In general, our schools are places of learning. They are sanctuaries for many young people that provide stability in an often chaotic world. I do not think that any of us should underestimate the impact of the pandemic on learning; we know that particularly for older—

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I will take the intervention from former teaching colleague Liz Smith, but then I would like to make some progress.

**Liz Smith:** The cabinet secretary has just replied to me in a parliamentary written answer about pupil equity funding, giving me the updated figures. She knows that a very high percentage of that PEF money is being spent on extracurricular activities and outdoor education, which has a proven track record on improving behaviour. Does she agree that that could be looked at in her group?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I recognise that point, and I also recognise the member’s interest in the issue. I think that she is taking forward a member’s bill on that. I very much recognise the sentiment behind Liz Smith’s question, and I am happy to ensure that the summit will consider that in more detail.

The pandemic impacted on children’s learning. We know that it created anxiety and stress, and we know that that has impacted on behaviour in our schools. We also know that young people’s mental wellbeing improved when lockdown conditions ended, and that parents’ and carers’ wellbeing was also impacted. Lockdown was

tough for our young people and we need to reflect that. I do not use Covid as an excuse in that respect, but we need to be mindful that Covid has changed the type of behaviour and the type of relationships that happen in our schools.

I go back to Stephen Kerr's point about what is happening with attendance. What I do not see as cabinet secretary, because I get the national evidence base on attendance, is internal attendance challenges. For example, when young people get up and decide to leave a classroom and walk around the school, that is not captured at national level. Those are the things that I would like to pursue more broadly at the summit, because it is important that we talk about them at national level.

The majority of children and young people in Scotland are well behaved in school. I do not want to paint a false narrative, because relationships between our pupils and teachers are good. They have to be otherwise our schools could not operate, but I recognise that there are challenges post-Covid.

**Stephen Kerr:** I make a very brief intervention to say that that is exactly why we must deal with the issue of school violence. The vast majority of our children go to school to learn, but they are having a disrupted learning day, which will ultimately result in a poor outcome for them if we do not act.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back for the interventions.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I agree with Mr Kerr.

The Conservative motion talks about a working group. I am not against that suggestion per se, but we already have a working group in the Scottish Government on the issue—the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools, which I chaired two weeks ago.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I would really like to make some progress. I am now seven minutes in and have a number of other points that I would like to make—apologies.

That group includes representatives from COSLA and teaching associations, parents and carers, and it is jointly chaired by COSLA. We do not need another working group at this point; we need a call to action. Indeed, the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland told BBC Radio Scotland this morning that we need a wider community approach. We cannot expect schools to solve all those problems on their own.

The Government amendment proposes to convene a summit on behaviour in our schools, bringing together parents and carers, local councils, our teacher professional associations, young people and wider partners.

We need to trust our teachers, and we need to support them, and we have heard that point made in the debate today. That is why our councils, who have a statutory responsibility to deliver education, have a key role to play.

We should not tolerate a blame culture in our schools, as I discussed recently at the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association's annual conference. If a member of staff is struggling with a challenging class, as Mr Kerr alluded to, they should not be made to feel that they are the problem; they should be supported.

Last week I addressed Parliament on our behaviour in Scottish schools research, which is currently under way. That research is critically important in building our understanding of exactly what is happening in our classrooms, including what underlying factors might be affecting behaviour.

This is the fifth wave of behaviour in Scottish schools research since 2006, and Stephen Kerr is quite right to say that the last one was in 2016. It should have been carried out in 2020, but, because of the pandemic, it was not. Since I have been in post, I have asked whether it is possible to have the information earlier. It is not, because of the way in which the data is gathered, but in the interim I accept the challenge to Government that we need to act.

The Government is already providing more than £2 million to support the delivery of a wide range of violence prevention activities in schools and communities. When incidents occur in schools, we accept that there should be an appropriate and consistent method of recording them. If members have not already appraised themselves of the inspection that Her Majesty's inspector of education carried out in 2019, in relation to bullying, I ask them to please do so, because it shows a mixed picture in relation to how such incidents are recorded in schools. I suspect that there would be a similarly mixed picture on the recording of violent incidents in schools and more challenging behaviour generally. We need to address that at the summit.

I accept that the Opposition has gathered freedom of information data from individual local councils, but there are some challenges with that—for example, not all local authorities provided data in response to the request. I am also aware that councils use a variety of different approaches to gathering data on violent incidents—as I alluded to. We need to be mindful that the robust data that

we gather from BISSR will give us a more accurate picture of the national approach.

Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you a bit of time back for the interventions.

**Jenny Gilruth:** Thank you.

Excluding a child or young person from school—whatever the circumstances—is an extremely serious step, and it is one that no teacher would take lightly. We know that school exclusions do not impact all young people equally. Evidence shows that children from ethnic minority communities, those living in poverty and those with additional support needs are far more likely to be excluded. Exclusion can also have a significant impact on a young person's learning and their future outcomes.

Currently, Scotland has record low levels of exclusions in school. The Opposition might argue that that, perhaps, is the problem, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review of 2015 identified that Scottish schools are highly inclusive compared with those in other countries around the world. We should be proud of that. I do not want us to see record numbers of young people being excluded, because I do not accept that that is the answer, and I do not want us to demonise a generation of young people; we must not go backwards. However, I accept the need for Government to act.

Those at the chalk face are key. We need to remember that our teachers are skilled professionals. They work to defuse contentious situations daily—much as the Presiding Officer does in Parliament. Therefore, before summer recess, I will also convene a headteacher task force from across the education sector to consider school exclusions in more detail and to provide me with advice on suggested actions.

It is clear that responding to the issues presented by changes in behaviour and relationships in our schools will require a partnership approach, and it is right that we work together to develop solutions. Therefore, I will be listening for contributions from members with suggestions on what those solutions might be.

Our teachers need practical support in their classrooms. They also need back-up from management teams in schools. If incidents become more serious, they need to know that they have a supportive local authority that will work to support their professionalism and the children that we entrust to their care.

At the heart of today's debate is a generation of young people who have grown up with two years of disruption to their formal education. Punitive responses to that trauma will not work; we need

systems to pull together for the benefit of our children. That will be how we get it right for every child, and I am committed to engaging with every party to that end.

I move amendment S6M-09126.3, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises the impact that violence in schools has on teachers and school staff, especially in relation to retention and mental health; further recognises that evidence relating to violence in schools was last gathered in 2016, and that data collection is now underway, and that this will be published later in 2023 as routine publication returns to pre-pandemic arrangements; recognises that there has been a shift in school culture over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that affects a wide range of issues, including violence but also extending to issues such as attendance, and agrees that the Scottish Government should work with young people, parents and carers, schools, local authorities and unions to host a summit on the issue of violence in schools, to identify the work that is now needed to ensure that the right national framework for accurately reporting instances of violence and disruption within schools is in place, the right guidance on exclusions laws and policies is available, and the right resources that are needed to support schools, parents and carers and young people themselves are available to assist them in promoting acceptable behaviour and tackling violence and disruption."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, cabinet secretary. I wish those headteachers more success than the Presiding Officer is sometimes able to achieve.

15:13

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** The transformative power of a good, world-leading education system can never be overstated. I know that first hand. My experience is not unique and it was not without significant challenges, but it shows that, when challenges in education are overcome and our education system works, that really can give young people a fighting chance at a future. However, when the system does not work, that potential is wasted.

That is why I have found it deeply sad, in the short time that I have had to witness it up close recently, that Scotland's once world-leading education system faces the challenges that we see and are discussing today, such as regular challenges to authority, persistent refusals to adhere to school rules, online bullying of teachers and pupils, increasing bullying and harassment in schools, misogyny, pupils wandering around corridors rather than learning in classes, and physical and verbal abuse.

I am afraid that that deepening worrying culture in our schools is a sorry symptom of failure at the hands of a Government that has not delivered on some of its promises, which could have helped to avoid the situation that we are in. In failing, it has not only let down staff and pupils; it has put the

future and the next generation of our country in jeopardy.

In her publicised remarks this week, the cabinet secretary was correct in noting that schools are facing challenges in the midst of a cost of living crisis that followed three very tough years of a pandemic. However, she must also recognise that the impact of those challenges was deepened by the Government's inaction on recovery and its lack of proper analysis and a plan to rebuild from the trauma of the pandemic in schools.

Of course, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis impacted schools, but the problem was growing long before the pandemic. In 2018, there were 17,602 recorded incidents of abuse towards teachers in Scotland. No one should ever be made to feel unsafe in their workplace. Alarm bells should have been ringing for the Scottish National Party long before the situation reached that point. Instead, five years later, it is only just admitting that there is a problem. Of course, we welcome the fact that it has now done so but, in the meantime, the situation has escalated. The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers has estimated that the number of its members who have experienced verbal abuse by a pupil has increased by well over a third since 2019, and 16 per cent of its members have reported experiencing physical assault this year.

My fear is that, rather than working to solve the problems, the SNP has exacerbated them by failing to meet promise after promise. One of the earliest promises, which was made way back in 2007, was to reduce class sizes. Sixteen years later, the proportion of classes with more than 18 pupils in them is higher than it was back then. That situation is not helped by a drastic fall in the number of teachers, which has reduced by more than 900 in that time.

Teachers are well skilled in identifying and well placed to identify the challenges and needs of their pupils, but the strain on their resources and time has left them overstretched and hindered in their ability to do that.

A decline in the number of ASN teachers who are available to support pupils who need support against a cluttered backdrop of the confusing and overlapping legislation that surrounds transitions and access to additional support has made things worse. Teachers are left to pick up the slack, and too often the same is true of their pastoral duties.

That is why I welcome the SNP's commitment to increasing mental health support and counselling in schools. Doing that would not only have lightened responsibility on teachers; it would have meant better support for young people.

**Stephen Kerr:** Pam Duncan-Glancy mentioned mental health and support. Does she support our

suggestion—our demand—that there be a national helpline just for teachers who face particular stress and who often feel that they cannot open up about it or that they are not getting the support that they would like from their school management? Does she agree that that form of helpline would be invaluable to some teachers who are currently suffering as a consequence of what they are enduring in classrooms?

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

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I thank Stephen Kerr for that contribution. I think that that suggestion could be very helpful. It would be crucial to do that work with the trade unions, so that we understand fully what teachers require. We definitely need to address the fact that some teachers and people who work in schools are worried about reporting incidents. Such a helpline could be a solution to part of the problem.

To return to the issue of better support for young people, the truth is, of course, that the picture of mental health support across Scotland is too varied. I think that the lack of consistency results from a lack of leadership by the Scottish Government.

Teachers are resilient. We saw that clearly in the way that they stepped up and got on with it during the pandemic. However, when their resources are stretched and support is lacking, that really hinders their ability to take preventative measures. Where they are able to do so, they strive to implement restorative practices. As we have heard, managing student behaviour has become increasingly difficult, not just because schools are still struggling to navigate in the aftermath of the pandemic, which meant that many pupils lacked routine and social contact, but because the Government has let schools down by not evaluating fully the impact that that has had on them or putting in place a strategy to address it.

The digital devices that were promised could have bridged the access gap, and the provision of bikes could have encouraged physical activity and improved mood. That would have helped, too. However, once again, those ideas have remained aspirations that were overpromised and underdelivered. I am afraid to say that a very disappointing circumstance has led us to this point. A failure so systemic that it cannot be ignored has led us to the dire situation that we are in and discussing today.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** I can take an intervention on that point if I can get some time back.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please make your intervention brief, Mr Whittle.

**Brian Whittle:** Does Pam Duncan-Glancy agree that the strategy going forward must be long term and must tackle the problem of, and the reasons for, violence in a wider educational sense, and not just look at the current crisis?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** I completely agree with that. We need to look at the big picture and consider the issue into the future, too.

We need to do all that we can to ensure that our schools are safe and secure learning environments and workplaces. It is high time that the Government took responsibility for fixing the issue. Therefore, although I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement that there will be a summit, I would appreciate her recognition in closing that that alone will not be enough. I have heard some commitments today in that regard that I am really heartened by, but they have come quite late, so actions must follow swiftly.

Trade unions, teachers, parents and pupils themselves have been pleading for action for years, and they really are desperate. They need more than just a talking shop or a photo op. I am quietly confident that we can push in that direction, but it must be a space for teachers, parents and pupils to participate meaningfully, to lead to a real plan to keep the classroom safe, and to require a comprehensive national strategy to combat violence in schools, to deal with the longer-term approach that we have just heard about.

The strategy must take account of the wider circumstances, such as the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, but also evaluate the impact of continued cuts to local authority budgets on those circumstances. It will have to address concerns around hesitancy in reporting incidents, as we have heard, for fear of damaging school reputation, by establishing a national framework for reporting. To do that, we must also be able to understand the true scale of the problem.

I urge the Government to do everything that it can. I welcome the cabinet secretary's request to bring forward the research from the end of the year, but we can and should do something with the data that we have now. Trade unions have made that quite clear.

The battle against the problem needs leadership from the Government, which must come alongside transparent and open communication that will allow the widest possible engagement. It must also ensure that any outcomes are effectively

implemented with the support of schools, pupils and parents.

I and Scottish Labour will always have high aspirations for our education system in Scotland, as we do for all the people of Scotland. That is why we must all unite today in our determination to make sure that our schools are safe, pupils are thriving, and teachers have the resources to ensure both. Together, we can create an education system that uplifts and empowers every child to have a better future.

I move amendment S6M-09126.2, to leave out from "establish" to end and insert:

"urgently develop and bring forward a national strategy for tackling violence in schools that will empower teachers and schools, ensure pupil support assistants are available, develop material that will inform parents and schools, tackle the growth in accessibility and circulation of harmful online content and produce a national framework for reporting instances of violence and disruption within schools; recognises that trade unions have been raising concerns about violence and risks to teachers' safety in Scotland for a number of years; understands that the recent escalation in violence has not started overnight and that there are various factors that contribute to the circumstances where violent incidents may occur, including class sizes, a lack of mental health support for pupils, harmful online content, inequality and cuts to youth services, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver on the promises that have been made to Scotland's young people and ensure that any assessment of the current situation takes into account the wider circumstances facing pupils, teachers and parents, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis and the underfunding of local services."

15:22

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I am a liberal. I believe in tackling the root causes of behaviour rather than simply punishing the symptoms. I support an approach that hunts for the best in our young people, but I refuse to ignore the unacceptable behaviour that traumatises young people and staff.

We have heard some of the figures. We need to have a health warning on some of the data collection details, but it is clear that recent numbers are at a five-year high, that the majority of incidents are in primary school, which surprised me, and that there is underreporting. The unions are concerned that staff do not think that it is worth reporting an incident on some occasions, so they just do not report. Therefore, the numbers could be even higher.

**Jenny Gilruth:** On the specific point in relation to the data that has been gathered by the Liberal Democrats, it shows an increase of less than 1 per cent in the number of incidents in primary schools between 2018-19 and 2021-22. I hope that Willie Rennie recognises that. I acknowledge that there is a challenge here, but we need to be pragmatic and realistic about the national picture when, in

some instances in primary schools, that increase has been less than 1 per cent—it is not substantive in that regard.

**Willie Rennie:** I actually think that that reinforces our point that it is not a new problem. The pandemic has exacerbated the issue, but it has been there for some time. The minister helpfully makes that point for me.

I am afraid that, up until recent months, the political and education establishment has found this to be an inconvenient truth. Official figures have not been collected for years, and we will not get the new figures for months yet. The previous education secretary did not even turn up to her own specialist working group in December.

Education authorities often play it down because of a misunderstanding about the rights of children. I believe in getting it right for every child but, too often, that can mean getting it right for the violent child but not for every other child in the class. I believe that all children have rights.

The NASUWT says that nurture principles must not be used as a methodology to cover up abusive behaviour or indiscipline or to reduce public exclusion figures.

Some school leaders are concerned about the reputation of the school—I have experience of that myself—but I care more about the education and wellbeing of our young people and staff than I do about that.

Sometimes, social media are blamed for inspiring attacks, but that ignores the fact that the majority of attacks are never filmed and never shared. I do not think that we should shoot the messenger.

The time for excuses is over. We need to accept that there is a problem and that the problem has been around for some time. It is true that staff have reported an increase in distressed behaviour since children have returned from months of lockdown, but the violence existed before that. It is about time that we started to listen to those reports. Teachers should not have to return home at night battered and bruised, and parents deserve to know that their children will be safe at school.

The SNP loves a good summit; it also loves working groups and carrying out consultations on various things. Often, that is to hide the absence of action. However, I suppose that the new summit at least allows us to make the case for change.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's change of approach. She made a good speech this afternoon, in which she showed an understanding of the issues. However, we need solutions. For me, that is about confidence, tools and resources. Teachers need to have confidence that the school

leadership and the council have their back so that, when they ask for help, they will get it.

Outside the school, waits for mental health and autism assessments are far too long. In school, we need more staffing and classroom assistants. We need proper resourcing of additional support needs, which now cover one in every three pupils. That is an astonishing number.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Willie Rennie:** No—sorry.

There must also be a proper debate about how we apply the restorative approach. For the avoidance of doubt—I have already made this clear—I am not in favour of punishment; I am in favour of restoration.

Some say that schools are a soft touch, that they do not exclude enough, that the offenders must be punished and that the police should be called. It would be a sign of a failed system if the only answer was increasing the number of young people who are branded as criminals, probably for life. However, I hear reports that restorative conversations are too often seen as the only tool in the box. Teachers reporting persistent or more serious behaviour problems are trapped in a never-ending loop of restorative conversations with the same pupil and are given no support for more serious consequences for regular or serious misbehaviour.

A personalised solution—sometimes with individualised risk assessments—is required, because every young person is different. In some cases, the deployment of consequences—even microconsequences—is required to enforce the boundaries of unacceptable behaviour. Others do not understand consequences. In those cases, there will be little point in deploying those.

I have seen what works. In one struggling primary school—Aberlour primary school—the young people were given the tools to cope with the pressures of school and family life. However, Bannerman high school staff went on strike and Educational Institute of Scotland members in Northfield academy in Aberdeen balloted for strike action because they had had enough of dealing with violence and behaviour issues without adequate support. Quick as a flash, the resources for doing so were found. It should not take a crisis for the resource to be brought in.

For many staff, teachers and pupils, violence is a daily occurrence. Too often, they feel helpless and ignored. We must start listening and, more important, start acting.

15:28

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

We have already heard in the debate about the horrific statistics for the rise of incidents of violence in schools. However, teachers tell me that the statistics understate the problem. Willie Rennie is quite right: in many cases, teachers have simply given up reporting incidents, because they feel that the effort of filling in the forms is no longer worth while, that that is a pointless exercise and that nothing will change.

Let me just read a message that I received from a teacher in a primary school in my region. I will not name the school—it would not be fair to do so—but it gives a flavour of what is happening in a primary school classroom today.

She wrote:

“I was pleased to see that you are raising the issue of school violence at Holyrood. My school is simply no longer a safe place to work, and I do not believe that those in authority understand the scale of the issue.

We are, on a daily basis, sworn at, spat at, punched, scratched and bitten by children as young as five. We have books, chairs and tables thrown at us. Very young children trash classrooms and rip up other pupils’ work, causing them great distress.

I have colleagues who have had multiple trips to hospital as a result of attacks from a pupil. There are teachers in the school who have been off sick for weeks with physical injuries or with stress and anxiety. Some are literally too scared to come back to work.

This isn’t just an awful situation for the teachers, it is terrible for the majority of children who just want to get on and learn. Their life opportunities are being ruined by a small minority of disruptive children. The parents of these kids offer us no support, and in many cases, simply don’t have the skills to deal with their own children. The parents of the other children are up in arms about the situation.

What is so frustrating is that we lack the tools to deal with the problem. We are not permitted to exclude children and there is literally nowhere else for these kids to go, so they have to remain in school, no matter how bad their behaviour. ‘Getting it Right For Every Child’ is an absolute joke. We are letting down the children who can’t behave by not tackling the problem at root, and we are letting down every other child in the class who themselves are in fear of being attacked, and cannot concentrate on learning. I would encourage the Education Secretary to come and spend a day in a school like mine and see for herself what we have to put up with. It can’t go on like this.”

Those are not my words but those of a primary school teacher at a Scottish school. I know from conversations that I have had, which many other members will also have had, with teaching union representatives that her experience is by no means exceptional.

As we have already heard in the debate, it seems to be the case that, since Covid and the interruption of schooling or nursery for many younger children, the problem has got worse.

However, it is clear that the situation cannot be allowed to persist.

So, what needs to be done? I suggest three things that need to be tackled. First, we must review the presumption against exclusion for those who have persistent behavioural problems. In her remarks, the cabinet secretary said that it was a positive that exclusions were at such a historically low level. I am not sure that many teachers would agree with that approach. Where there are children who are persistently disruptive or violent, it is simply unfair to the others in the class who just want to get on and learn in a safe environment that those children continue to be there.

**Jenny Gilruth:** Having taught disruptive classes in my previous life as a teacher, I recognise the point that Murdo Fraser is making in relation to exclusion and how that can impact on other students’ learning. However, is an increase in the number of young people who are excluded the answer? Will that meet those children’s educational needs or is there a better approach to framing support for them? I am not necessarily sure that having a huge increase in the number of exclusions would be a signal of success.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will give you the time back, Mr Fraser.

**Murdo Fraser:** The answer—I am about to come to precisely this point—is about what alternative provision is put in place for those children.

The second thing that I was going to say, which ties into my first point, is that the policy of mainstreaming children with serious behavioural issues needs to be reconsidered for the same reasons.

Thirdly—this addresses the cabinet secretary’s intervention—we must ensure that there is appropriate alternative provision for children who cannot be in mainstream education, for whatever reason. That might mean having dedicated units in schools or, alternatively, having separate schools for those whose behaviour means that they are a risk to others.

Importantly, there must be a distinction between two different groups. There are children who have serious developmental issues or learning difficulties, and they should not be lumped in with children who have behavioural or discipline issues, which happens too often. Those are two separate categories of pupils, but too often they are put in together, which is not to the benefit of the children in the first category.

Those are all practical steps that I hope the Scottish Government will consider. Like Stephen Kerr, I very much welcome the fact that we are having a summit. A summit is good, but it cannot



just be a talking shop; it actually has to come up with concrete changes in policy that will then be implemented, because there is an epidemic of violence in our schools and it is getting worse. If we refuse to deal with it, we will be letting down a generation of children, and we are at risk of losing good teachers from the profession, so we must see action.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We still have a little bit of time in hand, but I do not think that I or subsequent Presiding Officers in the debate will be able to be quite so generous in giving back time for interventions.

15:35

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Our schools, as workplaces and learning environments, must be safe. Physical force, verbal abuse or threats, including prejudice-related incidents, and damage to property are all forms of violence that are completely unacceptable. No one in our schools—no pupil, teacher or other member of school staff—should be abused, threatened or assaulted. The violence that is reported in the media that has prompted our recent debates is shocking and I am, of course, particularly concerned for any individuals who are harmed. No one should feel frightened or unsafe in their place of work or learning.

I note and accept the cabinet secretary's comments on data. This is a serious matter that needs to be dealt with seriously, in a calm and considered way, with a proper understanding of the scale of the issue. Inflaming things will only cause more stress and anxiety to teachers, pupils and parents. I will not be alone in having had feedback from teachers that the manner in which we discuss education, and its subsequent reporting in the media, can really have an impact on them. I know that we all understand the pressures that teachers face and the vital work that they do every day in our classrooms, and I will be keeping that in mind today. I also acknowledge that the topic is not new to our skilled teaching workforce.

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide education in our schools, and all Scotland's schools and colleges should have strategies to address, prevent and deal with work-related violence, including verbal and physical abuse of staff. I am grateful to my local authority—North Ayrshire Council—for keeping me informed of the work that it is doing in this regard. In June 2023 it will introduce a new health and safety incident recording system, which it is anticipated will have an impact on the quality and quantity of data that is being collected through the incident reporting process.

The council has established a working group to address how health and safety incidents—in particular, those relating to violence towards staff and pupils—are reported and supported across educational establishments. The group, the remit of which has been agreed with trade unions, will carry out detailed data audit and analysis to focus attention on the areas where improvements can be made, and on the processes and procedures for handling incidents of violence in North Ayrshire schools and supporting those who are affected by it. That includes developing a consistent process to record, respond to and reflect on incidents, with the intention of reducing the frequency of incidents and increasing support for those who are involved and, importantly, raising awareness of and improving access to advice, guidance and training for all staff.

North Ayrshire Council has told me that the aim is that its education service will have reviewed and designed processes that ensure that staff are knowledgeable and confident in dealing with incidents of violence and in building positive relationships with young people, and that senior leaders will be confident in enabling staff to undertake professional learning in the area.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** In my constituency, the issue is not about logging of incidents; it is about empowering teachers and giving them confidence and a safe space to do that. That is something that the Government can help to encourage.

**Ruth Maguire:** I think that what Rachael Hamilton has said is perfectly reasonable.

The points about culture that the cabinet secretary made in her opening speech are important and illustrate why the issue is about much more than what goes on in school buildings. Covid lockdown and school closures were very hard on some pupils and some parents. There was a complex mix of changes and disruptions for children and young people to deal with. As is frequently the case, those with the greatest existing challenges will have been impacted the most.

In briefing me, my local authority confirmed that the additional support needs sector accounts for about half of all incidents that are reported to the council. Those incidents are due to distressed behaviours that are displayed by young people, with no intent to harm being shown on their part. In North Ayrshire, as seems to be common across the country, the number of such incidents following Covid has risen across all sectors.

In part, culture relates to behaviour, so it is important to look at things that drive aggressive behaviour, but we also need to look at broader issues including attendance. As has been

mentioned, young people who, during lockdown, faced transition periods—for example, the transition from primary school to secondary school—who had caring responsibilities or who were shielding will have found the return to in-person schooling to be challenging.

Teachers are very well-trained professionals, but I recognise their frustration about what sometimes feels like an endless list of social woes, which we all have a responsibility to change, being landed at their door. Culture change requires society as a whole to respond. In that regard, it is welcome that the Scottish Government will continue to engage with trade unions and will publish updated material to show the national picture. Responding to the issues that are presented by changes in behaviour and relationships in our schools requires that partnership approach, so it is good to hear that the Government will be working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, trade unions, parents and pupils.

We all agree that any form of violence in schools is completely unacceptable. I think that we can also agree that it is clear that working in partnership is the way to promote acceptable behaviour, prevent violence and disruption and ensure that our learning institutions are safe and productive places for pupils and staff.

15:41

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** A lot has gone wrong in Scottish schools over the past 16 years. Although I welcome the Government's announcement on the emergency summit—which was, of course, forced by the Scottish Conservatives—standards have slipped, with Scotland plummeting down international league tables on education. In primary schools, performance is declining in literacy, reading, writing, listening, talking and numeracy.

None of that is the fault of teachers: the quality of Scotland's teachers is one of the few remaining shining lights in our education system. Although the SNP has done huge damage to the reputation of our schools, it has not yet managed to prevent the thousands of brilliant Scottish teachers from continuing to do what they do best.

I say "yet" because the trend is concerning. Teachers are under more strain and pressure than ever before because of the system that the SNP Government has created. They are suffering from more abuse and violence than ever before because of SNP Government reforms. It turns out that broken promises have consequences, despite the Government having for years acted as though

that was not the case. The SNP promised to make education its number 1 priority, but—

**Jenny Gilruth:** I am keen to understand which of the Government's reforms have led to increased violence in our schools. I am at a loss to understand what those reforms might be.

**Rachael Hamilton:** That will become apparent during my speech. I will give examples of whistleblowers in my constituency and I will set out the pressures and strains that they are under because of the curriculum and other issues following Government decisions on schools. If the cabinet secretary cannot see that—*[Interruption.]* I would advise her to, because many teachers are watching today.

The former First Minister promised to close the attainment gap between richer pupils and poorer pupils, but it is as wide as ever. What more evidence does the cabinet secretary want? The impact of those broken promises is clear in classrooms across the country.

The SNP has failed to live up to the lofty expectations that it set, and it has left teachers to pick up the pieces. They are being forced to manage somehow to deal with mountains of extra bureaucracy as a result of a flawed curriculum, as I highlighted to the cabinet secretary, who seems to be blind to such issues.

**Jenny Gilruth:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Rachael Hamilton:** No, thank you.

Teachers have been made to somehow keep standards high while the SNP cuts teacher numbers and centralises decision making. We have crumbling national agencies that are long overdue a radical overhaul. Teachers have been put in difficult—close to impossible—positions by 16 years of confused reforms that have tried to turn teachers into social workers who must place a far higher emphasis on children's happiness than on their learning and development.

The SNP Government has forgotten that schools are places for discipline and that they are buildings for knowledge, skills and building character. The Government has left teachers without enough support, but it expects them to somehow set things straight anyway.

Our schools have wonderful teachers who do all that they can. They have struggled on and succeeded despite the Government's reforms. They have helped tens of thousands of young people to get ahead and to go on to fulfilling careers. However, they have reached breaking point and are resoundingly saying that the situation cannot continue. The consequence of SNP failure to manage our schools properly is a

teaching workforce that is subjected to appalling levels of abuse and violence.

As teachers try their hardest to somehow live up to the expectations that the cabinet secretary and the SNP have placed on them, they are met by a very small number of pupils who have been handed a free run to ruin the learning environment. I recently heard from a constituent who is a teacher about a steep rise in violence in her school—the “horror story”, as she put it, of a small group of kids rampaging through the school on a near-daily basis, throwing chairs, pouring glue over carpets and wielding weapons including metal bars. She described children who are unsafe, adults being in tears over violence and emotional stress, and some people having been sent to hospital. She said that her school has done all that it can, but the problem does not stop.

That would be bad enough if teachers had a way of speaking out about those issues. However, they feel that they do not. Teachers say that they have no real recourse when violence strikes; that they fear repercussions on their career; and that they feel powerless to prevent abuse.

As it stands, only in teaching does it seem to be considered to be okay for staff to be battered and abused without repercussions. The culture of silence that has developed about violence in schools must end. It is failing everyone—not only the teachers, but the majority of well-behaved pupils and concerned parents, too.

The Government must answer for its reforms, the impact of its changes on the relationship between teachers and pupils, and the promises that it has broken.

15:46

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I want to first acknowledge the hard work, dedication and commitment of the staff working on the front line of our schools. There is no doubt that the past few years have been challenging for staff and pupils. Let us be in no doubt that many of those challenges have been years in the making and were a cause for concern raised with the Government time and time again.

As the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers pointed out in a brief for the debate,

“Behaviour in schools is not simply a post-pandemic concern. NASUWT has been raising concerns relating to pupil behaviour for some time. Back in May 2019, NASUWT requested violence at work be placed on the agenda for discussion at the Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools (SAGRABIS).”

NASUWT goes on to say that

“While the Scottish Government committed to gather all existing resources in to one place, the drafted document fell short in terms of both its clarity and ability to support and affect real change for teachers on the ground.”

Given that there now seems to be a further commitment from the Government to work towards recording violence and behavioural incidents in our schools, one can only hope that this time it actually happens. The Government needs to listen to stakeholders as it develops its approach. As Martin Whitfield said in welcoming the fact that there is to be a summit, there is an urgency—the summit needs to happen as soon as possible.

More importantly, we need to know what actions and what funding will be brought forward to support teachers and, indeed, pupils. The majority of pupils in our schools are well behaved, but they become the victims of the pupils who do not behave and their education suffers as a result. I have lost count of the number of times that parents have approached me about behavioural problems in schools and told me that the pupils who misbehaved seemed to be rewarded. We really need to address that issue; it is not about calling for people to be expelled or suspended from school, but there has to be an alternative. We have to stand up for the majority who are behaving, who want to learn and who go to school to learn.

The failures of the Government have been highlighted already, including the failure to deliver on class sizes, teacher non-contact time, support for pupils with additional support needs and mental health support for young people, as well as the failure to address harmful online content, continuing inequalities and cuts to our youth services.

In our schools and across the entire education system, Scotland’s children are being let down.

I point to the answer to my recent question, which asked the Scottish Government what the average real-terms spending, based on current prices, was for primary and secondary pupils and pupils with additional support needs in each year since 2007. The response from the cabinet secretary highlights quite starkly some of the problems with school finances. Additional support for learning spending has fallen drastically over the past 10 years. There has been a consistent drop in nine of the 10 years from 2012-13 to 2021-22. The real-terms spending for additional support for learning per pupil has been cut by 35 per cent.

There was also a sharp decline in primary spending from 2010 onwards, which only recovered to pre-2010 levels last year. On top of that, there was a steady decline and then stagnation of spending on secondary education from 2008 onwards. That started to increase again only in 2018, but the latest spending is still not

back to pre-2007 levels. Therefore, there has been a massive cut in spending on education in schools up and down Scotland. Against that financial background, is it any wonder that teachers are feeling overwhelmed? Is it any wonder that the Scottish Government has presided over a sharp drop in specialist teachers while the number of pupils with additional support needs has soared?

The number of specialist teachers supporting children with additional support needs in primary school has fallen from 858 in 2008 to 442 in 2022. Again, that is not acceptable. Put simply, it is not good enough. We need an education recovery plan that recognises the need for more additional support teachers and to address the teacher pupil ratio, to cut class sizes and to recognise the major pressures on our schools. The fact that the number of teachers in Scotland has fallen by 907 since 2007, with a drop of 92 in the past year, at a time when many probationary teachers say that they cannot get a job, should be a concern for everyone in the chamber.

Our amendment also highlights the cuts to youth services—youth clubs, youth support and youth workers—up and down Scotland; they have been cut to the bone. There are hardly any youth services left, so it is not just about the school but the support round about the school. We can do much better, so I hope that this summit is the start of that. I hope that the cabinet secretary is serious about this and that she will come back to Parliament and tell us what actions will be taken and how those are to be financed.

15:53

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** There is no doubt that today's debate is an important one. People are in agreement across the chamber—we have heard that already.

The debate was no doubt triggered by the ugly events in Renfrewshire last week, but as we all know and have heard already, that was not an isolated incident.

Schools are places where students and staff should feel safe without worrying about acts of physical or mental aggression. However, we are now regularly seeing reports of violence in primary and secondary schools, with reports suggesting a surge of violence compared with even pre-pandemic levels.

I have no doubt that every member in the chamber, regardless of whether they are speaking in the debate, has engaged with casework involving a student or staff member who has contacted them as their MSP about acts of violence and intimidation in their place of study or work, particularly in schools. Of course, that is not

right. I have met many students, parents and administrators whose lives have been appallingly affected by violent acts in schools, and we can all agree that violence is never acceptable and that the safety of pupils and staff is absolutely paramount. That includes all pupils.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's opening remarks, in which she cautioned us about our use of language in approaching this debate because we are talking about children.

In looking at the reasons for the increased instances of these events, we must consider and be mindful of a number of things.

Although we are talking about behaviour in schools, that behaviour does not occur in a vacuum. Circumstances at home and other external factors such as the influence of social media are often leading causes for individuals to be violent in a school setting. Schools can do very little to address that and yet teachers are still expected to defuse challenging scenarios on a daily basis. I take the opportunity to thank the schools in my constituency for their engagement with me on the issue, when I have had to speak to them about it, and their desire and ability—on a lot of occasions—to respond quickly and innovatively to those situations. There are some great examples of that across the country and I have seen some of it in action in Coatbridge and Chryston in particular.

As we have heard, the Scottish Government devised a national approach to bullying in 2017 with the launch of "Respect for All", which provides a holistic framework for adults working with children and young people to address all aspects of bullying. The Scottish Government still places emphasis on preventing bullying in the first place. The education secretary recently stated that

"The preventative approach is critical: children who grow up with less trauma, surrounded by love, are much more likely to fulfil their potential and enjoy wellbeing".

I completely agree with that quote. It is good to see that the Scottish Government remains committed to working together with COSLA on the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools. Engagement with local authorities must be a core part of Scotland's approach to resolving violence and bullying in schools. As I said, there are great examples across the country. I take the opportunity to highlight the example of Coatbridge high, which has done a lot of work to tackle bullying in schools. I encourage the cabinet secretary, if she has time, to pay a visit to that school or to any other school in my area.

Our local authorities have a statutory responsibility for the provision of education in our schools, so they must remain a key partner in

combating this issue. As well as the discussions with COSLA, I welcome the education secretary's discussions with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the teaching unions on the issue.

Further Government support can be seen with the investment of more than £2 million in violence prevention. Projects that are supported by that large investment include the mentors in violence prevention project, which is delivered in schools and supported by Education Scotland; the medics against violence project, which runs several violence prevention programmes targeting the impacts and consequences of violence; and the no knives, better lives engagement programme through YouthLink Scotland, which is focused on preventing violence and knife carrying among young people and provides resources and support to local partners. That is a particularly welcome initiative in my area. We know that there have been issues with knife carrying in the west and central belt of Scotland historically. I therefore completely welcome that initiative.

Although I commend the Scottish Government for the work done so far, I also believe that headteachers, teachers and other school staff and local authorities are best placed to decide how to address bullying in their schools. Schools are expected to develop and implement an anti-bullying policy, which should be reviewed and updated regularly. For us to entrust schools with that responsibility, we must make sure that they are fully informed and have the latest information to hand.

**Stephen Kerr:** Fulton MacGregor has mentioned a lot of initiatives, all of them very worthy. Does he also agree that there should be additional support for teachers, who sometimes feel cornered by what is happening in their experience in the classroom? Would he support the call that we have made today for a confidential national helpline through which teachers can get the help that they need to deal with the situations that they are trying to cope with in our classrooms?

**Fulton MacGregor:** I do not disagree with the premise of what Stephen Kerr said. Who could? The premise is simple, but this is a very complex issue—which he knows, as he has brought it to the chamber. The cabinet secretary has found a lot of agreement with him on it and members on these benches are finding agreement with him on it. We need to work together to find the best solutions.

The point that I was making before the intervention is that, although there will be a national framework, it is down to schools to decide how to tackle these issues in their own communities, because all our communities are

very different. I see that I am close to the end of my time, Presiding Officer.

The motion calls on the Scottish Government to increase data collection and publication. I agree with that sentiment, as recording and monitoring helps organisations identify recurring patterns, which enables early intervention and appropriate support at a local level. The Scottish Government has stated that updated material showing the national picture in relation to the issue will be published later this year.

I had other things to say, but I will very briefly conclude, as I am over my time. The issue of violence in schools is a grave one. I thank the Conservatives for bringing the motion to the chamber and the Government for its amendment. The upcoming review must revisit the issues of the definition of bullying and the changing world of online bullying. We must get to the bottom of it and continue—as Parliament is doing today—to work together to tackle this very serious issue facing our young people.

15:59

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** I am honoured to contribute on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives to this important and much-needed debate on violence in schools as part of our party business.

I am not surprised that the debate is coming from this side of the chamber, because more than a year ago, when I asked the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills what action the SNP would take on the abuse that teachers experience, she abdicated responsibility and said that she would step in if there was

“a requirement for further support”.

In truth, however, we are long past that point.

As my colleague Stephen Kerr pointed out, there have been almost 75,000 verbal or physical attacks on teachers and staff since 2017, and our schools have become not just a torturous place for pupils and staff but dangerous, too. On around 200 different occasions in the past year, dangerous weapons were seized from school pupils. This much is clear: we need action, and we need it now.

Earlier this year, I visited a constituent at home, and I heard at first hand about the harrowing experience that a small girl went through. She reported an incident involving a dangerous weapon, which went unnoticed in a supervised area. After doing some digging, her father realised that none of those incidents had been reported on SEEMiS in line with Government policy.

This is not about just one isolated incident, however. The report that was published by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights states that 61 per cent of schools have not reported on bullying and equalities using the SEEMiS recording system.

**Martin Whitfield:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Pam Gosal:** Would I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** We have a very small bit of time in hand.

**Pam Gosal:** I am happy to take the intervention.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am grateful to Pam Gosal for giving way. Does she agree that there is also a challenge between the reporting that is required under health and safety legislation as an employment matter where an injury or risk occurs, and the reporting of the dangerous behaviour or unusual behaviours in school that SEEMiS captures?

**Pam Gosal:** Absolutely—it is very important that both are reported on.

I cautiously welcome the cabinet secretary's support for Scottish Conservatives' proposals to ensure that the right national framework for accurately reporting incidents of violence and disruption in schools is in place.

Another parent in my region, whose child was bullied daily, asked the school to intervene, but the bullying only got worse. The pupil had to be given a hall pass to be excused from classes early to avoid a kicking. What message does that send to the bullies and to those who are being bullied? To the former, it suggests that they can bully without consequences, but to the latter, it suggests that they should simply hide.

Some educators are so scared even to take action or speak up about such things, because they might end up facing a backlash from pupils and parents. They should not be frightened to do the right thing.

I am pleased, therefore, that the Government has listened to our calls to ensure that the right guidance on exclusion laws and policies is out there, and I appreciate commitments to understand the root causes of distressed behaviour.

We in the chamber all know that bullying causes untold damage to mental health and to our children's ability to learn. I go back to the two stories that I have shared with members. The young girl to whom I referred grew anxious and was unable to attend a single class in 18 months. The young boy became withdrawn and, after he moved school, his parents soon discovered that

he was around two years behind pupils his age. For too long, under the SNP, education was, despite being hailed as a priority, always on the back burner. However, after hearing the contributions from members today, I am confident that there is a cross-party commitment to introduce a violence reduction plan urgently.

The 16 years of neglect that we have had under the SNP Government has left children having to fend for themselves and has left teachers as punching bags. That is why today's Scottish Conservative debate on violence in schools is timely and necessary. I truly hope that the SNP listens to all the parents, children and teachers who will be watching the debate who have suffered the consequence of violence in schools, and that it will right that wrong by creating a national framework for reporting; introducing an immediate violence reduction plan; reviewing the policy and guidance related to exclusions; and assisting parents and schools to tackle violence and disruption in the classroom.

16:05

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests. As a former primary school teacher, I retain my passion for education, and I visit schools across my constituency almost every week. I like to know what is going on in the system because it matters to young people and to all of us in this place and beyond. I acknowledge that violence in schools is a problem—I will not deny that, and I hope that nobody here would do so—so I welcome the debate.

There has been an uptick in poor behaviour in our schools since lockdown, and that has created serious challenges. However, the reality is nothing like the lawless out-of-control environment that has been portrayed by some Opposition members. The vast majority of our classrooms are happy learning environments that are supported by a rights-respecting agenda.

**Stephen Kerr:** It is very important that Kaukab Stewart recognises that Opposition members are not making up stories. We are not trying to paint a false picture. We are trying to convey something that is authentic and true. It is not right to say otherwise. Does Kaukab Stewart agree that there is a problem, which is growing, and that we should tackle it and take action today?

**Kaukab Stewart:** I thank Mr Kerr for that intervention. I absolutely acknowledged that violence in schools was a problem. However, I also wish to remind members that the vast majority of our classrooms are happy learning environments. We must remember that.

The problem of violence in schools is not only a Scotland-wide problem; similar trends are being seen in England and Wales, and across the world, as a side effect of the measures that were necessary during lockdown. We must deal with the additional challenges that have come down the line. If we do not get this right, as well as letting down our current dedicated teachers, we risk stifling an entire generation of young people, who need not only our love and care but clear boundaries, consistency and support.

I hope to offer some constructive suggestions based on my experience and the experiences of people who are still working in the profession. The feedback that I am getting is that some children who have returned to full-time physical attendance at school are seriously struggling to get back into school routines. For some, that has resulted in issues with poor behaviour. Unfortunately, on occasion, it has resulted in horrendous incidents, which colleagues have mentioned, when others have been made victims and have faced terrible harms. It is understandable that any parent of any child who went through that would be furious—sickened, even.

In my view, when a bullying incident occurs, there are at least two victims—the bully and the bullied. I have yet to meet a happy child who misbehaves, who picks on others, who acts out or who disrupts class. I welcome the Conservatives accepting that a summit would be a better place to bring everyone together to secure the support that is required: support for the pupils who are the victims; support for teachers who are also victims; support for children with their behavioural challenges; and, importantly, support for the parents of those children as well. I have yet to meet a parent or a household member who is falling short in meeting a child's needs who is not struggling severely in other areas of their lives, such as with finances, bereavement or adverse childhood experiences, which inevitably have an impact.

Mental health support is the key element to reaching a solution. Child psychologists, among other professionals, are well placed to identify trauma and offer solutions, perhaps even working with entire family units. I would be grateful to know more about what plans the Scottish Government has to extend mental health support in our schools to children with behavioural issues, as well as those who have been victims of bullying or violence, and, of course, their families.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Will the member give way?

**Kaukab Stewart:** I need to press on.

I want to talk about the reporting of incidents and their causes. I agree that there must be a

national framework through which we can better understand the data around incidents. However, I would stress that the current systems that are in place can be—and are—laborious and time consuming, and they can take teachers away from the jobs that they are trained to do. I would be grateful if, in summing up, the minister could provide an assurance that that will be discussed with the teaching profession and trade unions to find solutions that give us an accurate picture of classroom and playground behaviour but streamline the reporting procedure, allowing teachers to do their job.

We need to talk about trigger thresholds. If a teacher is facing consistent issues in the classroom, a local authority can step in and offer targeted support. In my view, the trigger threshold must be much earlier than it is currently.

As I mentioned, counselling and support should be consistently provided to the teacher and pupils involved, and, where possible, their families.

All behaviours are forms of communication, and teachers are well-trained professionals who know how to recognise when a child is in distress. What they need support with is around having that wider conversation about how to accommodate and deal with children's support needs, working with school policies on positive relationships that are based on mutual respect.

I am running out of time, but I ask you to indulge me, Presiding Officer. There is a poem by Dorothy Law Nolte about how a child lives. The bit that struck me was this:

“If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.  
If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.”

It is up to us to come up with the solutions. The poem goes on:

“If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice.  
If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.”

We need to have faith in a secure education system where everyone is free to thrive.

16:12

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I was genuinely and pleasantly surprised to see the Conservatives break from their tradition for Opposition education debates and propose something that is genuinely constructive, and which gives Parliament an important opportunity to discuss a really serious issue. [*Interruption.*] I see that the Conservatives are enjoying that reflection. I welcome the fact that they have accepted the Government amendment.

As the motion says, every young person and member of school staff has the right to a school day uninterrupted by violence and disruption.

Clearly, that is not the reality for everyone. Last year's report on life in Scotland for LGBT young people certainly confirmed that. Seven in 10 gay and lesbian young people have been bullied at school; for bisexual and trans young people it is just under six in 10. The percentage of queer young people who feel confident reporting bullying in schools has plummeted in the past decade, to just one in four. One in five trans young people surveyed was forced to leave school, college or university as a result of the bullying and bigotry that they faced.

It does not take a genius to work out why the situation for many trans pupils in our schools is getting worse rather than better. Some members of this Parliament, including those condemning bullying in our schools, need to seriously re-examine their own conduct over the past few years and consider the consequences when they dehumanise trans people and question the very validity of their existence. What did they think was going to happen? This is the result.

**Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** I wonder whether Mr Greer will agree with me on this. Alexander Stewart and I, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, have just come from Glasgow, where we met three 12-year-old girls who were victims of violence by other girls. Two were left unconscious in pools of blood and gore. In each case—I have not heard this reflected in the debate—the incidents were filmed by friends of the perpetrator. The police and the school accept the prima facie evidence, but say that nothing can be done. Despite the evidence, the violence continues. Is that not a problem that we have to get to grips with?

**Ross Greer:** I could not agree more with Mr Carlaw, and that was a welcome reflection because the reality is that, in terms of the current legal framework, there is no reason not to take action. We need to get to the bottom of why schools and other authorities such as the police believe that they are unable to do so. I can speak from personal experience of seeing action not being taken when I was a pupil, including instances when I was the victim of bullying.

There are wider lessons to be learned from the progress that has been made towards our schools becoming LGBT inclusive. The motion and the Government's amendment both mention the importance of recording instances of violence and disruption. Importantly, the cabinet secretary's amendment specifically mentions the need to accurately report those instances.

The Time for Inclusive Education campaign brought the issue of reporting to the fore when it made the point that the number of recorded instances that mention a protected characteristic such as sexuality was far lower than the number of

instances that queer young people were reporting to them. It was clear that schools were reporting instances of bullying and violence where bigotry was the motivating factor without including that key information. I suspect that that is absolutely the case with misogynistic violence against young women and girls, where a report of any kind has even been made—I will come back to that point in a moment.

Fife Council has developed a robust system for accurately reporting instances of bullying and harassment in their schools. I believe that that system is separate from the SEEMiS service, and I encourage the Government and COSLA to engage with Fife Council on what the rest of the country can learn from that approach. That might make for an appropriate agenda item at the upcoming summit.

Given the consensus around the importance of collecting accurate data, I must again ask MSPs who spent months undermining the pupil health and wellbeing census to take a moment to think about the impact that their opportunism has had. Last year's census was undoubtedly badly impacted, and its response rate lowered, as a result of the manufactured culture war nonsense that was pushed by those who should absolutely have known better, leaving us with less of exactly the kind of data that we need to tackle this problem.

**Stephen Kerr:** Ross Greer is badly misjudging the tenor of this debate. This is not a moment for that sort of gratuitous speech; it is a moment for we parliamentarians to unite and welcome what we are going to do to resolve this issue, which is a rising problem across Scotland. I think that Ross Greer needs to think about the tone and the tenor of what he is saying—it is not good.

**Ross Greer:** If Mr Kerr wants to reflect on tone and tenor, there are members behind him whose tone and tenor he can certainly reflect on. I am reflecting on the fact that we do not have essential information on the experience of young people in our schools in relation to bullying because of a manufactured culture war issue around the health and wellbeing census.

In the Glasgow City Council area, we had a 51 per cent response rate. Within that, we found out that 12 per cent of pupils in the area had been physically hurt by a bully in the past year. However, we do not know about the other 49 per cent of pupils in Glasgow, because of the manufactured nonsense around the health and wellbeing survey. I hope that certain members will reflect on that. I did not even mention which political party I thought responsible, but Mr Kerr's intervention is telling in that regard.



**Monica Lennon:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Ross Greer:** I should be closing, but I would feel guilty if I did not take the intervention.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Actually, Mr Greer, you should start to think about concluding your speech.

**Ross Greer:** I understand, Presiding Officer.

Before finishing, I need to point out that the motion—well intentioned as it is—does not mention young people as one of the groups to work with in tackling violence in our schools. I am sure that that was just an oversight, but it is essential that young people are active participants in these discussions, not just the topic of conversation. If we want young people to feel respected and safe in our schools, they need to be part of the conversation about how we make our schools safer—a point that, I am glad to say, is reflected in the Government’s amendment.

I welcome the fact that we appear to be developing a consensus in Parliament this afternoon. It has made it clear to those who are watching that the Scottish Parliament and all of its members stand with the victims of this violence, whether they are members of staff or pupils. I hope that that will provide some reassurance for them.

16:19

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests, which states that, until the elections last year, I was a councillor in Aberdeen City Council, a post for which I received remuneration.

We can all agree that any form of violence anywhere, but particularly in our school estate, is unacceptable. As a parent whose daughter was on the receiving end of taunts and emotional bullying at school, I know how important it is to protect our young folk from bullying and intimidation. Within and outwith our school estate, the safety of our pupils and our staff is paramount.

However, I have to say that the Tory motion does little other than tar all young folk with the same brush, and that is a very dangerous path to take. Never has a saying had more meaning than “it takes a village to raise a child”. We all have a collective responsibility when it comes to our children.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Meghan Gallacher:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jackie Dunbar:** Do I have time to take an intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A very brief intervention. Who are you giving way to?

**Jackie Dunbar:** I heard Mr Kerr, not Ms Gallacher; I do not mind.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Stephen Kerr.

**Stephen Kerr:** The point about the motion is ridiculous, because her Government has pretty much copied it word for word. It changes only one or two words. I do not know what the member is getting at; she is accusing her own Government of being anti-young people, which we on this side of the chamber certainly are not.

**Jackie Dunbar:** Absolute rubbish—I was not doing that. I hear the tone of language that is coming from the other side of the chamber, and I have not once in the debate heard from them about the children who want to learn.

The more that you tell young folk that they are bullies or violent, the more they will begin to think that they are and the more they will act as though they are. We should be talking up our children, not talking them down.

Listening to the language of some members in the chamber today, I am disheartened that some appear to want headlines rather than solutions. Scotland’s focus on progressive preventative action remains paramount, and the Scottish Government is taking specific action to engage with young folk to prevent further violence and harm. The Tory motion fails to mention that a range of different factors can impact on children’s behaviour in school, and those factors are often external to the school community.

Teachers are professionals who are skilled in defusing challenging scenarios on a daily basis. Although it is clear that those teachers need support to respond to challenging behaviour, it is also clear that the examples of extreme events that have been reported in the press must be treated very carefully, given that we are talking about children. It is also well known that many of those stories are sensationalised through attention-grabbing headlines. As leaders, we must be cognisant of that.

Headteachers, teachers and all other school staff and local authorities are best placed to decide how to address bullying in our schools.

**Pam Gosal:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jackie Dunbar:** No—I do not have time.

Our local authorities have a statutory responsibility for the provision of education across our school estate, a fact that we in the chamber

should know well, given that many of us come from a local authority background. The Scottish Government works closely with local authorities to tackle violence and bullying in schools. That work is supported by a wider investment of more than £2 million on violence prevention. The Scottish Government also supports Scotland's national anti-bullying service, respectme, which provides advice and resources to schools, parents, carers and young folk. That commitment is important.

We must not forget that, whether we like it or not, social media and online platforms are a big part of our young folk's lives. Those platforms have a responsibility to ensure that they do everything in their power to help tackle bullying. We must not treat online bullying differently from face-to-face bullying. We address online bullying effectively when we address it as part of our anti-bullying approach, not as a separate area of work or policy.

The Scottish Government rightly takes online safety incredibly seriously and continues to liaise with law enforcement agencies to ensure that they have the powers and resources to tackle any incidents of criminality. However, regulatory responsibility for social media lies with the UK Government, and the Scottish Government has limited means of intervention. The UK Government must call on social media companies to improve their standards and sanctions when it comes to removing material that promotes violence, and we must back it on that call.

Yet again, the Scottish Government is constrained when it comes to taking real action on bullying—this time on the online safety of children. Despite that, in 2022-23 the Scottish Government is providing more than £2 million to support the delivery of prevention activity across Scotland. Supported projects include mentors in violence prevention, which is delivered in schools and supported by Education Scotland; Medics Against Violence, which runs several violence prevention programmes targeting the impacts and consequences of violence; and the No Knives, Better Lives engagement programme through YouthLink Scotland, which focuses on preventing the incidence of violence and knife-carrying.

Diversity and equality are at the heart of the policies that underpin education in Scotland, and I ask the cabinet secretary that that will remain our approach. Bullying must be addressed, but that must be done through prevention and understanding the root causes of behaviour, not through the demonisation of all young people.

16:25

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I am not sure which debate Jackie Dunbar has been in

today, but it is not the one that I have been in, that is for sure. She can shake her head, but let me say to her that she should not confuse members on the Conservative benches sharing the real lived experiences of young people and teachers with storytelling and manufactured grievance on our part. Jackie Dunbar needs to hear the reality, which is that the only manufactured grievances that I have heard this afternoon have come from those on the SNP benches.

It should not be those on Opposition benches using Opposition time to debate this. It should be done in Government time, and the Government knows that very well—which is why the minister has a sheepish look on her face.

**Jenny Gilruth:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jamie Greene:** In a second. I have important points to make.

Members across the chamber have raised these issues repeatedly. They have raised very serious incidents. I raised one at topical question time, last week, as the cabinet secretary will recall. Every time we have raised these issues, we have been met with the same or similar responses—time after time. When we have raised these issues in the chamber, ministers have said that they are isolated cases. No—they are not. They told us that they are issues for individual schools. No—they are not. We were told that local authorities should tackle this. No—they should not. In fact, it is best illustrated using the cabinet secretary's response to my topical question on a very serious situation that happened in my region—a case that I will not go into. She said:

“Yes, they happen—but they are not the norm.”

The reality that we have heard about this afternoon—hour after hour, from member after member, about case after case—is that this is the norm in Scotland. Far too many teachers are having their workplace disrupted, and far too many pupils are having their learning disrupted. The status quo is clearly causing harm for far too many. People are desperate, which is why we make no apologies for bringing the issue to the chamber this afternoon. There have been 75,000 attacks in schools during the past year, which is not a few incidents, and 200 dangerous items have been seized from young pupils, which is not a few items.

I put a shout out on social media yesterday, in which I challenged people to come and share their own real lived experiences. I asked teachers and pupils—anyone who wanted to participate in today's debate—because we have a voice and they do not. I have to say that the response was immense, and I am sure that the same will be true for other members who asked for responses

ahead of today's debate. Every single person who responded asked us to please not share their name or the name of the school, such is the fear that exists about raising issues of this kind.

I would simply say that the culture of fear has to stop. Teachers fear speaking out because of the repercussions in their school; schools fear speaking out because they do not want to admit that there is a problem; and local authorities fear speaking out and admitting that there is a problem because of the reaction that the Government might have.

Here is what some of them had to say. This is the reality. A teacher who worked as a supply teacher got in touch to say that he had been attacked 10 times in just three years. That is not a few times; that is life changing. It is no wonder that people are leaving the profession. Raising these issues is not talking the profession down. Instead, by raising these issues in Parliament, we are standing up for the profession.

Another real-life story came from a parent who got in touch. I will not read out the whole email, but what she told me was utterly horrendous. Her 15-year-old son was subjected to an unprovoked attack by a group of seven boys on a school bus. She asked me to share the story and she told me of many other incidents involving her son, two of which involved knives. She said to me:

"All of those incidents were not addressed in any meaningful way".

She said that her son is petrified and that he will not go to school, so he is missing out on his learning while his attackers carry on with theirs. That underlines the deep-rooted problem, which is why we have to talk about it. The school responded that it could not do anything about the attack because it happened on a bus, and the bus drivers will not do anything about it because they are petrified, too. Bus drivers are being attacked on the way to and from school, and the police rarely get involved.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The member will need to conclude soon, because we have no extra time in hand.

**Jamie Greene:** The Government will not like to hear it, but many factors are involved, and a perfect storm of events over the past couple of years has led to the situation. A reduction in behavioural support staff in schools, a failure to reduce classroom sizes, a loss of campus officers, a loss of locally funded police officers and the ratio between teachers and pupils are all factors that have come into play. The Government has put its head in the sand and refused to listen, but it cannot ignore the voices of teachers, pupils and parents who have all shared their horrendous experiences.

Of all the party business and motions that we have brought to the chamber of late, this is the one that we should be most proud of, because it was long overdue and it is much needed. It is always a shame that the Government talks about these things only when it is under pressure or embarrassed into doing so. That must change. I support the motion in Stephen Kerr's name.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that we have now used up all the extra time that we had. So, although members are perfectly free to take interventions, if they do so, no extra time will be added back and they must absorb the time of the intervention within their allocated time.

16:31

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** I, too, agree that no pupil, teacher or member of school staff should suffer any kind of abuse. The recent incident at a central belt high school, where three teachers had to receive medical treatment and a 14-year-old pupil was given medical assistance in an incident that involved an ex-pupil, horrified everyone. No-one should have to go through that experience—I know that we all agree on that.

The minister took many questions on that incident and the wider issues that are involved, and she spoke to a number of the points that are raised in the motion. Her replies clearly showed that the Government takes the issue seriously. She has met and raised the matter with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and, as chair of the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools, she has raised the matter with COSLA and trade union representatives. She also informed members that the Scottish Government is currently gathering evidence to help it to better understand behaviour in schools at a national level through research on behaviour in Scottish schools.

I turn to a key ask of today's motion. A number of weeks ago, the minister asked for an update on the research on behaviour in Scottish schools and informed the chamber that she will be able to access that data in the autumn, at which point she will be in a position to update Parliament. I genuinely understand the frustration and the strong feeling, because we all have to get the correct information so that we can go forward and change the bad situation. Of course, we all want to have the data as soon as possible, but we have to make sure that the approach is right and that we deal effectively with this very real issue.

That measured approach is definitely the right one. We need to work together with pupils, parents, teachers, local authorities, COSLA and other stakeholders and listen to them about what

works, what does not work and what they want and need. By working together, we will get it right for every child and every teacher, and that is the right thing to do.

I also think that we have to be measured and careful in how we characterise the issue. We need to be extremely careful not to stigmatise children by painting a picture that such behaviour is the norm. As was said earlier, the majority of school kids are well-behaved, attentive, keen learners, and we need to appreciate that, reward it and acknowledge it. We need to listen to them and understand how that environment works for them and how we can further foster a positive learning environment for everyone. On the flipside, we need to listen to those who are not as keen and for whom the environment does not work as well, to understand why and to incorporate that into future education strategies.

Last week, I saw many members and the Presiding Officer get hands on at the construction skills demonstration outside in the gardens, which was sponsored by Gordon MacDonald and Alex Rowley, on what was yet another sunny day.

The event saw construction skills demonstrations by young tradespeople, in which school pupils received a mini masterclass in key trades to help them to make an informed decision about their career choices. Speaking to some of the pupils, I was struck by how the traditional learning model had not really appealed to many of them, but they got really keen when doing hands-on work.

I spoke to the organisers about the support for the scheme from trade unions and about what support there was from local authorities. I was told that some local authorities are very supportive of and very positive about the scheme; others not so much. I was sorry to hear that Glasgow was mentioned as one local authority area where the organisers needed more support to get into every school and to reach out to every school child. Will the minister perhaps look into the issue and get back to me regarding what Glasgow needs to do to offer those choices for the many for whom traditional learning is perhaps not their thing?

When speaking to the organiser from City of Glasgow College, I was reminded of how many of us chose an alternative route to employment, to do something that we got a lot out of. My grandfather was a stonemason in the building of the Kelvingrove art galleries and the Kelvin hall. The family of the organiser from City of Glasgow College had also been involved in that work. Those people shared the same opportunities, and our kids in this century deserve to share them, too.

We all deserve the same chances in life. Let us work together to get it right for every wean.

16:36

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I welcome this debate on a topic that is rarely discussed so openly in the Parliament, and I welcome some of the honest debate from members today.

I am sure that, for many, the opportunity to see these issues addressed at a national level will be refreshing, and I trust that we will continue to shine a light on these very serious matters in the weeks and months to come.

I know that many teachers and support staff have raised concerns with all of us about this very subject—as we have heard—and they are right to do so. Not enough is being done. I believe that councils would love to do a lot more to help if only they had the resources to do so, which is at the heart of the matter that we are discussing.

In fact, I have spoken to a number of teachers who have reported incidents in which they genuinely feared that that they or a pupil would be seriously harmed. What is really remarkable is that, in those cases, the teacher's primary concern was the wellbeing of the pupil and what had led them to act in that way. That tells us a lot about the caring and professional workforce that we have.

In many such cases, the problem is rooted in emotional and mental health needs and a lack of provision for young people when they need it most. Much of that stems from the serious poverty and neglect that are evident in parts of our country, which are often hidden but are always there.

I am sure that many of you know that we have young people living lives that would be unimaginable to most of us and to most people in our constituencies and regions. That all contributes directly to worsening emotional, mental and physical health across the country.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that there is a crossover of briefs here. She does not need me to remind her that, currently, only 70 per cent of children and young people are seen within 18 weeks of a mental health referral, which is well short of the Government's already modest target of 90 per cent. That is happening in a climate in which more than 10,000 children and young people were referred to child and adolescent mental health services in quarter 4 of 2022 alone. That equates to thousands of children who are waiting endlessly for referral, and even those who receive one are often waiting well beyond the point that they can bear.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary will recognise that the toll that such waiting times and lack of support are taking on young people is often

intolerable. Teachers see the result of those difficulties day after day, yet, as we have said, selflessly, they continue to serve.

I am afraid to say that the Government is letting young people and the school workforces down, and a little bit of honesty is needed. The Government has failed to deliver on class sizes, teacher non-contact time, support for pupils with additional support needs and mental health support for young people. It has also failed to address harmful online content, continuing inequalities and cuts to youth services. Our teachers and young people deserve better. They need more action, with greater urgency, to address those challenges.

The cabinet secretary has said in the chamber that she is aware of how teachers feel. I am sure that she knows that teachers are overworked, overtired and, in many cases, lacking the necessary support staff to assist them in increasingly difficult classrooms.

Trade unions have been pointing out these issues for years, often with no significant response from the Government. Education unions and others have repeatedly raised how vulnerable many teachers and staff are to assault or worse.

I am sure that we are all genuinely fearful that the problem could go further if we do not take it more seriously. We know of some of the harrowing and sometimes tragic experiences that teachers face across the United Kingdom—some of those have been mentioned today. There is no room for complacency. We cannot assume that things that are happening in other parts of the UK will not happen in Scotland. We are facing a serious challenge and we must act now.

A summit is welcome, but it is not enough on its own. We need to ensure that the experiences that have been set out in the chamber today and by those with lived experience are listened to, but, more important, acted on.

Teachers are workers just like anyone else and they deserve the same level of respect and consideration that we would offer to anyone in a workplace and, indeed, to anyone in our family.

We need to raise awareness among parents and pupils that this is a real and prevailing situation that requires every effort from people across the board. For the situation to be considered in a meaningful way, we must engage pupils, parents and professionals.

I reiterate that it is welcome that we are having this debate, but it should have been on Government time. Although today's debate is useful, it is important that the Government raises the topic again, as we are running out of time to act. I thank all members for their contributions.

16:42

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** I, too, welcome this important debate. I am glad to be able to participate in it and to listen to colleagues about how we can work together to support our teachers, professionals and other members of staff working in schools across our constituencies and regions.

I do not think that it matters whose time we are using for this debate. The focus should be on our collective responsibilities and it is good that the debate has been largely constructive. As well as welcoming the fact that the Opposition has used its time for this debate, I welcome the Government's response and its commitment to act, which has been clearly illustrated in its amendment and demonstrated by the cabinet secretary's words.

I take this opportunity to point out that, in the cabinet secretary, we have a former teacher with life experience in the roles that she is occupying. That is a good thing for all Scotland. We as a Parliament should be doing all that we can to work with ministers constructively. When our education system succeeds, our young people succeed, and when our young people succeed, that is an investment for the benefit of the common good of all Scotland.

In that spirit, it is of vital importance that colleagues from all parties have raised incidents anecdotally and general statistics about the challenge of violence in our schools that we face together. However, that is a symptom of wider challenging behaviour, which takes place in the context of the difficulties of the past year and the pandemic, and other challenges, including the cost of living crisis that we confront right now. Social media is not a catalyst for this behaviour and trend, but it is a factor, as Jackson Carlaw's example terrifyingly illustrated.

The issue goes beyond the school setting. Colleagues have made points about the need for a community response and the third sector's involvement that are absolutely true. I want to emphasise my experience of that as the constituency member for Edinburgh Northern and Leith.

When I first had the privilege of being elected in 2016, we were experiencing issues with significant, serious antisocial behaviour and violence in the north of my constituency, both in schools and in the community. The only question that I asked at First Minister's questions was about that issue—I probably need to ask some more questions. [*Laughter.*]

As well as violence, we had instances of motorbike theft and joyriding. The situation was concerning. Although it has not been completely

resolved, it is much better now, because schools, the police and the community all worked together and we had youth work engagement. Many organisations made a difference, but I want to highlight one of them: the Spartans alternative school. What that school did during that time and what it continues to do in north Edinburgh is remarkable. It is utilising pupil equity funding as well as raising resource through its own and other fundraising initiatives. Using the power of football, as well as strong teaching staff, persuasive personalities and real credibility in the community, it has been able to turn around the lives of some people who were really struggling in school, being violent, not achieving and not giving their best and, in that, disrupting others. The Spartans alternative school has done that work in north Edinburgh on its own initiative, which is remarkable.

Perhaps there are some lessons. Bill Kidd discussed how to help people who do not necessarily engage as well as others do with traditional models of education. I know that, collectively, we have committed to a presumption to mainstream, but perhaps it is time to look at other models and alternative ways of doing things, and not to be ideological in how we approach that. At the same time, we need to hold true to equality of provision. If the Government would like to visit the Spartans alternative school, I would be more than happy to facilitate that. That model is not a panacea but, in the collective challenge that we face, if we are all open minded, perhaps we can make a bigger difference.

Another important lesson from north Edinburgh is that, although we have too many terrifying incidents of violence in our schools, we also need to collectively emphasise that, as the cabinet secretary was right to highlight, a minority of young people are involved and are disruptive, causing harm and damage. However, there is also a majority of young people, and we need to use debating time to talk about their achievements and to big up their academic excellence and the achievement of their goals. We need to make sure that we are giving equal, if not more, emphasis to the positive, while dealing with the collective challenge that we face.

16:48

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** I remind members of my entry in the members' register of interests, which I referred to earlier. I say with an open heart that it is becoming a great pleasure to follow Ben Macpherson in his contributions to these debates, because he has managed to capture so much about what has been positive in the debate. I, too, look forward to having a fruitful discussion about mainstreaming and what we mean by it. If we consider the

alternative educational provision that exists across Scotland, there are extremely good examples of fine practice.

The debate has been pleasurable in parts. I welcome what I see as a change of approach with the change of cabinet secretary. I am optimistic that there will be better and stronger cross-party support and that we can reach conclusions that support our young people, our educational staff—including our teachers—our local authorities and, fundamentally, our local communities. I assure the cabinet secretary that members on this side of the chamber will support those discussions and conclusions.

In that light, I want to mention a couple of things by way of parliamentary formality. But for the rule of pre-emption, we would have supported the Government's amendment and, irrespective of the outcome of various votes, we will support what I hope will be an agreed motion at decision time. We will rightly be able to judge the Parliament and the Scottish Government on that motion in the coming weeks and months. I welcome the comment that Stephen Kerr made in his opening speech that we need to take a holistic view of the experience that our young people have in education rather than think about one-off events. However, we will be held to account for the outcome of all the proposals that we have heard today and, as I said in my intervention on Mr Kerr, the sooner that happens, the better.

I want to emphasise the issue of data. We have heard about violence, and many members have spoken about bullying. Sadly, we have heard a lot about pupil on teacher violence. We have not heard as much about pupil on pupil violence, although it is similarly important. Those are all different and separate issues, and they all have different solutions. The thing that brings them together is that they tend to occur on the education estate. However, as Jamie Greene rightly pointed out, some events happen outside that estate, particularly on school buses—most of us will have had correspondence from constituents on that. When incidents happen outside school, there is a challenge as to who takes responsibility, but the consequences of that violence for the individual victims are the same.

I welcome and wholly endorse the points about the language that we use on the issue. We are speaking about a minority of pupils although, sadly, the number of incidents is increasing. We have heard powerful subjective evidence today, particularly in the letter that Murdo Fraser read out. There are huge amounts of subjective evidence, but there is less objective metadata. I know that the cabinet secretary is talking about that and that she seeks to mine to a granular level

the data that exists, as well as the data that I hope will exist in the very near future.

I like to think that we have an acceptance that Covid has not been the cause of the situation that our schools find themselves in, but it has certainly been an accelerating factor in the increasing trail of behaviour. I will not make this party political, because I agree with the member—I apologise, but I forget who it was—who said that education systems across the western world face the same challenge. However, Covid has accelerated the issue, and we have reached a position in which we can acknowledge that our education system is in crisis in relation to the matter. That does not mean that good work is not happening, but the system is in crisis. It is up to us in the Parliament to do everything that we can to change that situation as soon as possible.

Under article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, our young people have

“a right to be protected from being hurt or badly treated”,

and that includes exploitation and neglect, as well as being hurt through violent images. That brings me on to the many comments that have been made about social media. I am not in total agreement with Willie Rennie that we should not shoot the messenger, because I think that social media companies have responsibility, but there is also responsibility for those who provide the wi-fi access. For the purposes of this debate, that is our local authorities, who might find that they have responsibility, as the carrier of images and of attitudes towards young people that are expressed by other young people.

Time is short, but I want to mention the example that Ruth Maguire gave about North Ayrshire Council. One issue that we need to explore relates to the notifications that employees give to their employer of near-miss incidents through the Health and Safety Executive, and the notifications that arrive through SEEMiS, which members have referred to. Those are two separate systems. One is a legislative requirement and the other is, quite frankly, good practice and is needed for reporting. However, we need to look at why those two systems are so separate.

I am conscious of time. There is much that I would have liked to have talked about, particularly the powerful speech that Alex Rowley made—indeed, the vast majority of members who have spoken have come to the debate with positive ideas and, sadly, subjective examples. I do not want to make Ben Macpherson feel too embarrassed but, as he said, there is space to celebrate what is good and great that is happening in our schools for children through alternative education methods. Those children are there

because the mainstream school architecture does not work for them. Their contribution, as we saw last week in the construction skills demonstration, is as valuable as everybody else’s.

16:55

**Jenny Gilruth:** I have listened intently to the contributions this afternoon. I shall not be providing marks out of 10, but suffice it to say that some members clearly listened to my contribution more than others—so two stars and a wish.

I very much recognise the challenge, and it is really important that we get this right. A number of members talked about the pressures that schools are working under. There are Covid impacts and on-going cost of living impacts.

A few weeks ago, I was in the school in which I taught, which is not far from here. The school prom is usually held in an expensive hotel in central Edinburgh, which costs quite a lot of money. This year, the prom is being hosted in the school, which is reducing the cost for all pupils to attend. The school has provided a swap shop where children can try on dresses, and some of the contributions have been donated to the school, so the experience is much more affordable for all pupils. The school is in a very middle class part of central Edinburgh, so if that school is struggling, I wonder how the cost of living crisis is affecting the school day in other schools.

We need to take a partnership approach. I will respond to some individual contributions, because there have been some really good ones this afternoon. As Kaukab Stewart said, the vast majority of classrooms are happy learning environments. I do not think that any member would disagree with that, but we all accept that there are examples of that not being the case. We have heard about some of them today.

Willie Rennie said that the behaviour in Scottish schools research figures have not been collected for years. I want to put on the record that that was due to the pandemic. Those figures are collected on a four-yearly cycle. However, I have been pushing my officials for early sight of that data, and I am keen to publish it as soon as we are able to. That data will give us the granularity of focus that Martin Whitfield spoke about and which we do not currently have. In relation to some of the FOI requests that Opposition parties have made, local authorities use a variety of methods in gathering data, and some did not respond to the requests, so that data set does not give us the full national picture.

Willie Rennie also made a point about restorative approaches, which I responded to earlier. I whole-heartedly agree with such approaches. Restorative approaches work when

there is a partnership approach around the individual classroom teacher. However, if there is not that partnership approach, they can be quite a weak measure in our response to children and young people.

Murdo Fraser invited me to visit a school in his region, and I accept that invitation. I heard what he said about the experience of a teacher in his area. I am keen to hear about teachers' experiences in schools. I want to get out and visit schools. As I said in my opening speech, I have spent a lot of my time doing just that. It has been quite heartening to see staff being quite taken aback by the cabinet secretary asking them about behaviour in schools. It has become almost unfashionable to talk about such things, but it is important that we do. As I said, I have made it clear to my officials that we should focus on this matter. As the cabinet secretary, I want to get this right, because I recognise that our schools are struggling following Covid. I do not accept that these issues have happened overnight, but the pandemic has nonetheless compounded some of the challenges that our schools face.

Ruth Maguire spoke about her local authority taking a more consistent approach to recording and monitoring incidents, and a number of members made similar points. I alluded to the HMIE inspection on bullying, which was also mentioned by one of the Conservatives. That inspection looked at some of the inconsistencies in how such events are recorded. We need greater consistency, and the summit will have to address that issue.

During the pandemic, one challenge in schools related to the different ways of learning and teaching. For example, we encouraged schools to have good ventilation. Windows were open, so young people were able to wear their jackets in class. That was a huge shift, and, to be blunt, teachers now face a challenge in getting young people to take off their jackets. Those are the day-to-day issues with which classroom teachers are grappling.

I know that we have focused on violence today, but I remind members that that is not the only issue. For example, there can sometimes be verbal abuse in the classroom. There are different ways in which challenging behaviour can manifest. In my experience, it was never violence.

**Liam Kerr:** On that point, does the cabinet secretary take a view on the solutions that have been proposed by Northfield academy in Aberdeen? How is that work informing her proposed solutions at the summit?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I have not seen the proposed solutions at Northfield academy but I have asked my officials for a visit to that very school,

recognising some of the challenge that has been highlighted in recent times in the inspection report.

Martin Whitfield talked about some of the celebrations in our schools—it is important that we remember that great work is going on in our schools. I was in a school in East Kilbride a couple of weeks ago, learning about the ways in which staff are supporting their young people through what have been a challenging two years. Our teachers are really skilled at doing that; as a former teacher, I defer to their professionalism and trust them to respond appropriately. However, they do need support and that is what I hope that the summit will seek to provide.

**Monica Lennon:** It has been a good debate. We should remember that violence is preventable and that prevention is what a public health approach to violence is all about.

What role will the Scottish violence reduction unit play in informing the summit and the Government's response to the challenges that we have heard about, not just in school but in our communities?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I am happy to engage with the Scottish violence reduction unit; I know that it does really good work, and the member makes an important point about how that work is encompassed in our response and the summit.

I come back to a number of points made by Alex Rowley, who talked about the points that our teaching trade unions have raised. I declare an interest as a former member of the EIS and I recognise that the issue has not happened post-Covid but is one on which the unions have been campaigning over many years. We in the Government recognise that it is important that we get it right, and I hope that members have heard from me today that that is the approach that I will take. Trade unions have been supportive of that in my engagement with them thus far.

Kaukab Stewart spoke about the importance of adverse childhood experiences. In my opening speech, I alluded to the point that some young people in our schools are traumatised and that we need to ensure that support is in place to recognise that, because it is really important. We know that children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are far more likely to find themselves excluded, which is really detrimental to their progress, so we need to be mindful of that.

Carol Mochan made an excellent contribution in relation to the roles that teachers have in their classrooms and the worry and care that they have for their young people, which I recognise. She is right to point, too, to the cross-portfolio nature of the challenge in relation to mental health. We have provided funding for school counsellors; however, I am keen to work with my health colleagues on



that issue more broadly because I recognise the need for us to look across portfolios, out of our silos in Government, to better support our young people.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please conclude, cabinet secretary.

**Jenny Gilruth:** Yes; I am mindful of time. I thank members for their contributions. In general, it has been a very positive debate. It is important that we get the Government response right; the summit will seek to bring together partners to do just that and to work with our teachers, who are at the chalkface and will be essential to delivering the solutions that we need in responding to behaviour issues in our schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I now call Meghan Gallagher to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, for up to eight minutes.

17:02

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** We have heard harrowing stories from across the chamber about the increasing levels of violence in our schools.

The first time that I heard about the true extent of the problem was when I took part in a panel event with NASUWT. The union spoke openly about how the education workforce is adversely affected by a minority of pupils who challenge authority, use threatening behaviour and abusive language and, in some instances, physical violence. No one should go to work feeling unsafe.

When I was putting together some words to say during the debate, I found myself returning to the same question: “How did things get so bad?” The testimonies that we have heard today from across the chamber are a damning assessment of Scotland’s education system. Colleagues have approached teachers directly so that they could share their stories—that shows that we have a serious problem. It is not our voices that need to be heard but the voices of education professionals who need the Government’s support.

I say to Ross Greer that if he thinks that raising concerns on behalf of parents and young people is stoking a “culture war”, he maybe needs to re-evaluate what it means to be an MSP.

**Ross Greer:** Without wishing to assume the experience of others, I am pretty sure that I have more experience than most members in the chamber of being the pupil who is left bloodied by an attack at school. I am just interested in what made the Conservatives so uncomfortable when I raised the experiences of LGBTQ young people who face violence at school.

**Meghan Gallacher:** That was not the case at all; we were referring to concerns that were raised on behalf of parents and young people. I do not think that Mr Greer should misconstrue what we were trying to point out.

Voices are powerful, and Murdo Fraser quoted the experiences of one teacher, who said that he had seen people being sworn at, spat at, punched, scratched and bitten, tables being thrown and colleagues having multiple trips to the hospital. However, the part of Murdo Fraser’s contribution that should shame the Government is that that teacher said that the getting it right for every child policy is “an absolute joke”. That did not come from an MSP but from one of Scotland’s educators.

There is something fundamentally wrong with our education system and it is clear that our teachers have had enough.

**Brian Whittle:** I am grateful to Meghan Gallacher for giving way.

Does she agree that the Scottish Government’s response so far has been reactive, that it is scrambling to deal with symptoms—which are only one side of the coin—and that consideration should be given to how we tackle the issues before they become a crisis, such as by investing in pre-school activity, which includes a healthy breakfast? Tackling hunger and poor mental and physical health, attainment and poor behaviour—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Whittle, we need to go back to Ms Gallacher.

**Meghan Gallacher:** I thank Brian Whittle for his intervention and could not agree more. Prevention is key, and we need to look at ways in which we can tackle the issues in our schools.

Rachael Hamilton pointed out that teachers have succeeded not because of the SNP Government but in spite of the reforms. We need to find solutions to the unacceptable levels of violence that we see in our schools. Last week, I raised violence in our schools as part of a long list of SNP Government failings, so if the cabinet secretary is looking for somewhere to start, this is the place—by making our schools a safe space for teachers to teach and for pupils to learn.

As we have heard so frequently today, this is not a new problem. Teachers have been raising it for years, and an acceptable-violence culture has been allowed to grow, which Pam Duncan-Glancy rightly raised. We have yet to see a cabinet secretary of this Government do something about the increasing violence in our schools.

**Ben Macpherson:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Meghan Gallacher:** I have taken quite a few, so if the member will forgive me, I would like to continue.

It is reassuring that the majority of speeches today have approached the issue with good intentions.

In June 2022, I raised the issue of violence in our classrooms and, again, the concerns of the NASUWT. One union representative said that it is as though they—meaning the Scottish Government—really do not want to know the scale of the problem. At that time, I also asked the Scottish Government to accept that cuts to council and education budgets—or the inaction with regard to reducing class sizes, which was mentioned earlier—were putting teachers at risk.

Shona Robison, who was the cabinet secretary who responded at that time, then announced that research into school behaviours had been cancelled due to Covid, with no confirmation that the research would be reinstated later. Although the advisory group on relationships and behaviours in schools met last December, the then cabinet secretary did not attend, as Willie Rennie said in his contribution. I think that the advisory board has not met since, which is something that I wanted to ask the cabinet secretary about earlier, because it is important that we, as MSPs, know exactly what the group is discussing so that we can take matters on and raise them fully in our roles.

Stephen Kerr also pointed out that parents are worried about their children's safety and prospects. Pam Gosal spoke about bullying and the untold damage that it will have on a child's mental health and ability to learn. That underlines the importance of bringing everyone together to tackle the problem.

I want to know and understand further how the Government can understand the scale of the problem when it has not collected, let alone published, data on violent incidents in our schools since 2016. That was seven years ago; we can hazard a guess about some of the causes.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I thank Meghan Gallacher for giving way. I think that I have responded to that point a number of times in the chamber today. Of course the research should have been carried out in 2020, but it could not be carried out because of the lockdown. However, it is going ahead, so I hope that that gives the member reassurance about why the research could not be carried out: we were in lockdown so children were not in school.

**Meghan Gallacher:** Yes, I accept that point, but it does not mean that it is acceptable that nothing has happened in seven years.

The Conservative motion is one of concern and solution, so I am pleased that the SNP has supported our principles and action points. It is good to see that it has finally accepted Conservative education policy, although I would say that changing a couple of words and trying to call it an amendment might be a bit of a stretch. However, the Scottish Conservatives will support the SNP's amendment this evening. That is cross-party working at its best.

I hope that the Scottish Government will agree to our action points—which Stephen Kerr outlined earlier—and in particular the first three: the summit, which must meet urgently; a statement in Parliament on the outcomes of the summit; and an action plan to tackle violence and disruption in our schools.

This Government cannot be allowed to get away with any more years of doing nothing. I welcome the cabinet secretary's warm words about working to tackle the issue, but until we see the results, it is just another issue on which the Scottish Conservatives will need to hold the Scottish Government to account, in order to end the violence in our schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate on ending violence in Scottish schools.

## Powers of Attorney Bill

17:10

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-09109, in the name of Maree Todd, on the Powers of Attorney Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Powers of Attorney Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 15 June 2022, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—  
[Maree Todd]

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

## Business Motions

17:10

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-09147, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 30 May 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Topical Questions (if selected)

*followed by* Ministerial Statement: Diet and Healthy Weight Consultations

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Hospital at Home Programme in Scotland

*followed by* Committee Announcements

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 31 May 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;  
NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Let's Talk Education – The National Discussion

*followed by* Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Motion: Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 1 June 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

*followed by* Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Social Justice

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate:

Trustworthy, Ethical and Inclusive  
Artificial Intelligence - Seizing  
Opportunities for Scotland's People and  
Businesses

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-09148, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 2 timetable.

*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
5.00 pm Decision Time

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 9 June 2023.—[George Adam]

Tuesday 6 June 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Topical Questions (if selected)  
*followed by* Scottish Government Business  
*followed by* Committee Announcements  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
5.00 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business

*Motion agreed to.*

Wednesday 7 June 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Constitution, External Affairs and  
Culture;  
Justice and Home Affairs  
*followed by* Scottish Conservative and Unionist  
Party Business  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)  
5.10 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 8 June 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
11.40 am General Questions  
12.00 pm First Minister's Questions  
*followed by* Members' Business  
2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Education and Skills  
*followed by* Public Audit Committee Debate: New  
Vessels for the Clyde and the Hebrides  
– Arrangements to Deliver Vessels 801  
and 802  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 29 May 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:11

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-09149, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-09150, on parliamentary recess dates.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Interim Target) Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 10 to 18 February 2024 (inclusive), 30 March to 14 April 2024 (inclusive), 29 June to 31 August 2024 (inclusive), 12 October to 27 October 2024 (inclusive), 21 December 2024 to 5 January 2025 (inclusive).—[George Adam]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The question on those motions will be put at decision time.

## Decision Time

17:11

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** In relation to the first question to be put, I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jenny Gilruth is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy will fall by way of pre-emption.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-09126.3, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-09126, in the name of Stephen Kerr, on ending violence in Scottish schools, 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.

17:12

*Meeting suspended.*

17:16

*On resuming—*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The question is, that amendment S6M-09126.3, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-09126, in the name of Stephen Kerr, on ending violence in Scottish schools, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

**For**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (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)  
 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)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 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)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 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)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (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)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

## Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 93, Against 18, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S6M-09126, in the name of Stephen Kerr, as amended, on ending violence in Scottish schools, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

That the Parliament believes that no pupil, teacher or member of school staff should suffer physical or verbal abuse and that every child and young person has the right to an uninterrupted school day, free from violence and disruption; recognises the impact that violence in schools has on teachers and school staff, especially in relation to retention and mental health; further recognises that evidence relating to violence in schools was last gathered in 2016, and that data collection is now underway, and that this will be published later in 2023 as routine publication returns to pre-pandemic arrangements; recognises that there has been a shift in school culture over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that affects a wide range of issues, including violence but also extending to issues such as attendance, and agrees that the Scottish Government should work with young people, parents and carers, schools, local authorities and unions to host a summit on the issue of violence in schools, to identify the work that is now needed to ensure that the right national framework for accurately reporting instances of violence and disruption within schools is in place, the right guidance on exclusions laws and policies is available, and the right resources that are needed to support schools, parents and carers and young people themselves are available to assist them in promoting acceptable behaviour and tackling violence and disruption.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S6M-09109, in the name of Maree Todd, on the Powers of Attorney Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Powers of Attorney Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 15 June 2022, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on the two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

The final question is, that motion S6M-09149, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-09150, on parliamentary recess dates, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

*Motions agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Interim Target) Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 10 to 18 February 2024 (inclusive), 30 March to 14 April 2024 (inclusive), 29 June to 31 August 2024 (inclusive), 12 October to 27 October 2024 (inclusive), 21 December 2024 to 5 January 2025 (inclusive).

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

## Race for Life 30th Anniversary

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-08731, in the name of David Torrance, on race for life celebrates its 30-year anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament celebrates the 30th anniversary of the founding of Race for Life; understands that Race for Life, in partnership with Standard Life, is Cancer Research UK's biggest series of fundraising events that take place across the UK; further understands that, since its inception 30 years ago, Race for Life has raised over £940 million towards lifesaving cancer research and, in that time, over 10 million participants have taken part in Race for Life events; notes that the Race for Life is open to everyone, no matter their fitness level, background, or gender, with all sponsorship money going towards Cancer Research UK's lifesaving work in its effort to beat all types of cancer; welcomes the multitude of local events across the UK organised each year, and wishes all participants the very best for their efforts.

17:20

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** It is my great pleasure to open this evening's members' business debate on race for life and to recognise the work that Cancer Research UK does to support our constituents. I thank my colleagues for supporting my motion and allowing the debate to go ahead. Such widespread support is a testament to the thousands of participants and volunteers who have been involved in race for life events across our country during the past 30 years. It also pays tribute to the huge success of that vitally important initiative.

I also thank Emily and Sorcha from Cancer Research UK for taking the time to travel to Parliament for this debate, and I welcome them to the public gallery.

The debate gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the invaluable work that is undertaken by race for life and Cancer Research UK and by the staff, volunteers and participants who form the backbone of the initiative. The hard work that is done behind the scenes to organise and run these events is a great achievement.

For three decades, Cancer Research UK race for life has provided the opportunity for communities to raise money for life-saving cancer research. Its track record is seriously impressive. In 30 years, more than 10 million people have taken part in race for life events, raising more than £940 million for life-saving cancer research and supporting more than 130,000 cancer patients across the country with radiotherapy every year.

All race for life sponsorship goes to Cancer Research UK's life-saving work by funding laboratories, tests and treatments for all 200 types of cancer. Thanks to significant investment, dedication and research, there have been noticeable improvements in early cancer diagnosis and treatment across Scotland. The initiative, spearheaded by our Government and delivered by exceptional national health service staff, is making a difference to the lives of the very people whom we are here to represent. We have made significant progress in improving cancer survival rates in recent years thanks to the tireless work of researchers, medical professionals, campaigners and thousands of fundraising efforts such as race for life.

We cannot forget that the heart and soul of race for life is the participants. An astonishing 10 million individuals have donned their running shoes, sweatbands and pink ribbons to stand up against cancer. They come from all walks of life, all levels of fitness, all backgrounds and all genders and they are unified by a shared objective of improving cancer research and, ultimately, beating cancer. It is their collective spirit, dedication and selfless endeavour that we are here to celebrate and honour today.

Earlier this month, more than 1,600 people took part in the 2023 race for life in Beveridge park in Kirkcaldy in my constituency. They raised an inspiring sum of £92,000 for cancer research, and I was delighted to meet many of them and participate at the finish line by awarding them their medals. As anyone who has attended race for life events will know, the atmosphere is deeply moving, as communities come together to celebrate the lives of those dear to them. From the moment that I arrived, the park was awash with colour from a sea of pink T-shirts to colourful wigs and even a dog in a tutu. Every person was there for the same reason—to have fun and remember the lives and experiences of those whom they loved.

It is easy to get swept away with facts and figures, but the reality of this terrible disease really hit home when I was speaking to participants about their stories and their motivation for signing up. There were stories such as that of 11-year-old Saoirse O'Halloran from Fife, who was chosen as the VIP starter to sound the horn at the start of the events in Kirkcaldy. Earlier this year, Saoirse was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma, which is a cancer of the white blood cells. She stood at the start line and cheered on the participants, who included her mum, sister and brother.

Also participating was Joanna Keddie, who was running in memory of her mum, Sheena, a nurse from Kirkcaldy Victoria hospital, who died from

breast cancer last year. Speaking after the race, she said:

"I was thinking of my mum every step of the way today."

That was echoed time and again as I spoke to people who shared their stories with me and made comments such as,

"I know my dad would be proud of me right now",

and

"Today, I felt my best friend was still here running beside me".

Then there are those who have battled cancer and won, and are running to show others that this cruel disease can be beaten. I was left in awe of their bravery and determination.

I cannot express enough how proud I am of my constituents who participate in those events to fundraise and help scientists find new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer, which helps to save more lives. Every individual is a beacon of hope and a symbol of resistance against cancer.

I acknowledge and thank the organisers and tireless volunteers who make those events possible. Cancer touches us all at one point or another, be it through personal experience or through our loved ones, neighbours or colleagues. The funds raised at race for life events have been and will continue to be instrumental in groundbreaking research, providing the resources and tools necessary to continue our fight against cancer. The funding contributes to a wide array of cancer services, including the gloves that help scientists stay safe while in the lab, and the microscopes and other equipment used to measure the size of tumours and learn how they grow. An invaluable cancer chart helps thousands of people who are affected by cancer and are going through very challenging times.

That groundbreaking work, which is supported by events such as race for life, contributes to more people surviving. We must not underestimate the importance of ensuring that the voices and experience of people who are affected by cancer are at the heart of policy.

Many of our constituents are impacted by cancer, and it is crucial that they are the centre of our approach going forward. Thousands of families in our communities have faced the indescribable pain of losing loved ones to this dreadful disease. We owe it to them to strive for continuous improvements in our healthcare services, particularly in the field of cancer research.

I am grateful that Scotland's commitment to investing in the detect cancer early programme with state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment is further enabling early detection. I note the



contribution of the transforming cancer care programme, which is a first of its kind in the United Kingdom, in partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support, to improving the services that are offered to cancer patients.

A significant breakthrough has been rolled out in rapid diagnostic centres across Scotland, including the one in the Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy, in my constituency. Those centres aim to provide an all-clear diagnostic within 28 days of a referral, making the process faster and less anxiety provoking for those involved.

Although we celebrate the achievements, we cannot afford to be complacent. We still face challenges, and we need to tackle the health inequalities that contribute to lower cancer survival rates in more deprived areas. The road ahead is still long and filled with challenges. The optimism of race for life events is infectious, and I am firm in my belief in our collective ability to rise to the challenge. Scotland has a strong foundation to build on to improve cancer outcomes, and I am incredibly grateful for the brilliant work of Cancer Research UK to help Scotland continue to drive that progress.

I conclude my contribution with a sense of pride and admiration as we honour and celebrate the 30th anniversary of race for life, an initiative that has touched the lives of thousands of people across Scotland. It is a pleasure to be able to formally acknowledge the incredible work that race for life and Cancer Research UK do, and I extend my heartfelt gratitude to participants, volunteers and supporters of this wonderful initiative. I also extend my best wishes to everyone across Scotland who will take part in the upcoming race for life events this year.

17:28

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** I thank David Torrance for bringing forward this very important debate to recognise the 30th anniversary of Cancer Research UK's race for life. Every year, tens of thousands of Scots are diagnosed with cancer, and the numbers are only set to rise in the coming decades. Every one of us in the chamber, and everyone across the country, will have had their life touched by the impact of cancer.

Today I think of my late friend and neighbour Sue in London. Sue died of cancer far too young. She left behind a family and friends, and a void among us. I also think of my partner's father, Alf, who fell ill with a very difficult-to-treat cancer while visiting my partner, Mark, and myself when we lived in Asia. He faced a gruelling 16-hour flight back to Edinburgh accompanied by a doctor and Mark's mum, Ann. The weeks that followed were

difficult for our family and for Ann and Alf's many friends, some of whom visited Alf in his last few days at home in Portobello.

As the family came to Alf's bedside, so too did a team from Marie Curie, who helped to nurse Alf and provided support to Ann, Mark and his sister, Louise. I was struck by how important those organisations, which are often charities, are, and by how important the support is that they give to people living with cancer and their families around them.

Sadly, too many of us have only memories of a loved one who suffered from cancer but, thankfully, many more have the comfort of family or friends who have survived cancer—they have come through the treatment and are now living healthy and normal lives. They do so thanks to the huge efforts of a wide range of charities, clinicians and, of course, our NHS. That is why it is hugely important that we in this Parliament recognise those efforts and, particularly today, the efforts of Cancer Research UK.

Thirty years ago, Cancer Research UK established race for life, a series of fundraising events right across the UK that are open to everyone. People of all skill levels, all ages and from all walks of life come together to celebrate collective efforts to combat cancer and to promote healthy living and wellness. The race for life is all about celebrating life and those who face or have faced cancer. Runners are encouraged to wear bright clothing and to race at their own speed to raise funds for life-saving cancer research. The race has raised more than £940 million for Cancer Research UK over its three decades in operation.

This year, there will be events in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Fife, Falkirk, Stirling and Inverness to help to fight cancer, and it is vital that we in this Parliament do our bit to raise the profile of initiatives such as this. I strongly encourage my constituents and anyone who is interested to donate or to take part in the event in future years. Somebody asked me today whether I will be doing it, and I think that I can now commit to doing it. I might be walking it, but I will commit to doing it, because race for life helped Cancer Research UK to fund more than £33 million-worth of cancer research in Scotland last year. That money has supported laboratories and institutions in Glasgow and Edinburgh and hundreds of scientists, doctors and nurses across Scotland.

The races offer a critical lifeline for cancer researchers and patients right across Scotland, which is why I would like to say thank you and express the thanks of my constituents to all those who have participated and supported race for life over the past 30 years. Each and every one of us who has lost someone to cancer has good reason to want that commitment to be redoubled and for

further progress to be made in combating cancer. We hope that that continues for another 30 years.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Hoy. Your commitment is now on the parliamentary record.

17:32

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I begin by thanking my friend and colleague David Torrance for securing this members' debate. I also take this opportunity to thank Cancer Research UK for all the hard work that it has done and continues to do on a daily basis.

When David Torrance spoke about pink wigs in his opening speech, I kind of laughed—I apologise, because I know that it is a serious subject. However, it brought to mind the day that Kevin Stewart MSP and I, when we were both councillors, decided to don pink curly wigs and walk the floors of Marischal college rattling our tins—I say to Douglas Lumsden that that was before his time, so he is okay—to get money for Cancer Research UK. I still have the photographs, so if anybody wants to make a donation to Cancer Research UK, I will gladly show them those.

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You have goaded him into it.

**Jackie Dunbar:** Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You will get the time back and more.

**Douglas Lumsden:** Will Jackie Dunbar commit to doing the race, as Craig Hoy has done? I would maybe even put £50 in the pot.

**Jackie Dunbar:** Ooh! I have already done it but, yes, absolutely, I will. I will come on to talk about the Aberdeen race, too.

Cancer affects us all in some shape or form, and it touches all of us at some time or another. It is a cruel disease that we would all like to banish to the history books. One day at a time, one step at a time, we will beat cancer—we just have to.

Race for life is celebrating its 30th year, and it has been a huge success. It started as a women-only event in Battersea in 1994, where 750 participants raised £48,000. Since then, it has grown into a series of hundreds of events and, as we have heard, more than 10 million folk have taken part in that time, raising more than £940 million, which helps to fund research into more than 200 types of cancer.

In 2019, for the first time, race for life opened its doors for men to participate so, if Douglas

Lumsden wants to join me, he is more than welcome. That made it a truly inclusive event that gives folk the chance to come together with their families and friends and join the movement to help to beat cancer.

Many moons ago, I became one of the 10 million folk who have taken part. I took part in the Aberdeen race for life when it was held at Hazlehead park, which shows just how long ago that was, because it is now held down at the beach in Aberdeen. My daughter, Dawn, and I took part for a number of reasons. Dawn was keen to take part to celebrate her auntie, Frances Walker, who was a warrior at kicking breast cancer, and I am delighted to say that Frances is still a cancer-free warrior, living life to the full and enjoying spending time with her grandchildren. While I wanted to celebrate Frances, I also wanted to do the race in memory of my mam, whom Dawn never got to meet. My mam died at the very young age of 34 with ovarian cancer, and I still wish to this day that Dawn had been able to meet her grandma Barr, but cancer just did not allow it.

This year's Aberdeen event will take place on 2 July, meeting at 10 am at the Kings Links on the beach esplanade, and I have just found out that I am doing it. Even if folk cannot manage to take part themselves, they can still go down and support those who can, although I will say that it is never too late to register and take part.

For everyone who takes part, sponsors, raises money or whatever it is that they do to help to beat this vile and awful disease, I sincerely say thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Dunbar. I hope that you and Mr Lumsden enjoy your race for life together.

17:36

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I thank David Torrance for bringing the debate to the chamber and allowing us to again talk about the very important issue of changing cancer outcomes. It is right that we use much of our members' business debate time to discuss cancer, cancer treatment and the research that is needed to ensure that we fight and beat this devastating disease.

When we speak the figures for cancer diagnosis out loud, we know why we, as parliamentarians, spend so much time discussing, debating and analysing treatment paths. There were 35,379 new cancers registered in Scotland in 2021. That is an increase of 5.5 per cent compared with 2019, and it is in line with a long-term trend of an increasing number of cancer diagnoses over time.

When thinking of those numbers, the most important thing is to think of the person and families behind them. Behind every number is a person who will be unsure of what is ahead of them in the days, weeks and months ahead. We know that cancer can affect people physically, emotionally and financially, and it is also a huge emotional challenge for families and friends.

That is why volunteering and participating in communal events are so appealing for people. While fundraising, one gets the opportunity to participate in a group event and space to share experiences and stories, and perhaps to find some common ground. The lovely thing about race for life is that people at all fitness levels are encouraged to do what they can to contribute to the common goal of raising money for cancer research.

We need research into cancer now more than ever. Research has moved the goalposts and tipped the dial in the correct direction. During the past 40 years, cancer survival rates in the UK have doubled. In the 1970s, just one in four people survived the disease for 10 years or more. Today, two in four survive. Cancer Research UK has a clear goal of accelerating progress and seeing three in four patients survive the disease by 2034.

We are, of course, lucky to have excellent research facilities in our education departments, and I understand that Cancer Research UK leads research in areas such as cancer biology, cancer drugs, cancer trials, early diagnosis, immunotherapy, new technologies, personalised medication, prevention and radiotherapy. However, it would be wrong not to take this opportunity to note that Cancer Research UK made a decision to end core funding at the Beatson in the west of Scotland, which is one of the largest clinical trial units in Scotland. We need to continue to invest in those areas, so it is important that we recognise that Scotland can hold those trials, and it is welcome when research funding is placed in Scotland.

My final point, which I have raised repeatedly, is about the inequalities in prevention, care and access to cancer care treatments. For many of the most marginalised in our society, the chances of getting cancer, their experiences of cancer and the outcomes are worse due to factors and circumstances that are beyond their control. Key to reducing cancers and cancer inequalities is acknowledging and dealing with the root causes that blight many of our communities. Across Scotland, we know that the most deprived populations have worse experiences and outcomes than those in the least deprived areas do.

We must act with purpose to reverse those concerns. Early detection gives those who have

cancer the best chance of life. We must use events such as race for life not only to raise awareness of the disease and to focus on the importance of research but as a reminder of the long way that we have to go to address health inequalities.

I really appreciate all the contributions in the chamber this evening, and I wish everyone who is taking part in race for life the very best.

17:41

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** I, too, give my heartfelt thanks to my colleague David Torrance for bringing the motion to the chamber today and for allowing us all to recognise the value of race for life. I thank Emily and Sorcha from Cancer Research UK very much for all the work that they do. It is great that they have been able to join us here in our Scottish Parliament. I also thank my colleagues for sharing such valuable contributions to the debate.

As Craig Hoy said, this is our opportunity—in fact, it is more than an opportunity; it is our purpose—to raise awareness of cancer, so I thank him for highlighting that.

As Carol Mochan said:

“Behind every number is a person”.

In my role as Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, I have found hearing personal stories and meeting people really important. I appreciate David Torrance talking about Sheena's daughter, and I can reflect personally on some participants saying that their dad would be proud of them and on others saying that they were imagining that their best friend was running beside them.

Craig Hoy talked about the “void”, which is a poignant way of describing losses. Jackie Dunbar talked about celebrating Frances the warrior and running in memory of her dear mum. I thank all members for sharing those stories with us.

I have also reflected on the role that charities play with regard to cancer, as part of that intersecting team that helps researchers, clinicians and the NHS, who all work together, along with communities. That is really important.

I am delighted to mark the 30th anniversary of race for life this year. The level of participation and commitment shown by all those who join the many events across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom is so impressive. Many participants consider race for life as a way to share their own or their friends' or family members' experiences of cancer, as we have heard. I congratulate every participant on raising funds to support research—

they are making such a difference to the lives of people with cancer right now and in the future.

As others have said, race for life is an inclusive event—everyone can participate, no matter their fitness level. I know that there are varying lengths of races and some muddy obstacle courses for adults and children. I would love to see Jackie Dunbar doing that with her pink wig on—I might even join her. As David Torrance said, there was an event in his constituency earlier in May. As Cancer Research UK's website says, people can sign up as a volunteer if running is not their thing. The website asks volunteers to

“bring you energy, smiles and passion to the party and let's help beat cancer”.

If people are not running, they can volunteer instead.

I am aware of how truly important race for life is to Cancer Research UK. Race for life is its biggest series of fundraising events, having raised—as others have said—more than £940 million, which is seriously impressive.

I will take some time to recognise the important role of Cancer Research UK in funding vital and life-saving research into all types of cancer. Here in Scotland, CRUK works in partnership with the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde and with NHS Lothian and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. The research focuses on a variety of cancers, including those that, unfortunately, have poorer outcomes such as brain, pancreatic and liver cancers.

The Scottish Government is clear that research is essential if we are to continue developing new and effective approaches to cancer diagnosis and treatment. In partnership with Cancer Research UK, we have increased funding to the Experimental Cancer Medicine Centre and specifically to its centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh, which specialise in the delivery of early-phase clinical trials. The combined Scottish Government and CRUK funding for the adult and children's ECMCs is £4.68 million over five years from the start of the current financial year.

As minister for public health, I must highlight the importance of preventing cancer, which is an area that Cancer Research UK is also particularly keen to address. We recognise the importance of public health initiatives in reducing the risk of ill-health, including cancer, for everyone in Scotland. That is why, in May 2018, we introduced minimum unit pricing as one of 20 actions in our alcohol framework 2018 to tackle alcohol-related harm. We also want everyone in Scotland to eat well and have a healthy weight, to help reduce the impact of a range of diet-related ill-health conditions.

Given how important physical activity is for our general health, it is particularly appropriate to raise awareness of cancer by taking part in race for life. Being physically active is also one of the most important steps that people of all ages can take to prevent, treat and control cancer.

We know that the risk of cancer can increase when preventative measures do not have the expected outcomes. Cancer remains a national priority for the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland. We are developing an ambitious 10-year cancer strategy, which will be launched shortly. The strategy will take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways from prevention and diagnosis through to treatment and post-treatment care, and its vision and aims will be supported by a three-year action plan.

Work to develop a new earlier cancer diagnosis vision for Scotland that will shape the future of the programme is nearing completion and will form part of the new cancer strategy. The programme will ensure that those with suspected cancer symptoms are put on the right pathway at the right time. Our aim is to reduce later-stage diagnosis so that cancer, when detected, is more likely to be curable.

I thank those who support race for life and the on-going work of Cancer Research UK to fund life-saving research and raise awareness. Anyone wishing to join one of this year's race for life events can find out more from the website [raceforlife.cancerresearchuk.org](http://raceforlife.cancerresearchuk.org).

I reiterate to members, and to those watching, that the Scottish Government has an enduring commitment to reduce the burden of cancer in Scotland through a wide range of actions from prevention and early intervention to strengthening treatment options and providing broader supportive care. As Jackie Dunbar said:

“One day at a time, one step at a time”.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate.

*Meeting closed at 17:48.*

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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