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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 31 May 2023

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

Point of Order

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. There is a debate this afternoon on a motion in the name of Jenny Gilruth that invites the Parliament to welcome the publication of "All Learners in Scotland Matter: Our National Discussion on Education". However, that document has not been published. Strictly speaking, nobody in the chamber has a right to speak about its contents because it is not in the public domain.

I ask for your guidance and intervention. How are we supposed to have a debate about a document that has not yet been published? Can the office of the Presiding Officer intervene with the Government to insist that that document is published at least before we begin the debate? Can it also make the point that it is a discourtesy to the Parliament for the Government to schedule a debate on a subject that involves a publication that has not been published? How are we supposed to have a meaningful debate?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I thank Mr Kerr for his contribution. Strictly speaking, that is not a point of order, as it does not engage the chair. However, I am aware of the important issue that Mr Kerr has raised. Obviously, it is vital that members have the information that they need in a timely fashion, so we will look into the matter that Mr Kerr has flagged up to the chamber, with a view to ascertaining what is happening.

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

14:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands. As always, I make a plea for succinct questions and answers so that I can call as many members as possible.

UCI Cycling World Championships (Forestry and Land Scotland)

1. **Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions have taken place with Forestry and Land Scotland regarding the upcoming 2023 UCI cycling world championships. (S6O-02292)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): We are all delighted that Scotland is hosting that groundbreaking sporting event this summer. For one country to host all the UCI cycling world championships is unique, and 2023 Cycling World Championships Ltd is working with Forestry and Land Scotland on preparations to host various competitions and disciplines. The Scottish Government sits alongside Forestry and Land Scotland on groups such as the cycling world championships policy advisory group and the cycling world championships marketing and communications group to help to progress those preparations.

Bill Kidd: Although Glasgow will be the host city and it will undoubtedly rise to the occasion of giving competitors and spectators a warm welcome, all of Scotland will play its part in marking the occasion, with key events such as mountain biking being held at Glentress and Fort William, as well as in Glasgow. What role will our national forests play in supporting the historic and unique event?

Mairi Gougeon: It is important to highlight that Glasgow, given its track record and facilities, will be at the heart of activity, but our national forests will provide a spectacular backdrop for key disciplines. That includes the world mountain bike cross-country, which will be held at the Glentress centre, and the mountain bike downhill world cup, which will be at Fort William.

A key aim of the 2023 UCI cycling world championships is for the event to demonstrate our nation's natural beauty as well as a warm welcome. We can really look forward to seeing Perthshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Fife and Stirling featuring and showcasing all that Scotland

has to offer to an unrivalled world audience. Many events, such as the road races and time trials, will be free to view. I hope that that will help to introduce cycling and cycling events to a wider audience and encourage people from throughout the country to go along and view what will be spectacular events.

Salmon Industry

2. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to boost the Scottish salmon industry. (S6O-02293)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to the sustainable development of our world-leading aquaculture industry, not least because of the significant economic value that the sector brings to more remote rural and island areas through farm businesses, the wider supply chain and all the jobs that the sector supports.

We are working to support business by streamlining the consenting process for fish farms to make it more effective, transparent and efficient. We are also supporting the Sustainable Aquaculture Innovation Centre and collaborating with producers and others to support fish health and welfare in Scotland.

Roz McCall: It is well known that Scotland's native wild salmon are in a perilous state, with populations continuing to decline. Predation is a key factor in that decline, with predators such as cormorants and seals impacting on numbers. The effects are intensified by anthropogenic pressures, including barriers and impoundments that alter habitats and disrupt migration.

Through fisheries and wider tourism, the wild salmon industry is a key component of the rural economy, not least in Fife, where a number of key fisheries are located. A recent Scotland-wide economic assessment of the wild fisheries estimated that the industry is responsible for 4,300 jobs and contributes to just short of £80 million in gross value added to the economy. Therefore, any review of fish-eating bird policies clearly needs to strike a balance in terms of conservation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms McCall, we need a question, please.

Roz McCall: I am just coming to it.

What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that that balance is struck?

Mairi Gougeon: Roz McCall raises a vital point. I am glad that she has highlighted wild salmon, which is an iconic species for Scotland, and that she has emphasised just how important it is. I

absolutely agree with her that wild salmon is a key component of the rural economy.

We recognise the importance of our wild salmon, and we are also seriously concerned about the declines in numbers that we have seen. That is why we set out our wild salmon strategy and published earlier this year a wild salmon implementation plan that outlines all the key pressures and what action we are taking in that regard. I would be happy to furnish Roz McCall with that information so that she can see what action we are taking against each of the pressures that salmon face, because we want to do all that we can to preserve and boost that iconic species for Scotland.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Our salmon industry is a national asset that provides a nutritious source of home-grown protein as well as employment opportunities in rural communities. With Europe reportedly continuing to be the top destination for Scottish salmon, does the cabinet secretary agree that the best way to enhance what our salmon industry has to offer Scotland and the world is to reverse Brexit and remove the bureaucracy and hardships that the Tories have forced on the sector?

Mairi Gougeon: Karen Adam will not be surprised to learn that I absolutely agree with her, because her assessment is absolutely right. Brexit has been harmful to our entire seafood sector, including the Scottish salmon industry.

The Scottish Government repeatedly warned the United Kingdom Government that the forced exit from the European Union would be damaging to Scottish businesses, and we still do not yet know the full implications of the trade and co-operation agreement for our aquaculture industry. Last June, I said in the chamber:

"It is hugely disappointing that increased costs are threatening the competitiveness of Scotland's most valuable food exports."—[*Official Report*, 29 June 2022; c 29.]

A year on, I simply repeat that remark, and I will continue to make clear that all of our food and drink sector would be better off with independence and with Scotland as a member of the European Union.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Last week, the Scottish salmon industry celebrated growth in exports to Asia. The salmon industry provides jobs to economically vulnerable island and coastal communities, but the sector faces concerns about the impact of Scottish National Party-Green proposals for highly protected marine areas. Will the Scottish Government boost the salmon industry by going back to the drawing board on HPMA plans?

Mairi Gougeon: I emphasise that we never left the drawing board in that regard. We consulted on HPMA's at the earliest possible stage in the process.

Beatrice Wishart will no doubt be aware that I visited Shetland a couple of weeks ago. There, I engaged with members of the aquaculture industry in order to hear their concerns directly. We are committed to that engagement and to on-going engagement with communities as well as with impacted industries and sectors. We are continuing to listen to that feedback, and we will analyse the results of the consultation before we set out next steps.

Fisheries Management

3. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the letter from the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, offering to assist with progressing fisheries management issues, including highly protected marine areas. (S6O-02294)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): We received a letter, dated 22 May 2023, from the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, offering assistance, as the member said, in progressing various matters, including inshore fisheries management initiatives. We are in the process of considering the points that were made and will respond in due course.

Of course, the SCFF is involved in our co-management groups, and I encourage the federation to continue to support the fisheries management and conservation group and Regional Inshore Fisheries Group network.

Ariane Burgess: Scotland has a legal duty to manage our seas to a good environmental status, which includes minimising sea bed damage and maintaining fish stocks and wider biodiversity. Supporting low-impact fishers, such as creelers and divers, will help us to achieve that commitment while maintaining jobs in fishing. Does the cabinet secretary agree that creelers and scallop divers must be at the heart of fisheries management policies that will complement HPMA's?

Màiri McAllan: The member narrates very accurately much of what was put to us by the SCFF, which we are now considering very carefully. As part of delivering the United Kingdom marine strategy and ensuring good environmental status, we will shortly publish an updated programme of measures to include actions to improve the status of our sea bed. That will include working directly with fishing industry and international partners to focus on identifying practical and achievable actions to reduce

pressures on the habitats that are most at risk. I commit to working with all fishers and wider communities to ensure that we have a healthy marine environment, including for commercial stocks, which, of course, are critical to maintaining jobs in the industry.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Brendan O'Hara, the Scottish National Party's chief whip at Westminster, has written to 11,000 householders in Argyll and Bute, to encourage them to write to the First Minister over the ill-thought-out, ill-conceived HPMA's. In doing so, he has joined thousands of stakeholders and MSPs from across the chamber in condemning the policy. The process takes as fact that at least 10 per cent of our seas will be designated as HPMA's, which makes a mockery of the consultation. The Scottish Government is clearly only interested in discussing where HPMA's will be imposed and not whether there is a case for creating them. That is bad policy making.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could we please have a question, Mr Carson?

Finlay Carson: Will the consultation ask only the question where the HPMA's will be in at least 10 per cent of our seas, or will it also ask whether 10 per cent of our seas should, indeed, be HPMA's?

Màiri McAllan: I cannot quite believe that, this far down the line, Finlay Carson has obviously still not read the consultation. It is an incredibly broad suite of questions; there is not just the one that he has characterised but a great deal more about what ought to constitute an HPMA or what the site selection might be—running through blue carbon, ecosystem recovery, leisure and fish stocks. For goodness' sake—he should read the consultation before he comes here and asks the Government questions that have no bearing on reality.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Creelers, divers and, indeed, the whole fishing community want to protect our seas, because doing so is crucial to their survival, yet their expertise appears to be ignored. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need a joined-up fisheries management approach, which must be designed with and by the fishing community? How does she intend to re-engage creelers, divers and the fishing community, who have been alienated by the HPMA proposals?

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely agree with the first point about interconnectivity between healthy marine environment and support for people who rely economically on the seas. That goes to the heart of our blue economy vision and what we hope to achieve through our marine environment policies. I direct Rhoda Grant to the work that is due to be on-going with the development of

national marine plan 2. That will be a critical means by which we develop policies for our marine space, noting, of course, the increasing squeeze that is playing out there. As with the development of HPMA's, marine protected areas and priority marine features, we will engage widely with all of those who have an interest as we develop national marine plan 2.

Agricultural Support (Single Application Form)

4. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many farmers and crofters it has supported this year through the single application form. (S6O-02295)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The single application form is the application form that farmers and crofters must complete annually if they wish to claim a number of different support scheme payments. Last year, 19,408 businesses submitted a SAF. To date, approximately £557 million of funding has been issued under the various direct payments and Scottish rural development plan support schemes, with basic payment scheme and greening advance payments issued into the rural economy at the earliest time ever.

All scheme payments were started in line with the 2022 payment strategy timetable and have met, or are on course to meet, payment performance targets. The 2023 SAF submission period opened on 15 March this year, and the penalty-free submission period closed on 15 May, with 19,248 SAFs having been received to date. The late submission period runs until 9 June, with a penalty of 1 per cent per working day being applicable.

Jackie Dunbar: The support that flows from completion of the single application form is vital to the wellbeing of Scotland's agricultural sector. In 2021, more than 93 per cent of single application forms were submitted online through Rural Payments and Services. What percentage of applications has the Government received online this year, and what efficiencies are achieved by farmers using technology in this scenario?

Mairi Gougeon: The member is absolutely right when she talks about the continuing importance of that funding coming through to the sector. I am pleased to say that more than 99 per cent of the SAFs that we received in 2023 were submitted online. We have had only seven paper applications submitted to date. That is a really big step in the right direction, because there are a number of benefits that come with submitting an online form. When it is submitted online, the information that is entered is validated, which reduces the risks of any errors or penalties.

The application is pre-populated with the most up-to-date land information at the time when an application is started, and farmers can choose whether to add seasonal land used the year before. Online applicants then continue to receive email updates and notifications about the scheme acknowledgements and the payment letters, as well as a whole host of other benefits.

As I said, I believe that it is a huge step in the right direction, and it is really positive that so many people are submitting their forms online.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I hope to be able to take the next three questions, so I will need succinct questions and also, cabinet secretary, succinct answers.

Ferries (Impact of Construction Delays)

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its cross-government co-ordination on island connectivity, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding any impact of the continued delay of vessels 801 and 802 on island communities. (S6O-02296)

The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart): I regret that the vessels are taking longer to deliver than estimated, and I am working with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands and other ministerial colleagues to understand the impact that it is having on island communities.

That also requires dialogue with our local authority partners, which is why we have re-established the islands transport forum through the islands strategic group. Furthermore, the First Minister's policy prospectus includes a commitment to publish a new rural delivery plan that will cover the issues that are critical to Scotland's island communities, including transport.

Paul Sweeney: The minister will be aware that the connectivity of Scotland's island communities has been severely hampered by the continued delay to those vessels, which are more than £200 million over budget and five years behind schedule. That does not include the economic impact to those island communities.

What is the Government doing to ensure that Scotland's shipbuilding industry, which should be a national asset to our island communities as well as to the whole country, is resilient and able to flourish in the future to supply a continuous shipbuilding programme for ferries? Right now, it seems that the Government is content to simply capitulate on a national shipbuilding strategy and award future contracts for Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd to Turkey. He must surely recognise that that is not sustainable and that we must

create a continued shipbuilding programme in Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: The Scottish Government supports the growth of commercial shipbuilding in Scotland and has welcomed the United Kingdom Government's intention to introduce a shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme as part of the national shipbuilding strategy refresh.

We look forward to the launch of that scheme, and, once the finer details of it are known, we will work with the industry to establish how best to use the scheme and maximise its potential to support the growth of commercial shipbuilding in Scotland.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Regarding the co-ordination and connectivity questions that the minister mentions, and given the on-going pressures on the fleet, will he provide an update on progress with the delivery of the new vessels for the Little Minch and Islay services and on what benefits might be expected from their deployment?

Kevin Stewart: Construction of the two new Islay vessels is well under way, and I am pleased to say that, on 25 May, steel cutting marked the official commencement of the construction of the first of the Little Minch vessels.

The vessels will bring benefits to island communities by improving the reliability, resilience and capacity of the ferry network. That includes the planned provision of a two-vessel summer service on the Little Minch route in place of the current single-vessel service.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This morning, I received a letter from the transport minister rejecting the idea of a ferry compensation scheme for island communities that are affected by problems in the network—problems that were caused by the catastrophic handling of ferry services by his Government over the years. In the light of that and the problems that the delays to the two vessels are causing to islanders, will the minister reconsider that position?

Kevin Stewart: I have discussed that directly with a number of local businesses—I did so last week with Alasdair Allan in north and south Uist and Benbecula. Although I understand the calls to support businesses through disruption, our focus—rightly—must be on building resilience into the ferry network. That means that we are able to provide vessels such as MV Alfred, and we have invested £9 million in that regard to build on resilience.

I think that many folk understand that we really need to invest in our ferry network to get it right for people as we move forward. That is why we have

vessels 801 and 802 and the four Islay class vessels being built at this moment.

Commercial Forestry (Effect on Farming)

6. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what actions it is taking to mitigate any negative effects of commercial forestry on farming. (S6O-02297)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): We have introduced positive initiatives to help farmers and crofters get the benefits of growing trees and to support their farming business. All woodland creation is assessed for its agricultural impact and recent analysis shows that all types of woodland, including commercial forestry, have a vital role to play in reducing net CO₂ emissions.

Liam Kerr: The Scottish Land Commission has found that there has been a notable increase in off-market or secret sales of farms to turn them into forestry. Will the cabinet secretary tell me what the Government is doing to ensure that any secret sales are above board and that they are not sacrificing irreplaceable productive farmland to subsidise greenwashing through tree planting?

Mairi Gougeon: I welcome the report that the SLC has put together, and I want to engage with it to discuss directly the outcomes of that report.

As I said, we undertake impact assessments. This morning, I was at the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, where we talked about forestry. I emphasised again that, ultimately, we want to see the right tree in the right place, and we want to ensure that any transactions in that regard are handled appropriately and in the right way.

I am more than happy to follow up and discuss the issue further with the member.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I have been contacted by constituents in Dumfries and Galloway who have provided examples of forestry having been planted on prime agricultural land. Given the need to ensure food security in Scotland, and our proud agricultural history, does the cabinet secretary agree that following the right tree in the right place strategy is important? Will she set out whether the Scottish Government is considering any action to stop large-scale commercial planting on prime agricultural land, such as that in Dumfries and Galloway?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises important points. As I said in my previous response, I very much believe in and am supportive of the right tree in the right place approach, because we want to ensure that food production and the actions to address the nature and climate crises are taken together.

Through our work on the development of the agriculture bill, which will be introduced this year, and the recent consultation on the future forestry grant scheme, we will be supporting greater integration between farming and forestry through the incentives that we offer to land managers.

Agricultural Support

7. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether agricultural support is delivering value for money. (S6O-02298)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): First, I want to state that I remain committed to supporting active farming and food production, and we are doing that with direct payments to provide certainty and to support a just transition as we replace the common agricultural policy.

I am committed to co-development. We all accept that, to achieve our vision, we will require farmers and crofters to do more to deliver sustainable and regenerative farming and to maximise sustainable food production in ways that also actively benefit both nature and climate. That includes our commitment to shifting 50 per cent of direct payments to climate action and funding for on-farm nature restoration and enhancement by 2025.

Richard Leonard: In “Equality, opportunity, community: “New leadership—A fresh start”, the First Minister told us this. He said:

“it is imperative that transparency underpins our approach to delivery. My government will ensure the people of Scotland have the information they need to hold us to account”.

At the moment, when it comes to agricultural payments, we can see where the money goes and we can see what the money was claimed for, but we cannot identify who receives that money. So, in the interest of transparency, to ensure that the people of Scotland have the information they need, will the cabinet secretary commit today to publish, and update regularly, a list of Scotland’s landowners who receive Scottish Government agricultural support, including a league table, by value, in order, broken down by gender, from those who receive the most to those who receive the least?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank the member for raising that really important point, because his question highlights just some of the issues that we need to try to balance in that regard. I think we want to—well, I know we want to—increase the transparency of who owns land in Scotland. That is why we have undertaken some measures so far. We also want to increase the diversity of land ownership in Scotland, and the proposals that we

bring forward in the land reform bill will be critically important in relation to that. I look forward to continuing these discussions as we bring forward our agriculture bill and bring forward our land reform bill to really deliver on that transparency and accountability.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): We get better value for money by supporting our farmers, crofters and fishermen. We also get better quality by buying food that is locally produced to high environmental standards. Would the cabinet secretary be open to adopting Scottish Conservative plans to increase the amount of home-grown food that is purchased by local authorities by introducing a 60-60 target or strategy, in which, where possible, 60 per cent of the food purchased is sourced from farmers, fishermen and crofters who are within 60 miles of the region?

Mairi Gougeon: Those are commitments that we are already driving forward as a Government. Through our good food nation plan, our local food strategies and the food for life scheme, which we are delivering with the Soil Association, we want to deliver exactly that. If the member wants to have a discussion with me about the measures that we are undertaking or areas that we could look to develop further, I am more than happy to have that conversation.

Ultimately, we are all trying to achieve the same thing. We want to meet more of our own food needs sustainably, to produce that food in Scotland and to ensure that we have strong, local, resilient supply chains. First of all, we want to see more of our own produce ending up in the public sector in particular, where we have a lot of initiatives and a lot of levers that we can use to deliver that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands. Sorry—I should have said that question 8 was not lodged.

There will be a very short pause before we move to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change position, should they wish.

NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to portfolio questions on NHS recovery, health and social care. I remind members that questions 3 and 8 have been grouped together; therefore, I will take any supplementaries on those questions once they have both been answered.

Maternity Services (Moray)

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many

mothers from Moray it anticipates will give birth at Raigmore each year until the new service at Dr Gray's is up and running, in light of its decision in December 2022 not to continue with model 4. (S6O-02300)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The member will be aware that, in March this year, the previous Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care approved the plan for integrated maternity services across the north of Scotland, with consultant-led obstetric services at Dr Gray's hospital, and that the plan was supported with an initial investment of up to £6.6 million.

Although model 4 is not continuing as previously outlined in the Ralph Roberts review, the elements in model 4 continue to feature in the approved plan. Under that plan, Raigmore will continue to accept around one to two women per week who require emergency transfer in labour from Dr Gray's. In addition, from 2025 and in line with the expected completion of building refurbishment work in Raigmore and increased staffing levels associated with the networked model of care, it is expected that Moray women will be able to choose to birth in Raigmore in addition to Dr Gray's or Aberdeen maternity hospital. I expect to see the revised NHS Highland business case for Raigmore maternity services once it has been through board approval processes.

Edward Mountain: NHS Highland is spending £9 million to expand Raigmore's maternity unit, with the help of a £5 million allocation from the Scottish Government. Can the minister explain how Raigmore will cope with an estimated 500 extra births per year, as was explained at the board meeting yesterday, when the updated unit, when built, will increase capacity by only one additional bed space in the labour suite?

Jenni Minto: The plan for a networked model of maternity care in the north, which was approved in March 2023, envisages women from Moray being able to choose to birth in Raigmore from 2025. As I mentioned, I expect to receive the revised business case from NHS Highland shortly. I am aware that it was discussed at the NHS Highland board meeting yesterday and is available online, but I will consider it fully and look at the points that the member has raised once it is submitted.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Although we should not be in any doubt about the scale of the challenges in delivering the plan, it is welcome that the services will now be rebuilt in a phased way to ensure that they are safe, sustainable and fit for the future. Given the importance of these developments, will the minister provide assurances that she will keep Parliament updated as the delivery period progresses?

Jenni Minto: Karen Adam makes an important point. She will be aware that the previous Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care on numerous occasions reiterated his commitment to returning consultant-led maternity services to Dr Gray's, and that that is also a manifesto pledge. I can give an absolute assurance that, as progress is made, I am happy to keep Parliament updated.

General Practice (Independent Contractor Model)

2. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the continuation of the independent contractor model in general practice. (S6O-02301)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting general practice, and the independent contractor model is a key part of that. I recently met the chair of the British Medical Association's Scottish general practitioners committee to reaffirm that. The 2018 GP contract that was agreed with the BMA is designed to support and strengthen that commitment.

As part of the contract, and to support GP practices, we have recruited more than 3,220 healthcare professionals since 2018. That is underpinned by an investment of £170 million this year, and our policy prospectus commits us to sustaining that investment through the primary care improvement fund and investing more in practices that service disadvantaged areas. We remain committed to increasing the number of GPs working in Scotland by at least 800 by 2027.

Claire Baker: The cabinet secretary will recognise that, although he has promised 800 more GPs, Audit Scotland has warned that progress is not on track. In my region, NHS Tayside has recommended that Invergowrie's practice should close later this month, with more than 1,800 patients being allocated to other practices. In Fife, 40 per cent of GP surgeries have closed their doors to new patients, which is a higher figure than anywhere else in Scotland. Among the current workforce, it is estimated that more than a third are unlikely to remain in general practice for the next five years, which would mean around 1,500 GPs lost.

What action is the Scottish Government taking to improve the retention of GPs, which will be crucial if we are to reach the required number?

Michael Matheson: We are taking forward a range of work to support the retention of GPs in general practice. That includes the funding initiatives that we have in place to encourage GPs to work in rural areas. Alongside that, in this year's recruitment programme for GP training, we have

more or less reached the quota that was set to support further GP provision.

I understand the concerns that the member is raising on behalf of her constituents, but I reassure her that investment in primary care, supporting the retention of general practitioners, recruiting more people into general practice and expanding the primary care workforce are all critical to ensuring that we have a sustainable primary care system. We have, for example, recruited more than 3,000 additional staff in primary care to help the wider workforce to support individuals with their healthcare needs in primary care settings.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the issues relating to the GP surgeries in Burghead and Hopeman, as I have written to him and to his predecessor about them. The very strong local action group, save our surgeries, is campaigning to retain those vital services, and I believe that there is cross-party support for that. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet the campaigners, either in Moray or in Parliament, to listen to their concerns about the future of those two vital surgeries and to the local solutions that they are offering to keep them open?

Michael Matheson: I am aware of the issues relating to those surgeries. The principal route for those issues to be addressed is through the local integration joint board, health and social care partnership and health board, which will look at the design of services that are provided locally. The health board has a contract directly with the GP practices and will make decisions about the existing surgeries that are in place. It is important that that process is taken forward. I encourage the member and local campaigners to engage with the health board, the IJB and the health and social care partnership on those issues to ensure that there are sustainable services in the future.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Independent GP contractors in West Lothian have told me that having the ability to directly employ allied health professionals such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists and dieticians would make a real difference in allowing GPs to employ AHPs based on their practice's needs, rather than there being centralised allocations. That would give GPs the authority to line manage the AHPs in their employ, and it would support flexibility, continuity and integrity of care for patients. Currently, our local health and social care partnership requires centralised recruitment and employment. Will the cabinet secretary consider that policy in order to support GPs to improve services for their patients?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the value of the wider skills group in supporting primary care. In particular, AHPs such as those who deal with musculoskeletal conditions, physios, OTs and

dieticians can be used in a range of areas. We are trying to ensure that there is a steady increase in the number of AHPs being provided to GP practices across the country.

I recognise the concern that the member has raised. I have recently discussed the issue with GP practices in my constituency. I am not unsympathetic to looking at how we could improve the existing model in a way that would give GPs greater control over such matters. Equally, I want to ensure that the multidisciplinary teams in primary care expand and develop on a consistent basis, so that as many GP practices as possible can benefit. Some GP practices might want to do that directly; others might want that to be done centrally for them. However, I am certainly open to looking at how we can further improve the system.

National Health Service Dentistry

3. Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it is doing to tackle any challenges faced by national health service dentistry. (S6O-02302)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We are working apace to move forward with a modernised system of payment reform that will provide longer-term sustainability for the sector and encourage dentists to provide NHS care. The new system provides greater clinical freedom to dentists through a high-trust, low-bureaucracy model. The new policy prospectus, which the Government set out on 18 April, further commits us to sustained and improved equitable national access to NHS dentistry by 2026. That reaffirms our commitment to the sector and to patients in all parts of Scotland.

Jim Fairlie: In a month's time, the last NHS dentist in Kinross-shire is set to transform into a private practice. That will clearly be challenging for folk living in a vast rural area, given that there will now be a lack of accessible coverage in relation to a very important public health service. What more can the Government do to improve access to NHS dentistry in rural areas, including those in my constituency?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the concerns that Jim Fairlie has raised. We are working closely with NHS boards, a number of which have appointed task forces to support them to develop tailored solutions that will address local access issues.

I can confirm that we have recently expanded the Scottish dental access initiative grant support to Kinross. An attractive and unique financial support package has been offered to incentivise the setting-up of new practices or the extension of existing practices. There is the potential of up to

£100,000 being offered for the first surgery, with £25,000 per additional surgery.

National Health Service Dentistry

8. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it will take to reverse the reported decline of national health service dentistry. (S6O-02307)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The new policy prospectus, which the Government set out on 18 April, commits us to sustained and improved equitable national access to NHS dentistry by 2026. The previous Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care recently confirmed the continuation of the bridging payment to 31 October 2023, while we prepare for the implementation of payment reform. Payment reform will comprise a new, modernised system that will provide NHS dental teams with greater clinical discretion and transparency for NHS patients.

Willie Rennie: Another month has passed and I am afraid that we still have no clarity about what the future fee payment system will be for dentists. Meanwhile, we hear from people such as Jim Fairlie that dentists are leaving the NHS system. When will the minister get a grip on the situation and bring forward the payment system so that we have more clarity and stop the rot in NHS dentistry?

Jenni Minto: I am sure that Willie Rennie will understand that our discussions with the British Dental Association need to remain confidential. However, I will update Parliament as soon as I can.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The Scottish National Party-Green Government does not understand NHS dentistry. The minister has said that there is a low-bureaucracy model; well, if you are a qualified dentist who has been practising for many years abroad, or even in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, and you want to come to Scotland, you have to be recruited as a vocational training by equivalence—VTE—assistant, which means working under supervision for a year and not independently as a dentist. As a result, we have the frankly ludicrous scenario of highly qualified dentists, often with many years of experience, being required to work as trainees for a year if they wish to move to Scotland, which deters dentists from coming to the country. Will the minister commit to removing that bureaucratic red tape so that we can attract qualified dentists to Scotland?

Jenni Minto: Sandesh Gulhane's question refers to a United Kingdom-wide issue. The Scottish Government is working closely with the

other nations; I am, in fact, in the process of writing to them to see whether we can find a better process to ensure that we get the right dentists—

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): That is factually incorrect—

Sandesh Gulhane: It is not a UK-wide issue—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, minister. The question has been posed and the minister is responding. We do not need sedentary interventions; there are other routes.

Please continue, minister.

Jenni Minto: I am in the process of writing to the UK Government to work with it in a four-nation process to try to alleviate that situation.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): With the accessibility of NHS dentistry declining, oral health inequalities are widening and access to dental care, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and young people, is crucial. What steps is the Government taking to support the recovery and future of oral health improvement programmes, such as the Labour legacy of Childsmile, caring for smiles and mouth matters?

Jenni Minto: I was going to reference Childsmile, too, because it is a fantastic project that really helps to educate young children about the importance of oral health. Over the longer term, we have seen significant improvements in child oral health. For example, the first year of the national dental inspection programme, in 2002-03, showed that 45 per cent of primary 1 children had no obvious decay experience. Despite the unique challenges of the pandemic, that figure has increased to 73 per cent.

As of 1 February last year, the Scottish Government introduced changes that permanently increased enhanced fees for examination appointments for both adults and children. For the first time, dentists would receive a fee for examinations for children.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): What is the Scottish Government doing to proactively encourage the use of digital dentistry, particularly oral scanners, which offer significant time savings for dentists, thus increasing capacity; cost savings for the health service; economic development opportunities for Scotland's live science sector; and which prevent Scotland from falling behind global best practice in that regard?

Jenni Minto: Ivan McKee raises a really important point. I remind the chamber that NHS dentistry is provided by independent contractors and that the use of digital technology is ultimately a business decision for them.

The use of digital technology in dentistry is becoming more commonplace, which I very much

welcome. It affords dentists potential cost savings and provides improved patient experiences. I am confident that, through payment reform, we will enable dentists to make use of digital technology where they deem it appropriate—for example, by using digital scanners rather than taking physical impressions of teeth.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister accept that dentists are aware of all the policy initiatives that she talks about—the fact that payment is continuing until 31 October and that a new payments regime will come into place—but that they are still choosing to withdraw from NHS provision? More than 20,000 patients in Dumfries and Galloway alone have been deregistered from the NHS recently. Why does the minister think that that is happening, if the new regime is going to solve the problems?

Jenni Minto: Payment reform constitutes one of our national responses for dentistry. By putting in the framework of payment reform, it is our intention to lay the foundations to ensure further engagement with dentists to look at the points that the member has raised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 was not lodged.

Dentistry (Engagement with Health Ministers)

5. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an update on any recent engagement with health and social care ministers from the other United Kingdom Administrations regarding a co-ordinated approach to dentistry. (S6O-02304)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): A co-ordinated approach is often not possible as dental services in Scotland operate on a fee for item of service model, which is entirely different from the contract model that is used in England and Wales. However, where we identify areas of mutual concern, such as workforce, the intention is to raise that with UK Government colleagues.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the minister for that answer. I welcome the comments that Jenni Minto made earlier this month to confirm extended Scottish dental access initiative grants and the enhanced recruitment and retention allowance. Importantly, the minister also noted that she was working with and writing to UK Department of Health and Social Care ministers to seek improvements to the registration process for overseas dentists on a four-countries basis. Can the minister provide an update on any progress made on that work to increase dentistry workforce pipelines from overseas? Does she agree that that

work is vital to address the destructive impact of Brexit and improve oral healthcare for patients?

Jenni Minto: Stephanie Callaghan makes an important point about the impact that Brexit has had on workforces in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament approved legislation that came into force on 8 March 2023, which provides the General Dental Council with flexibility regarding international registration. As Stephanie Callaghan mentioned, I am in the process of writing to Department of Health and Social Care ministers to ensure that changes are made on a four-nations basis to improve the registration process for overseas dentists. I can also confirm that the cabinet secretary will raise that matter when he meets the GDC on 15 June.

NHS Lanarkshire (Meetings)

6. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with NHS Lanarkshire and what was discussed. (S6O-02305)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet representatives of all health boards, including NHS Lanarkshire, to discuss matters of importance to local people.

Collette Stevenson: We are seeing some really positive changes in primary care, with an emphasis on getting the right care in the right place. For example, NHS pharmacy first Scotland is an excellent service that allows pharmacy teams to provide advice, treatment and referrals. However, people are really struggling to get appointments with their GP. Can the cabinet secretary outline some of the wider work that is being done to improve primary care and how that modernisation will continue to benefit patients? With regard to GP practices, can the cabinet secretary set out how standards are set and monitored, including on the ease of booking appointments, and what opportunities members of the public have to give feedback?

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important issue on behalf of her constituents. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question, we have seen a significant expansion in the primary care team, with more than 3,000 additional staff being recruited to support primary care. That includes staff with a health practitioner background. We want to continue to see that expand as we move forward.

I am also aware of the services that are offered by the wider primary care network, such as through pharmacists and opticians, all of which can have a positive impact on the way in which

patients can access particular services in their locality.

The member might also be aware that the former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care set up the general practice access group, which is looking at some of the key principles around access to general practice. That work is on-going and we expect to receive that report in the coming months. I hope to be in a position to publish it in the summer.

The member will also be aware that, as independent practitioners, practices have to have arrangements in place that ensure that they comply with the GP contract in their health board area and that they ensure access to patients. Therefore, any patient who is concerned about access to their GP service can raise it with them directly or via their health board. It is important that GP practices provide access to patients so that they can make appointments as and when is necessary.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be well aware of the problems that Lanarkshire's accident and emergency units have been having. In March, only 57.2 per cent of patients in Lanarkshire were seen within four hours, and at University hospital Hairmyres in East Kilbride the figure was 52.3 per cent. That is against the national target of 95 per cent. Staff have been up against it for months, so what is the cabinet secretary going to do to help them to reach the national target?

Michael Matheson: The health board is taking forward a range of work, which I am sure that the member will be aware of. For example, recent fire break work was done to improve capacity in the A and E department and help with the flow of patients through the hospital. That has had some positive impact, and we hope to see further progress.

Alongside that, the Government is providing support and guidance to boards to ensure that they are doing everything that they can to improve the flow of patients, which has an impact on A and E performance. That includes the use of the Glasgow continuous flow—GLASFlow—model, which NHS Lanarkshire is presently looking to roll out to help improve the way in which patients move through the hospital.

That combination should help to support staff and improve performance.

Surgical Mesh Products (Independent Review)

7. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will initiate an independent review into the use of surgical mesh products within NHS Scotland. (S6O-02306)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government has already commissioned an independent review of transvaginal mesh implants and acted on the conclusions, which were published in March 2017. We have also implemented Baroness Cumberlege's 2020 recommendations about transvaginal mesh.

More recently, we commissioned two reports from the Scottish Health Technologies Group on mesh used in hernia repair. Those reports supported its continued use, but stressed the importance of patient choice, availability of alternative treatments, informed consent and data collection—all of which the Government supports.

Katy Clark: Freedom of information responses show that, from 2015 to this year, 8 per cent of all patients in NHS Ayrshire and Arran who were implanted with surgical mesh to treat a hernia were readmitted due to complications arising from the mesh. That suggests that there may be a connection, with surgical mesh products having a detrimental impact on the health of some hernia patients. Will the minister meet campaigners who are calling on the Scottish Government to undertake an independent review into the use of mesh?

Jenni Minto: I thank Katy Clark for her supplementary question, and I appreciate the concerns that her constituents have. Scottish Government officials have previously offered to arrange a meeting between a small group of Katy Clark's constituents and the Scottish Health Technologies Group to discuss the findings of its reports into hernia mesh. That offer remains open, should they wish to take it up.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Action needs to be taken now to support women who have been affected by transvaginal mesh-related health issues. The median wait for referral to the complex mesh surgical service in Glasgow is 236 days, and the longest wait is 448 days. Women then need to wait a significant length of time to start treatment that will alleviate their symptoms—or even remove them, if they are fortunate. Women with that debilitating and life-altering condition need help, now. What action is the Government taking to accelerate the provision of that vital treatment?

Jenni Minto: The Government has taken note of the results of both the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's survey and one that was done by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde with regard to that issue, and it is looking at what improvements can be made.

Surgeries have restarted, a number have been carried out and the service expects that it will soon be able to operate within 12 weeks of a patient

and her clinicians deciding on the course of treatment.

I confirm that the service is also taking action to increase its out-patient capacity, which includes an additional translabial scanner. That will allow more patients to be seen and I hope that progress from those actions will soon start to become evident.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on NHS recovery, health and social care.

Presiding Officer's Ruling

14:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I take the opportunity to respond to Mr Kerr's earlier point of order.

I understand that the established practice is for documents to be published at the start of a debate to ensure that information does not enter the public domain before it is provided to members. In that regard, I understand that embargoed copies of the report were indeed provided to assist members in their preparation for the debate. I hope that that is helpful clarification for members.

There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Education (National Discussion)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-09123, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on let's talk education—the national discussion.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased to lead a debate during Scottish Government time on our national discussion on education. Professor Ken Muir's review, "Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education", provided the rationale for the discussion and the recommendation for

"a national discussion on establishing a compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education".

I present that vision to Parliament today. I am keen, in the spirit of last week's debate, to engage with the Opposition consensually as we move the education reform agenda forward and to listen to any ideas that Opposition members have to support the Government and, ultimately, Scotland's children and young people in that endeavour.

This morning, I visited Towerbank primary school in Portobello to officially launch the vision with children and teachers who took part in the national discussion. Towerbank primary school has an impressive pupil parliament, and I am sure that we will see some of those representatives in this Parliament in the future. My thanks go to the headteacher, Mr Friend, for his time, and my apologies go to my friend Ms Gladstone, whose primary 3 class I interrupted.

For our older pupils and anxious mums, dads and carers, today is an important day in the Scottish education calendar: it marks the last day of the official examination diet. I congratulate pupils and learners across Scotland for all their hard work. Today will be a day of reflection for many, so it is timely that we reflect on the future of Scottish education.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the open-door approach that she has adopted so far in her new position. She will have seen that additional support needs get quite a showing in the report on the national discussion. In fact, the report refers to "a flashpoint" whenever the issue is discussed, particularly with parents. Has she reflected on that? What is her view on how we can tackle those long-standing problems?

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

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Willie Rennie for his point. I will come on to talk about the challenge that is presented in the report in relation to the issue that he addressed. He will also be well versed in the increase that there has been in pupils with additional support needs in the past 10 years. I think that just over one third of all pupils in Scotland now have some level of identified additional support need.

There is more that the Government will need to do, but I also recognise that, ultimately, the situation is about partnerships. It is about local authorities and wider partnerships in the school communities. I will come on to talk about that in my response. However, this is not the Government's full response to the report, which, as we heard, was embargoed until 10 minutes to 3 today.

More broadly on the member's point, the report does not sit in isolation. We also have the Hayward review of qualifications in the senior phase and the Withers review of skills delivery. We need to have a holistic and coherent approach across Government in relation to the future of Scottish education. I will say more about that in my remarks.

Back in 2002, when I was in my last year at school, the then Scottish Executive launched a national debate on schools for the 21st century. That debate generated more than 1,500 responses, and it was estimated that more than 20,000 people took part. Twenty-one years later, the national discussion reached an estimated 38,000 people, with more than 5,600 responses being submitted. I am indebted to Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris, both of whom are internationally respected education experts and members of our international council of education advisers, which facilitated the national discussion. Today, I thank them personally for their commitment and dedication. I also pay tribute to every person and organisation that took part in the discussion.

The national discussion is the biggest engagement exercise ever to have taken place in Scottish education. It was co-convened by the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and there can be no doubt that the discussion had children and young people at its heart, and that, in general, it was consensual.

A number of events and discussions took place in every part of Scotland. Those were led by schools, community groups and third sector organisations, supported by the Scottish Government and local authorities. We heard from parents, primary school pupils, island communities, young carers, children with additional support needs, teachers, trade unions,

early years practitioners and speakers of Gaelic and Scots, to name just some.

Time and again, the facilitators were told by participants that they welcomed the opportunity to give their views and that they wanted more opportunities for engagement, so I commit today to ensuring that engagement opportunities will continue to be provided throughout our education reform programme. We must get this right for the next generation, and we cannot do that without continuing to listen.

The agreed vision states:

“Children and young people are at the heart of education in Scotland. The Scottish education system is grounded in collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, parents, and carers to ensure that all learners in Scotland matter.

All learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise. Education in Scotland nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being.

Each child and young person in Scotland has high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represents the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in.

Each child and young person receives great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute in their life, work, and world, so they know how much they matter.”

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am not sure whether the cabinet secretary has just read out a statement of her objectives or whether she is trying to reflect reality. I hope that it is the former and not the latter, because every aspect of the report illustrates that there is frustration, unhappiness and a desire for improvement. I hope that Jenny Gilruth, as the incoming cabinet secretary, will bring a breath of fresh air and that she will address the issues that are raised in the report with the honesty and integrity that I—and others—expect of her.

Jenny Gilruth: Heaven forfend that I do not live up to Mr Kerr’s expectations. In all seriousness, the vision that I have set out to Parliament is the vision from the document itself and, as I mentioned in my response to Mr Rennie, it is for the Government to respond to that vision.

Given that members have had the report only since Thursday of last week and that it has been embargoed until 10 to 3, Mr Kerr will understand that the Government will need to take time to respond to the report. I intend to do so in a fulsome manner, but one that also respects and acknowledges the plethora of other reports that are current in Scottish education. I think that we

need to take a holistic approach as we move forward.

As I have just outlined to Mr Kerr, I am very mindful of the fact that the Opposition will not yet have had time to fully digest what is a substantive report. Equally, as I mentioned to Mr Kerr, I am not going to stand here today and give members answers to all the issues that were raised during the national discussion. It is right that the Government takes time to consider our response, and I need to reflect the fact that the report before Parliament sits within the broader context of on-going review in Scottish education.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I have just left a round-table meeting on children with additional support needs. One comment that was made was that the only certain thing in education is reform. Can the cabinet secretary guarantee that another certainty following the report will be action from the Government?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to give Pam Duncan-Glancy absolute reassurance on that. We need to move forward at pace on reform, but we also need to ensure that we continue to engage with the profession. That is hugely important in relation to where we will get on reform. We need to take teachers and others who work in our education sector with us, as well as our children and young people.

I want to touch on a number of the important findings that were captured in the national discussion. The first relates to “joy”, which is perhaps not a word that we hear often in the chamber, and the simple proposition that learning should be “joyful”. The report talks about

“professionals who spoke of instilling the joy and igniting the love of learning and their appreciation about the opportunity to talk with each other”.

Teaching can be joyful. I think that we need to reflect not only in Government, but, as Pam Duncan-Glancy alluded to, through other organisations—be that local councils or our education bodies—on how we can better empower the profession to create the space so that teachers enjoy what they do best.

My modern studies teacher at school used to refer to the light-bulb moment—the exact moment when someone realises that they have taught a child a concept and that they have understood it. There is no feeling like it. Fundamentally, we want people who teach our children and young people to love what they do and to have a passion for it.

The report talks about the respect that exists for a graduate-level teaching profession and

“human-centred educational improvement”

that places

“people who work in education, especially those such as teachers who are directly responsible for teaching and supporting children and young people, at the centre of informing and leading educational improvement.”

That speaks to the Conservative amendment, which talks about empowering the profession “to be more autonomous”. I agree with that sentiment. I want to work with our teaching professional associations on how that can be better supported as we move forward with reform.

As I mentioned previously, the context for the national discussion is important in relation to the other reports that the Government has commissioned, which we will publish in the coming weeks. It is also important to reflect the global context, which the report says includes

“austerity, a cost-of-living crisis, climate change ... and war in our world”,

which

“cannot be downplayed.”

In last week’s debate, we discussed the anxiety experienced by young people during lockdown and the associated impact on their mental health. However, our schools are not hospitals for all ailments; they cannot respond independently without partnerships and experts who can help.

The report talks about

“networks and collaborations with a range of communities”.

If we visit any school in Scotland, we will see that collaboration in practice, whether that is with social work, the local rotary club, Developing the Young Workforce, active schools or even Scottish Opera, as I heard about at Towerbank primary school earlier today.

As the professors recognised, reform is not about change for change’s sake. There is a lot to be proud of in Scottish education and so much that we can build on. The report is supportive of curriculum for excellence’s focus on numeracy and literacy, and it recognises the commitment to equity and inclusion, a broad-based curriculum, tackling the poverty-related attainment gap, wellbeing, and support for a highly skilled teaching profession.

There was also recognition that more needs to be done to ensure continuous improvement. Respondents to the discussion raised the need for every child to be educated in safe and inclusive environments that respect relationships and where effective anti-bullying strategies are in place.

As I set out in the debate last week, we have a level of challenge in relation to the thematic inspection that was carried out by Education Scotland some time ago. We know that a third of schools, for example, do not use SEEMiS to record bullying incidents. I have discussed that

matter with COSLA directly, to ensure that we have more consistency as we move forward.

The facilitators heard about the levels of children and young people with additional support needs—we have heard about them from Mr Rennie, and I am sure that we will hear about them from other members. It is important that we take away from the report a strong action point on that and seek to embed that in the reform agenda as we move forward.

We cannot walk away from the presumption of mainstreaming, which is a hallmark of the inclusive education system that we have in Scotland. However, we have a responsibility to ensure that the system for young people that is put in place allows them to flourish in the mainstream environment. We all know of examples of where, too often, that has not been the case. It should not be for parents or carers to have to fight for that entitlement.

There is a strong theme in the report around skills-based and practical learning, learning for life, and ensuring that skills-based learning and qualifications are given parity of esteem with academic qualifications. There is also a strong focus on the need for inclusivity and diversity to be embedded at all levels.

Like any curriculum, Scotland’s curriculum for excellence needs checks and balances to ensure that it continues to be relevant. Further, we need to ensure that it meets the needs of children and young people, and that teachers and those who work in our schools are supported to deliver the curriculum successfully. It is absolutely right that we continually look to evolve the curriculum delivery model and that we equip our learners for the challenges that they will face in the future.

The vision is the starting point as we look to the future. The challenge for all of us in Scottish education now is to work together to make the vision a reality. The call to action that has been developed by the facilitators, drawing on the national discussion, sets out the principles from which we can build actions to make the improvements that we need to see in Scottish education.

As intimated earlier today, a number of independent reports exploring specific aspects of our education system are due to be published in the near future. I will consider the outputs of the national discussion alongside those reports. It is right that we take time to reflect, and I will provide a detailed response to the national discussion in the autumn.

As I mentioned, the reform of our education system is, quite rightly, ambitious for our young people, but it also needs to be pursued at pace. I recognise some of the challenges that the

pandemic has presented to the education system. Our reform agenda is ambitious, but we need to take teachers, those who work in our schools and our young people with us.

I look forward to working with my local government partners and everyone with an interest in Scottish education to make the vision of the national discussion a reality.

I call on members to welcome the publication of the report, endorse the vision and work with the Scottish Government and COSLA to turn the vision into a reality. As the facilitators noted, there is

“an optimism for the future of Scottish education and an enthusiasm to be part of taking the outcomes of the National Discussion going forward.”

There is also an overwhelming appetite for change in Scottish education. Let us not miss that opportunity, and let us commit today to making that optimism a reality and ensuring that we deliver that vision for Scottish education, which ensures that all learners matter.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of *All Learners in Scotland Matter: Our National Discussion on Education*; acknowledges the significant levels of engagement that the National Discussion generated, with events and discussions taking place in every part of Scotland, led by schools, community groups and third sector organisations, and reaching more than 38,000 people; thanks the independent academic facilitators, Prof Carol Campbell and Prof Alma Harris, for overseeing this work; supports the guiding values of the report to ensure that all learners in Scotland experience an education system that is ambitious, inclusive and supportive; recognises the diversity of all learners and endorses the vision, which will safeguard the learning and the life chances of all children and young people in Scotland, and agrees to work with the Scottish Government and COSLA to turn this vision into a reality for Scotland’s children and young people, and the educators, parents and carers who support them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr to speak to and to move amendment S6M-09213.3, for around nine minutes.

15:10

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): As I tried to intervene on the cabinet secretary to say, it is important that we have an honest discussion about where we are in Scotland with our education system. The Scottish National Party should not try to disguise its paucity of positive ideas or policies by trying to hide behind the national discussion.

We can all clearly see that Humza Yousaf and his ministers are scratching around for policy ideas. Just look at last week—thank goodness the Scottish Conservatives had ideas about tackling violence in schools. The Government could then copy and paste the Scottish Conservative motion

with minor adjustments and present it as its initiative. I am not moaning about that—I wish that it would do it more often.

Now, I am happy to give way to the cabinet secretary if she will update us on when the summit that she proposed is going to take place.

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to do that, but Stephen Kerr needs to reflect on the fact that the national discussion did not come about in relation to the current First Minister. It has been commissioned as a result of the Muir report. It feels to me that the member may have come to the chamber with a prepared script and that he has perhaps not engaged in reading the report itself. I would certainly encourage him to do so. It is a substantive body of work.

Last week, during what was a consensual debate in relation to behaviour and relationships in school, I already gave an undertaking that I would come back to Parliament with proposals. I am yet to receive proposals from my officials on that, but I intend to take action on the matter before the end of the parliamentary session. I gave Mr Kerr an undertaking on that last week.

I really ask Mr Kerr to respond to this: is this the best that he can do for Scotland’s children and young people? Let us work together more positively and consensually to deliver the improvements that we need to see in Scottish education. That is my challenge to him.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would encourage interventions to be a little briefer, not only from the cabinet secretary but also from Mr Kerr himself.

Mr Kerr, I can give you some of that time back.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you very much.

Well, there we have it—that was the response from the cabinet secretary. But this Government is now in its 17th year in office. It cannot hide its record on education behind the national discussion. That is my point. My message to Jenny Gilruth and her colleagues is straightforward: please listen. Listen to what people are saying is going wrong and act on it. The final report “All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education”, which I have read—and which, by the way, I think we should have published long before 10 to 3, but that is a separate matter—is what the people of Scotland are telling us loud and clear. That is why the report should, in fact, make these ministers feel very uncomfortable indeed.

I repeat that we are in the 17th year of a Government that said that education was its number 1 priority.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does Stephen Kerr agree that, after 17 years, it should be of extreme concern that the young people who responded to the consultation expressed a fear about being at school?

Stephen Kerr: I will quote from paragraph 9.3 of the report:

“We heard many concerns about whether the National Discussion would lead to genuine action and significant change ... We heard frustrations, cynicism, and anger, in some cases, about whether transformational educational reform, as recommended by the Muir Review, would be implemented in Scotland. We heard concerns about whether there would be a tendency to continue the status quo rather than embracing an opportunity for the entire system to do things differently.”

As we enter the 17th year of this SNP Government, people feel cheated. They feel let down and angry. They have seen an SNP Government that is big on words and big on promises but infinitesimally small on delivery.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Does the member welcome the fact that, on the most recent data, a record number of young people—95.7 per cent—are leaving Scottish education to go to positive destinations? Does that not in any way register on Mr Kerr’s view of the world as being a good thing?

Stephen Kerr: I welcome positive destinations, but, under the definition that the Government uses, positive destinations can mean just about anything. The information is tracked only for so many months after young people leave school. I am afraid that that leaves a lot to be desired. That is my honest response to John Swinney’s intervention. Much needs to be improved.

I will go back to the report. As has been referred to, there is a

“groundswell of current support for educational improvement”

which cannot be

“lost, ignored or side-lined.”

That is from paragraph 9.3 of the report. Professors Campbell and Harris, the independent facilitators, conclude:

“now it is time for action, most critically ... time for the right action.”

Will the cabinet secretary set herself apart from her predecessors? Will she take the action that parents, teachers and school leaders are begging for and reform Scotland’s education system? We all know that the business of Government is the business of tough choices. The cabinet secretary will not be able to please everyone, because doing the right things often results in at least temporary unpopularity. However, if Jenny Gilruth makes the right decisions for Scottish educational reform and

she meets resistance, I can assure her that members on the Conservative benches will support her. I hope that future events will show that we are fortunate to have a former teacher as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. I know that she will empathise with the concerns that are writ large in the report about teacher recruitment and retention, which should have been fixed a long time ago. The report highlights the job insecurity that too many teachers experience. How can teachers, particularly those who are newly qualified, plan their future when they are stuck on temporary contracts?

The report goes on. Paragraph 6.1.22 says that there were concerns about

“exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and burnout affecting people’s capacity to do their work and negatively impacting their personal lives”.

That is what we were talking about last week when we called on the Government to provide extra support to teachers in the form of a national helpline. Employee helplines are very common in businesses and other organisations—that is something that can be put in place now to provide teachers with an outlet, because we need to rebuild teacher morale. Comments from teachers and pupil support assistants speak of a profession that has been underappreciated for far too long. That is why the Scottish Conservatives call for a new deal for teachers—the report backs up what we are talking about. We want to see reduced contact hours for teachers so that they can plan and prepare lessons; teachers being paid for extracurricular activities; competitive salaries being offered for specialist subject teachers; cuts to excessive bureaucracy in order to let teachers teach; opportunities for teacher sabbaticals in order to help them to develop professionally; and new pathways into teaching in order to attract the best talent.

Beyond those proposals, there are three specific issues, which I hope I have time to mention, that we need to openly and calmly debate. The first of those is the autonomy of headteachers. I have always felt that it is far better to trust them to run the schools and the school populations that they know in the communities that they know than to leave decisions in the hands of national, regional or local authority managers. There must be accountability and we need to give careful thought to how that can be best achieved. Headteachers should have the freedom to innovate and lead according to the needs of the pupils who are in their care.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I do not know whether I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you a little time back, if Ross Greer is brief.

Ross Greer: I strongly agree with the need for more autonomy in schools. The member may be familiar with proposals that were made in the past parliamentary session for a headteachers' charter. When the Education and Skills Committee took evidence on that, the response from 32 headteachers was unanimous: they wanted their schools to be empowered. They did not want to be empowered as individuals, because they wanted their whole team to take that approach to making decisions in their schools.

Stephen Kerr: The best leaders in any walks of life are those who lead teams of people. That is a fact, so I do not disagree with that.

Secondly, there is a great deal in the report about the value of play-based learning. We should review the starting age for formal schooling and perhaps move it to six. That is the starting age in Germany, Spain, Denmark, Sweden and Norway—it is seven in Finland and South Korea—and we should think about that.

Thirdly, we need to give serious consideration to the presumption of mainstreaming for children with additional support needs. There is clear evidence in the report that what we have currently is not working. At paragraph 5.2.10, the report recounts the “concerning and troubling” experiences of parents in relation to

“their child not receiving timely or necessary supports and sometimes inappropriate use of exclusions and other sanctions”

and says:

“The need for ... appropriate ASN provision is now urgent.”

In large classes, pupils with additional support needs struggle to learn and their classmates struggle with their sometimes distressed behaviour. It is high time that we addressed that.

The people of Scotland care passionately about their education system. Paragraph 9.2, at the end of the report, says:

“the scale of response is unprecedented in the history of national engagements about Scottish education.”

The fact that we care so passionately about our education system makes me proud to be part of this great nation. However, the report concludes:

“One thing is clear ... there is an overwhelming appetite for change”.

The people of Scotland are watching and waiting. We require urgent action from the SNP Government. More words will not cut it. I call on the Government to show teachers, school leaders, parents and pupils that it has listened to the national discussion and will now act on it.

I move amendment S6M-09213.3, to leave out from “, Prof” to end and insert:

“and all those who participated; notes the report’s conclusion that ‘there is an overwhelming appetite for change’ and urges the Scottish Government to view this as a call for urgent steps to ensure real reform; further notes the concerns raised in the national discussion over the lack of support and respect given to teachers and pupil support assistants, as well as the issues experienced by teachers, pupils, parents and carers in relation to young people with additional support needs and the need to ensure a better approach to play-based learning and early years; believes that a new deal for teachers would address issues in professional development and teacher recruitment; further believes that debates should be held on the level to which teachers and school leaders should be able to be more autonomous in their decision making, the presumption against specialist schooling for young people with additional support needs and the age at which children start formal schooling, and acknowledges the frustration, cynicism and anger at previous unmet promises of reform and the resultant doubts expressed in the report over whether genuine reform would take place.”

15:21

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is always a privilege to open for Scottish Labour to discuss education. The education system is where children grow and learn, and it is the foundation of the future of the next generation. That is why it is imperative that we get it right and why it is important to listen to and take on board all that has come through this national discussion—an opportunity that, as has been said, has seen an unprecedented level of response in terms of engagement on the issue of our education system. That is no small feat, and it is one that should be commended.

I want to say a particular thank you to the 26,000 children and young people who took part and to Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris, who produced the report. I also want to say from the outset that we will support the Government’s motion today.

“One thing is clear, and we cannot emphasise this enough: there is an overwhelming appetite for change ... now it is time for action, most critically is time for the right action.”

Those words, already quoted in the debate, are not my words but are from the conclusion of the report, drawing on responses from tens of thousands of young people, teachers, pupils, employers and trade unions. There is no ambiguity in that statement. Those who have engaged are telling us clearly that things are not working. However, the fact is that much of what they have said and what they are calling for is not new; it is a reiteration of much of what they have been saying—and what Scottish Labour has been telling the Government—for years only to be met with broken promises and a lack of action.

That is why, in a discussion that was designed to focus on the future of the system, a great deal was heard about contemporary challenges and issues, including a lack of adequate resource, disjointed policy and a labour-intensive curriculum that is cluttered and has unwieldy requirements and outcomes, creating gaps between its principle and how it is applied in practice.

Had the Government stuck to the promises that it has made over the years, perhaps those problems would not be so entrenched. However, the reality is that a fundamental failure to stick to its own commitments on increasing teacher numbers, reducing non-contact time and making class sizes smaller—to name only a few issues—has resulted, in many places, in the situation actually rolling back and has left teachers with the impossible task of trying to deliver truly person-centred education in a system that is overstretched and constrained by a lack of resource, while they are plagued by exhaustion and burnout, facing an ever increasing and intensifying workload and battling poor conditions.

Change that is visible is not just overdue, it is urgent. The system is already beginning to unravel, and that must be halted. As my colleague Martin Whitfield has already highlighted, one of the key messages from young people who participated in this engagement exercise was that they wanted to feel safe and secure, free from bullying, intimidation and harassment. In my view, it is absolutely extraordinary that safety is the number 1 priority for learners. They should not have to worry that safety would be anything other than a given for themselves and for their teachers. However, as members know only too well, for many, the current environment in schools is not safe or secure, and it is not inclusive either. Therefore, it is no surprise that the discussion has been overwhelmingly absolute in its conclusion that more must be done on that issue, particularly if we are to achieve the principle vision set out, which is that all learners matter.

More than a third of children in Scotland's schools are now identified as having an additional support need. Such a large proportion of the pupil population means that that is no longer an additional but a fundamental part of our education system. That makes even more galling the fact that the number of ASN teachers has fallen. It is all too clear that the current approach to additional support needs is "failing"—again, those are not just my words but those of teachers, parents and learners.

The approach is failing the children who need additional support, and members know that I believe that, for disabled people, that is at least partly because of the need to legislate for a more accountable, person-centred system. However, as

the report also makes clear, it is because there are insufficient resources and support, including staffing and specialists, to fully enable them. The reality is summed up by the concerning and troubling experiences that are shared by parents, as part of the consultation, of their children not receiving timely or necessary support. Witnesses have also shared such experiences with the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The approach is also failing those without additional support needs, who are losing out on the support that they need because teachers' time is stretched.

Neither of those situations is acceptable or can continue. An education system that is fit for the future must be welcoming and inclusive of all children, to enable everyone to learn and flourish and to give all children a fighting chance. That requires time and space for educational professionals and support staff to develop their knowledge, expertise and practice and to think strategically. To do that, the report is clear that

"Implementation of the existing government commitment to non-contact time"

is "necessary".

That is not only crucial for addressing the ongoing support needs of pupils in Scotland but key to ensuring that we give teachers time to get involved in developing the profession and education in Scotland. We need to put teachers closer to where decisions on what happens in the classroom are made or, as the General Teaching Council said ahead of today's debate, give policy about teaching back to the profession, with the appropriate space and time to think and teach with impact.

Ensuring that education is fit for the future also requires staffing in schools that is stable, to ensure continuation of high-quality teaching. However, instead, we have high teacher turnover across the country. We can all agree that teachers are valuable and that, to retain them, we must now show them that we value them. That starts by giving them the time that they have been desperately asking for.

We welcome the discussion, but we must now all agree that the report that it has produced is a stark warning that the time for talk is over and the time to act is now. There can be no more broken promises or delay. The SNP Government must heed today's report and what teachers, unions, pupils and Scottish Labour have said for a long time—that much is still to be done and the Government must get on and do it. If it does and if it acts, we will support the Government in its pursuit of an education system in Scotland that is fit for the future. For the good of our children and our future, it is time for change.

I move amendment S6M-09213.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises that the implementation of the existing Scottish Government commitment to increase non-contact time is necessary, and calls on the Scottish Government to reiterate this commitment and set out when it intends to fulfil it.”

15:27

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I will read an abridged quotation from the report. It states:

“In my class of 30, 4 have ASD ... 3 ... have long-standing separation anxiety difficulties ... one has been adopted, one has a difficult home life and experiencing a form of trauma, one is a young carer, 2 others have severe learning difficulties”—

and, in addition, eight have—

“‘normal’ behind-track difficulties ... There is only one of me—I can’t give those 12 children enough of my attention to support their wellbeing, never mind ... the other 18 children”

in the class. That is the harsh reality of the additional support needs about which I intervened on the cabinet secretary. She understands how challenging it is for individual teachers to cope with such circumstances and to meet all the needs of all the pupils, because it is about getting it right for every child.

We had hoped that the Morgan review would be the start of real change, but I am afraid that we are nowhere near the start, and I think that the cabinet secretary knows that. The report should be a wake-up call that brings dramatic change.

Of course, I am in favour of the presumption of mainstream education: I think that that is the right thing to do. That does not mean that mainstream is always appropriate, but the presumption should be in favour of it. However, if we are going to have that presumption, we need the resources to match it, so that the teacher whom I quoted, who is struggling to cope with the variety of needs within her class, gets the support that she needs in order to be able to deliver.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Mr Rennie actually quoted from the part of the report from which I was going to quote. I very much agree about the presumption about mainstream education, but I feel that in some schools it is almost mandatory. That is not always in the interests of a child who has, let us say, severe behavioural difficulties, and nor is it in the interests of the other members of the class.

Willie Rennie: To be frank, I do not know. I hear reports of teachers who really struggle to cope with a variety of demands. I think that they would love to have great diversity in their classes so that every single child gets opportunities, but

we should challenge that to make sure that it is the right decision. That is what I think the debate today helps with.

Every member in the Parliament has been around a school and has seen, as the cabinet secretary highlighted, the joy of learning. We are proud of so many of our pupils, teachers and—we should not forget them—the other members of staff in the school, who do brilliant jobs. However, our job in Parliament is to challenge. We should be impatient for improvement, so that when we challenge it, it is not because we are against the education system or against schools, pupils, teachers or staff but because we want improvement.

We should be hungry for that change, which is why I will repeatedly challenge the Government on casualisation of the workforce, especially in primary schools, where young people often go for six years on the trot having teachers who are on one temporary contract after the other. It is just demoralising. Those teachers thought that they were going to be able to craft young minds to be the workforce of the future, but they are really just struggling to stay alive in the teaching profession. That is why so many of them are leaving their positions.

John Swinney: I think that Willie Rennie has alighted on a very serious issue about the length of contracts that are given to newly qualified teachers. Does he acknowledge that not all such issues—in fact, none of them—are in the control of the Government, and that all of them are in the control of local authorities, which have been given the line-of-sight resources that should enable them to give full-time contracts? What does Mr Rennie propose be done in those circumstances?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you some of that time back.

Willie Rennie: I think that John Swinney is right. There is a partnership that involves working with local authorities to make this work. The Government did make an improvement by baselining quite a lot of funding, which helped with that.

We have a surplus of trained teachers coming through the system, so we need to talk to the initial teacher-education providers to make sure that we have the right supply and the right experience. We are short of secondary teachers and we do not have enough primary teachers, so we need to challenge local authorities to make sure that they provide permanent contracts when that is possible.

John Swinney is right, but the Government has a big responsibility to make sure that the pipeline of workers is sufficient and meets the complex

needs in order to ensure that we are able to get people for the long term.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I would love to take an intervention, but I would run out of time. I have really only just started.

On exams reform, I urge caution. In the report, we hear about many people who want quite dramatic change in use of exams and the number of qualifications. However, those are big changes, and we need to take employers, universities and colleges with us, as well as parents and pupils. We need to deal with the two-term dash and the interface between the broad general education and the senior phase.

There are steps—which I can go through with the cabinet secretary—that we could take now, or within the next few years, to do some tweaking to make things a bit better. We need to put knowledge back in—we need to put greater emphasis on knowledge within the curriculum. Of course, we need transferable skills, cross-disciplinary thinking and problem solving, but people need a good foundation of knowledge before they can apply those various skills.

We need contact time to be reduced by the 90 minutes that the cabinet secretary and her Government have promised. Through curriculum for excellence, we need to make sure that, rather than cutting teachers adrift, which I think was the experience in the early days of curriculum for excellence, we stop reinventing the wheel almost every single year in terms of courses.

We need to make sure that the new national bodies provide course materials that teachers can deploy and can use their skills to utilise. We need to make sure that vocational education has parity of esteem with the academic route. There is a quote in the report from an employer who says that vocational and technical routes are not

“worthy of an exam or a qualification.”

In fact, they do have lots of exams and qualifications, but the fact that that employer did not know about them is an indication that we have a failure of communication with employers. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework is good; it gives us an opportunity to get that parity of esteem, as does Developing the Young Workforce.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I know that the cabinet secretary is new, but her Government is 16 years old, and we need results. We have covered many issues this afternoon and we will cover many more. There

is an expectation that the Government and the cabinet secretary will deliver, so she will forgive us for being very hard on her if she does not.

I move amendment S6M-09213.2, to insert at end:

“believes that this vision should drive the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap and ensure that the international performance of Scotland’s education system is raised; further believes that vocational education should have parity of esteem with other forms of education; acknowledges that there are issues of teacher shortages, unemployment and an exodus of experienced staff from private and voluntary sector nurseries, which need to be urgently addressed; considers that the Scottish Government must respect the vote of the Scottish Parliament and end national testing of four- and five-year-olds, instead moving towards a model of national sampling; notes that the role of knowledge needs to be enhanced in the Curriculum for Excellence, and asserts that the new national education bodies, which are currently in the process of being created, must be teacher-led and must support teachers for the benefit of the education of Scotland’s children and young people.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rennie.

We move to the open debate. There is no more time in hand, so interventions will need to be accommodated in the time allocations.

15:35

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Presiding Officer,

“What kind of education will be needed by children and young people ... in the future and how do we make that a reality?”

That important central question guided the national discussion.

I welcome the publication of “All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education”, and am happy to speak in support of the Government’s motion, which acknowledges the significant levels of engagement that the national discussion has generated.

There were events and discussions in every part of Scotland, including some that were led by schools, community groups and third sector organisations. It was the biggest public engagement exercise on education to have been undertaken nationally by Scottish education. It reached more than 38,000 people, including 26,000 children and young people.

The task was to build a compelling, consensual and renewed vision; the agreed vision speaks directly to the voices of the children who said again and again that they want a safe and inclusive education system that values everyone and celebrates all kinds of success. It is worth hearing that vision in full. It is this:

“Children and young people are at the heart of education in Scotland. The Scottish education system values collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, parents, and carers to ensure that all learners in Scotland matter.

All learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise. Education in Scotland nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being.

Each child and young person in Scotland has high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represent the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in.

Each child and young person experiences great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute in their life, work, and world, so they know how much they matter.”

A line in the report stuck out to me. I think that it might be a helpful guiding principle for us politicians as we navigate our way through the coming reforms and scrutiny of the bold changes that might be required. There is a need to

“balance the realism of what is needed now with an inspiring optimism for education in Scotland”.

The report on the national discussion recognises that more could be done to support quality and consistency in implementation of existing policies and practices. Importantly, it also notes the strength of what we have here in Scotland. It states:

“features of the Scottish education system ... must be continued and further enhanced, such as a commitment to valuing children and young people’s views, a broad-based education, the foundational importance of literacy and numeracy, the development of wellbeing, the pursuit of equity and equality, respect for a graduate level teaching profession, the importance of the work and working conditions of all members of the education workforce, and partnership”—

which the cabinet secretary spoke about—

“with parents, carers, communities, and relevant agencies, specialists and service.”

Ahead of the debate, YouthLink Scotland provided a helpful briefing note that suggests that Scottish education remains too narrowly defined, and that it is too often understood as formal learning that is planned for and delivered by teachers in formal settings. The purpose of Scottish education is to ensure that all our children and young people develop the knowledge, skills and attributes to allow them to reach their potential in learning, life and work.

I agree with YouthLink Scotland that youth work in all its forms

“complements and enhances delivery of the formal curriculum”

and provision of support for pupils. It contributes greatly to raising attainment and to improving outcomes for children and young people. A future Scottish education system will need to offer not just high-quality teaching and learning, but different learning pathways.

The national discussion report talks of the “need to re-ignite the joy of learning”.

I strongly welcome the fact that play and outdoor learning are specifically mentioned. Not just as an MSP, but as a parent and, perhaps, even as someone who was not naturally inclined to thrive indoors in a classroom, I know just how important youth work is. Any “ambitious”, “inclusive” and “supportive system”, with children’s rights at its heart, will be clear that youth work is part of education. It would be helpful if, in her closing speech, the cabinet secretary could speak a little to how the national youth work strategy will link to the educational reforms that are coming.

I will end on that balance of realism and optimism. I acknowledge the issues that we have and the challenges that we face around investment—we face them right across our public services, as we are operating in hugely challenging times. For meaningful education reform that truly reflects the statement “All learners ... matter”, there will be difficult choices to make.

Here is the optimism bit. The vision is there: I believe that in Scotland we have all the skills and resources to achieve it.

15:40

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When Nicola Sturgeon told education leaders in August 2015 that education was her number 1 priority, I think that the vast majority of people across Scotland, and certainly in this chamber, agreed with her. I certainly did, so when six months later she reiterated that commitment and told us that a new education bill was forthcoming that would promise greater devolution to schools, I was very encouraged. I was not someone who ever subscribed to the view that everything in our schools was going badly wrong, but neither did I subscribe to the view that everything was going well and that the status quo was acceptable. In fact, I remember John Swinney saying, as he was on the cusp of introducing an education reform bill—I hope that I quote him correctly—that

“the status quo is not an option”.

He was absolutely right in that comment.

Now, interesting as some of the feedback is, I wonder whether we would be in quite the same place had the Scottish Government both listened to and acted on the collective findings of the Donaldson, McCormac, Cameron and Bloomer

reviews of Scottish school education, all of which were carried out by experts in their respective fields between 2011 and 2016. Their collective message was that although Scottish education had much on which to pride itself, the school system needed to be shaken out of its complacency. Incidentally, exactly the same conclusion had been arrived at the time of the proposed Howie reforms, way back in 1992.

Of course, the reports from 2011 to 2016 appeared at the same time as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Scottish survey of attainment, the programme for international student assessment—PISA—Reform Scotland and the Scottish Government's own statistics all produced compelling evidence that Scotland was flatlining when it came to attainment. Worse still, that evidence showed that the attainment gap between rich and poor was widening, thereby disadvantaging a large number of young people, which was fundamentally at odds with the basic principles of good Scottish education, which was once renowned across the world.

The 2017 programme for government proclaimed that

“A new education bill will deliver the biggest and most radical change to how our schools are run”.—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017; c 13.]

Nicola Sturgeon went further when she wrote, in an article for *Scotland on Sunday*, that the London model of cluster schools was worth looking at, given that it was clearly delivering results for more disadvantaged pupils. I was extremely disappointed when all that got dropped, for some reason.

Three things above all else matter to me. First, teachers have not been sufficiently valued as key professionals. Graham Donaldson had interesting things to say about that, particularly when he said that too many teachers were reporting that they felt uncomfortable about gaps in their professional training. Of course, it does not help when the number of cases of verbal and physical assaults on teachers is soaring, as Stephen Kerr's debate highlighted last week, and which I know my colleagues across the chamber will attempt to deal with during the debate.

Secondly, the Scottish Government has shown extraordinary unwillingness to properly reform the education agencies—not just to rebadge them and move the deck chairs around a bit, but to properly reform them to enhance the support that is available to teachers. No one can argue that Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority have had a happy history in recent times. Indeed, when I was on previous education committees for a substantial number of years, hardly a term went past without the committee's

attention being drawn to significant problems in the agencies that meant that teachers felt remote from and frustrated by the education agencies. That can never be a good blueprint for a successful education system.

However, I think that the main message from the national conversation is that education cannot stand still and that school leaders should not expect the curriculum to do so, either.

That brings me to my third point, which is one that members have heard me raise in the chamber over many years. I do so again because I am utterly convinced that it matters: it is the subject of extracurricular activity. We should all ask ourselves what education is for. We need to consider the intrinsic value of education. In the difficult and perhaps perplexing quest for the answer to that question, we need to stand back and ask ourselves, from a holistic perspective, what we should do to ensure that schools provide education in the round. Extracurricular activity—perhaps it is better named “co-curricular activity”—has many definitions, but it is an integral part of the process.

That view is not popular in some quarters. After all, extracurricular activity is not measurable in the same way as we can measure test results or SQA exam passes, but it matters so much to young people. I do not believe that that type of activity can or should be condemned to obsessive quantitative measurement. For many pupils, those activities are the most enriching. They help pupils to make decisions in difficult situations and they build confidence and self-esteem. They build understanding of what commitment and responsibility mean and of working in teams. In the post-Covid era, when many youngsters' lives are beset by anxiety, those skills are increasingly priceless assets.

I believed that when I was a teacher between 1983 and 1998, and I have continued to believe it in my 17 years in Parliament. That is why I have proposed my outdoor education bill, and why I am glad that Sam Rowlands in the Welsh Senedd has a similar bill, and that there is likely to be a bill at Westminster from Tim Farron.

We have a huge opportunity to get our education system right, but we need to be far-sighted. We need an all-round vision of Scottish education. It should be a vision that not only suits the economy but promotes a fair-minded and ethical society in which individuals are valued for who they are.

I support the amendment in the name of Stephen Kerr.

15:47

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The education landscape has changed beyond recognition in just a few decades, as has the world around us. Between the education that I had in the 1950s and 1960s, the education that I delivered as a secondary teacher in the 1970s and 1980s and education today, there are worlds of difference, in and outside the classroom. With the online world and technology, the needs of society continue to change and accelerate. What is taught will have to adapt while focusing on ensuring that children have the basic tools of numeracy and literacy.

There is much to be recommended in the broad base of our education syllabus, particularly in secondary education and beyond to tertiary. However, I welcome this wide-ranging report, which endeavours to provide a broad discussion about what our children need in today's world to help them thrive and contribute to society in their own way. The report also endeavours to make schools a place where inequalities are minimised and diminished and, most importantly, a safe and happy place to be.

I will focus first on what is for me the linchpin of success: the teachers. Something that remains constant is the value of a good teacher, and there are many good teachers. Some of us here can no doubt easily recall the good and distinguish them from the mediocre, no matter how distant our learning experience. That evidences the impact that the quality of teaching has on us, even decades on, and it is recognised in the report, which states:

“One very strong theme that featured heavily in the responses to the National Discussion was the importance of valuing and appreciating all educational professionals working with and within schools. We listened to some robust views about the importance of teachers and the need for more support staff, including classroom assistants, learning assistants, support for learning staff, and pupil support staff. ... We heard about the importance of class sizes affecting how much time and attention a teacher or support staff member could give to each individual child or young person.”

The issue of class sizes comes next for me. The smaller the class, the easier it is to teach and to give time to each child. I once taught a class of 40 and another of 16, and how I taught was determined not just by the character of the class but by the size itself. That for me is self-evident.

Inclusivity is to be welcomed, but it is not the answer for all children who have, for example, severe learning difficulties or behavioural issues. That is not just about their development and wellbeing; it is about the other children in the class. In that respect, I refer to my intervention on Willie Rennie.

There is a question about whether it is best for a child with, say, very difficult behavioural issues to be in a mainstream class. I repeat that, in my casework, it sometimes seems that what is a presumption verges on the mandatory. I have had representations from parents of children who would need substantial support in order for them to remain in a mainstream class that they have concerns that that would not be best for their child's development. That is especially the case if many children in a class require additional support.

I turn to the testy matter of how a school can deal with bullying which, again, often comes up in my casework. The report states:

“Within the National Discussion, we heard many times how important it was for pupils of all ages to feel secure and free from any form of bullying, intimidation, or harassment.”

However, in my casework experience, policies in certain schools are not always effective in striking the balance between the bully and the bullied. I appreciate that that is a difficult balance to strike, and I know that Scottish Borders Council, for example, is reviewing its bullying policy. For some parents, there is the perception that every effort is made to keep the bully in school, not the bullied child.

I understand that some 30,000 children have caring responsibilities. They might not always disclose that to a teacher in order to protect a parent out of fear—whether baseless or not—that social work might remove them from the situation if, for example, the child is supporting a parent with addiction problems.

Of course, if concerns about a child's wellbeing ring alarm bells, there is a duty on a teacher to bring those concerns to the attention of the appropriate authority. We ask a lot of our teachers, and we ask even more of them now than we did during my time in the classroom.

In my view, teachers need to have more in-class support and more non-teaching time for continuing professional development, for example. Sometimes, they are so busy that they do not have time to do anything else.

People can educate, in its broadest sense, even in a dilapidated hut—although that is not a suggestion from me to the Government. For me, it comes down in the simplest terms to the teacher, the in-class support and the size of the class.

15:52

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I am glad that the Scottish Government is finally taking charge of the future of education in Scotland. Our education sector has been racked by 16 years of

SNP failure. The SNP has failed to support teachers and pupils with additional support needs, and it has failed to update an outdated and narrowing curriculum.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Foysoyl Choudhury: I have a lot to get through.

As some of my colleagues have pointed out, the number of teachers has fallen over the past 16 years—since 2007, the number has fallen by 907. The Scottish Government has not yet delivered on its promise to hire 3,500 teachers and pupil support assistants, which is putting a strain on teachers and pupils and is having a negative impact on class sizes.

Teachers were also promised 90 minutes of non-contact time per week, but the Scottish Government has made little progress in meeting that promise. Teachers in our education system need to be valued and given time to think about and plan their teaching and learning outcomes.

Teachers are not the only ones in our schools who are struggling. Pupil support assistants provide essential support for children's education and social development, but there is currently a crisis in the recruitment and retention of PSAs. That is primarily due to PSAs being underpaid and undertrained to deal with the demands of the job. PSAs often work with children with additional support needs without adequate training or support, and that further exacerbates the lack of support available to children with additional support needs. A lack of PSAs in classrooms can create unsafe working conditions and decrease attainment for children. However, the Scottish Government has yet to outline exactly how it plans to support that vital role in schools, on which both teachers and pupils heavily rely.

Last week in Parliament, a debate took place on violence in schools. Violence from children towards other pupils or staff is often left to pupil support assistants to handle; I have heard stories from constituents about the daily violence that they experience in the workplace as PSAs. They are often the ones who deal with the brunt of violent behaviour and relieve classes of violent disruptions, yet they receive little support or training on how to effectively deal with violence in their workplace, which, once again, causes many to leave the profession.

The Scottish Government must move forward with showing teachers and support staff that they are listened to and valued in our education system; only then can we begin to improve the situation.

There needs to be some development, too, in the curriculum that is being taught in our schools.

The narrowing of the curriculum for excellence does not effectively prepare young people for the future. Our education system should prepare children and young people to deal with the major social, economic, cultural, personal and political challenges that are present in the 21st century. The current curriculum for excellence is ill equipped to teach young people about that important aspect of life.

The Scottish Government's recently announced Scottish connections framework addresses the need to deal with the more difficult parts of Scotland's history, including colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. That commitment to address the atrocities of the past needs to be done at home, too, and in our schools. Through learning about the past and Scotland's role in it, young people can be more open to, and understanding of, the racial, cultural and gender inequalities that still exist in Scotland today. In that way, we can send young people away from the education system more tolerant and with a better understanding of the social challenges that they might face outside of school.

Progress on the Government's reform of education is welcome. However, it cannot be another broken promise; if anything is to be fixed, the Scottish Government simply must recognise what the past 16 years have done to our education system.

15:58

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to warmly welcome to her role the new cabinet secretary—this is the first opportunity that I have had to do so. I have no doubt that she brings energy, enthusiasm and a great deal of effort with her, and I wish her well.

It will come as no surprise to many members that I will focus my remarks on what I consider will be the enormous benefits that will accrue to our economy and society, and particularly to our children, by teaching touch typing—a skill that I believe to be one of the most valuable that we can possess for our working and personal lives, and for the remainder of the century.

This is mark 4 of this speech—

Stephen Kerr: I am sure that Fergus Ewing will be delighted to know that, at the Scottish Conservative conference at the end of April, the Scottish Conservatives adopted life and learning skills, including keyboard skills, into our national policy.

Fergus Ewing: I am delighted to hear that; I think that it displays a particular intelligence on the part of the Conservative Party. [*Laughter.*]

Martin Whitfield: To match the fourth rendition of this speech, it is also right to say that touch typing is included in the curriculum for excellence under information technology skills. Yes, keyboard skills are hugely important, but the skill of touch typing frees our young people from the challenges of physically writing, particularly in the case of children with dyslexia.

Fergus Ewing: I totally agree with Mr Whitfield that it is in the curriculum, but the problem is that, although it is in the curriculum, supervision, which is essential, is not provided for. I will come on to that. My attempts have failed thus far.

Willie Rennie: Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, of course I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief.

Willie Rennie: Members might see a slight bit of co-ordination in today's debate. As somebody who types with his thumbs, I think that there should be greater education on touch typing in schools, and I hope that we can persuade the minister to task somebody to ensure that it is given greater priority.

Fergus Ewing: I am extremely grateful to Mr Rennie. This spontaneous expression and outburst of cross-party support is extremely welcome. However, it is a very serious issue, because that support demonstrates that this is not a party-political issue. Absolutely nothing that I have to say has anything to do with party politics; it is all about the enormous benefits that I think can be achieved for virtually zero cost—just by training teachers how to supervise young people in learning this skill. The average length of time that it takes a young person to learn this skill under supervision is 15 to 20 hours. That is a blink of an eye when one thinks of the time that children spend in school.

Here are some of the benefits. With a short investment of time and money, children gain one of the best life skills that will be used daily in their work and for personal purposes. This skill results in a huge improvement in self-esteem and confidence in young people. That is so important and empowering. When children feel confident, they can succeed, but if they are worried and afraid, perhaps that will be far more difficult. For adults, the potential productivity benefits are simply astounding. In a typical six-hour day, a touch typist will complete up to three times more work than those without this skill.

We frequently hear people talk about broad aims and aspirations to increase productivity. Very rarely do we hear about a specific, clear-cut, concrete measure that can actually do it—this is it! I cannot think of any more efficacious way to

increase productivity and empower people in their workplace to do work at a much faster rate.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I very much agree with the member. If we are talking about productivity, may I also introduce the idea of the importance of young people being physically active all the way through their school life?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, I absolutely agree with that.

I want to say to the cabinet secretary that the information that I have, which also comes from members in the chamber about personal experiences in their lives and with their families, is that, as Willie Rennie alluded to earlier, it is especially children with special needs—children with dyslexia and autism—who benefit from the acquisition of this skill, moving from a life of difficulty, challenge and worry to a life of confidence, self-esteem and self-regard. I specifically want to mention that. One parent gave this testimonial:

“Our eldest son is dyslexic. Learning to touch type has unlocked his academic potential in a way unimaginable before the course.”

I will discard the last three pages of the speech—well, everybody has heard it before anyway.

I want to stress this. I had a courteous hearing with Diane and Robin Gifford, who run a training company called Type by Touch and to whom I am extremely grateful for a very detailed briefing. I know that they have spoken to other members, too. Diane Gifford said:

“After 10yrs of running courses, I've yet to find anyone”—

anyone—

“who's mastered the skill through self-learning. It requires lots of repetition, encouragement and structured direction.”

The reply that I received on 2 August 2022 from the cabinet secretary's predecessor that touch typing materials are available is fine—that is great and it is a start, but it is not enough. Supervision is required. One would not expect a child to learn how to play the piano, the violin or any other musical instrument without tuition or supervision. Therefore, why should it be different when one is learning how to use a different type of instrument, one that can empower people for the rest of their lives at almost zero cost and zero time, and which I believe would be of substantial benefit to the people of Scotland the economy in the decades to come?

16:05

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The package of education reforms to be delivered in

this parliamentary session is the biggest since the curriculum for excellence was introduced. Indeed, the reforms in the Hayward recommendations, which I expect we will see, could be the biggest set of reforms since the Victorian era. Some of them are overdue and some are as a result of the pandemic, and we probably would not have had this opportunity otherwise, but they are all hugely exciting.

Organisational reform is critical to this, but even with really good consultation efforts organisational reform can be pretty impenetrable or at least quite distant to most people. The national discussion was an opportunity for wider society to engage in the debate on the future of Scottish education, and I think that it has been successful. We often hear of the frustration that people have that the scope of Government consultations does not allow them to talk about the issue that they wanted to bring to the table. We should congratulate Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris on their approach, which allowed people to bring whatever issue they wanted to to the table to discuss the future of education.

Debates in this area can often be quite challenging—not only for the public but for politicians—due to gatekeeping by established powers in our education system. In Professor Muir's recommendation for a national discussion, he made clear that it needed to prevent the "narrative privilege" of existing organisations. I think that that has been achieved, because I cannot detect the suffocating hand of the SQA and Education Scotland in the final report. That is easier to do in this area than it is in organisational reform, but there are lessons to be learned for the officials who are leading on organisational reform about consultation and engagement with pupils, teachers and wider society on what they need.

Like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report, the national discussion reinforces the core strengths of the curriculum. Its vision statement aligns with the core premise of the curriculum for excellence, and the report notes that much of what is in the vision is not new. The vision and values are easy to agree to, though, and I expect that, even in the areas where there is most significant disagreement between members, we could come together and agree on a set of common values. We need more challenge in our education system. Even what is in the call to action is broadly pretty agreeable.

If I have one concern about this, it is that those existing powers—those with a narrative privilege in education—can agree to what is in the report and also say that what they are already doing will fulfil it, which is why we need a greater challenge. I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to

drive forward substantial reforms across the system.

Martin Whitfield: Ross Greer indicated that the report has been successful, but will it not only be successful if the contributors see the results come to fruition and see a change in our education system?

Ross Greer: Absolutely, and Mr Whitfield has robbed me of the conclusion of this speech, which is on exactly that topic. The format of "you said, we did" for the Government's consultation efforts absolutely needs to be used here. It is right that people are cynical about this, because we have been here before in a lot of areas.

I want to focus my remarks on recommendation 4.12, which the cabinet secretary highlighted, because I think that is it fantastic to say that we need to

"reignite the joy of learning".

That is a great example of a completely agreeable concept; who is going to disagree with that? However, it is a challenge to deliver. The Hayward review is critical to doing that.

The OECD confirmed that we are doing a pretty good job of delivering the broad general education stage of curriculum for excellence but, once we get into the senior phase, there is too much pressure to teach to the test rather than deliver the senior phase of the curriculum. Reforming our qualifications and assessments system to match our curriculum will be critical. If we want to make learning more enjoyable, we also need to break it out of subject silos, which would align far better with our qualifications system and with the needs of our economy.

The submission from the Royal Society of Edinburgh summarised that really well. It said:

"Subject-specific knowledge is no longer the primary determinant of suitability in the majority of graduate recruitment. What matters more are transferable skills and attributes, breadth of knowledge and experience, cross-disciplinary thinking, and problem-solving capabilities."

Liz Smith: I agree with what the member just said, but would he be minded to support more of a baccalaureate system to do exactly that?

Ross Greer: There is a lot of merit in the baccalaureate system, as Liz Smith says. First of all, we need a serious appraisal of what happened with the Scottish baccalaureate efforts that were previously attempted. Why did they not have the success that many of us hoped for?

Willie Rennie was also right to say that we need to take employers, colleges and universities with us in any reform of the qualifications system. Employers want the wider set of skills to be recognised. I acknowledge that, in many cases,

they already are, but there is a disconnect. However, universities are an example of where reform of the qualifications and assessment system has already happened. They have raced far ahead of school-based exams when it comes to the move towards continuous assessment and alternative models. They have a lot to contribute to how we move forward on that area.

Reigniting the joy of learning also requires us to acknowledge that learning takes place outside of schools. If we want happy children and young people, we need a good balance of schoolwork with the rest of their lives. That brings me to the question of homework.

We know that, if we were to extend the school day it would, on balance, have a net negative impact on children and families. However, there is growing recognition that adults have a right to disconnect from their work out of hours, so we need to ask whether our current levels of homework are necessary and seriously consider ending homework in primary schools.

If children need to get through that work, we need to question the curriculum itself. If there are issues of cluttering the curriculum, which is certainly the case in primary school, we need to resolve those. That is compatible with giving teachers professional autonomy in the classroom. It is for them to decide how to deliver learning in class, but it is for all of us in the Parliament to have responsibility for children's whole lives. School can be a place of joy if it does not follow children home.

We have significant opportunities over the next couple of years to deliver on reforms that, in some cases, are long overdue and, in others, have emerged as an opportunity only in the past few years. There is a lot of cynicism about our ability to deliver them, but we have the right package of reforms and the desire across the chamber to ensure that we leave a lasting legacy for decades to come.

16:11

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): This is a welcome debate on the future of Scottish education and I compliment the cabinet secretary on the inclusive way in which she is trying to generate greater agreement, especially in Parliament, about how our education system should develop. Securing that greater agreement matters because the future of our country literally depends on it.

In working to establish that agreement, there has to be a willingness on all sides and among all partners to recognise the reality of Scottish education and to be prepared to consider evidence that supports the appropriate direction of

travel. In that respect, the cabinet secretary might have to revise, refocus or even remove some of the precious interventions of some of her predecessors. I know that she will have the resolve to do so; her predecessors will just have to come to terms with that.

Equally, other parties might have to be prepared to recognise more than they are prepared to admit of the strengths that truly exist in Scottish education. I am constantly struck by the often negative characterisation of Scottish education that is expressed by Opposition parties in the chamber, compared with what Opposition members say about the performance and achievements of individual schools in their communities and constituencies when it comes to issuing press releases and getting media opportunities.

Liz Smith: Will John Swinney give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will John Swinney take an intervention?

John Swinney: Oh! I seem to have touched a raw nerve with that comment. I will give way to Pam Duncan-Glancy first and then Liz Smith.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Does John Swinney also accept that satisfaction with schools in Scotland is going down? It is not just that the Opposition is complaining or being negative; actually, the people of Scotland see the systems on which they rely declining.

John Swinney: There is very high satisfaction with Scottish education and very high confidence—as recent opinion polling demonstrated—in the Government's stewardship of education. The situation is not helped by Mr Choudhury's characterisation that the Government has "wrecked" Scottish education. What sort of language is that? Mr Choudhury cannot substantiate his point, so that was inappropriate language to use to characterise the situation in the debate. I note that Pam Duncan-Glancy did not use her intervention to come to his defence or to justify his characterisation.

Liz Smith: It is most unlike Mr Swinney not to listen to what I said, but I will read him part of my speech. I said:

"I was not someone who ever subscribed to the view that everything in our schools was going badly".

There is a lot to pride ourselves on. Yes, there is a need for change; I think that Mr Swinney is the one who said that the status quo was not acceptable.

John Swinney: That is very nice, but it does not feel like what Liz Smith used to say to me fairly regularly during the five years for which I was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

The national discussion has been well steered—not surprisingly, in my view—by Professor Alma Harris and Professor Carol Campbell. They have listened with care to a wide range of voices across our education system and have identified key values that should guide its development—values that are ambitious, inclusive and supportive. Those are good, strong and clear values that can provide the necessary focus in our education system. The key is what steps we take to turn those values into reality.

I would like to raise three key elements that, for me, are critical in that endeavour. The first of those elements is the importance of ensuring that every child or young person is ready and supported to learn. Poverty is by far the key inhibitor to ensuring that every child has a chance to learn and to grow. The work of the Scottish attainment challenge, the introduction of the national minimum school clothing grant and the impact of the Scottish child payment, which are just three Scottish Government measures, are key contributors to the process of ensuring that every child or young person is ready and supported to learn. The sincerity of others on the question of removing poverty would be demonstrated by their taking an approach to measures to tackle poverty that is different from the approach that the current United Kingdom Government is taking with its measures on welfare reform.

The second element is teacher agency and autonomy, to which the Conservatives' amendment refers. Our children and young people will be able to learn only if they are guided by motivated professionals who have been able to develop and renew their professional capacity. I encourage the cabinet secretary to intensify the focus on that element of the agenda. That will involve Parliament supporting the cabinet secretary on the need for local authorities to create a more confident climate, in which professionals are able to deploy their strengths and their judgments in their practice. I met far too many teachers, and many headteachers, who felt constrained in developing their practice by the overbearing presence of their local authority employer. If Parliament is to value the importance of teacher agency, it must be prepared to help the Government to bring that about.

Stephen Kerr is not in the chamber at the moment but, in his speech, he set out a range of propositions, many of which I agree would be helpful in strengthening the professional capacity of teachers. However, they will all cost money—and lots of it. The Conservatives are against increasing tax—they want us to cut tax—and they have not supported investment in the education system. They need to turn their rhetoric into reality.

The third theme, which is encapsulated in the not-selected Lib Dem amendment, is the importance of parity of esteem for vocational qualifications. That is absolutely vital, crucial or seismic—members can call it what they want. It is what has driven so many of the improved outcomes that have been achieved by young people in recent years. Mr Rennie cited the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. The development of new qualifications and awards in recognition of the potential in every young person is central to ensuring that our education system lives up to the values of the national discussion of being ambitious, inclusive and supportive.

Without wishing to sound like an old man, one of the biggest differences that I see in our education system today compared with when I was in school in the 1970s and 1980s is the focus on ensuring that every young person goes on to achieve a good and positive outcome. I received a fantastic state education in that period and went on to achieve a good outcome, but that was not the case for most of my peers. One of the strengths of Scottish education is in ensuring that every young person gets a positive outcome. That should be central to the national discussion.

16:18

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The SNP Government has presided over 16 years of failure in Scottish education, with the gap between the poorest and richest pupils widening and education standards dropping. The SNP has starved schools and staff of resources, and its curriculum for excellence has been a failure.

The publication of “All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education” is welcome, and serves as a resounding call to action for the Scottish Government to prioritise urgent and meaningful reforms. In acknowledging the prevailing frustrations that Stephen Kerr mentioned in his speech, the cynicism and the anger stemming from unmet promises of reform in the past, the report instils a sense of doubt regarding the Government's commitment to genuine and lasting change, and underscores the need for immediate action. The Government has fundamentally broken the education system in Scotland, and urgent action is required to address the problems.

John Swinney: Does Sue Webber honestly believe that the statement that she just put on the record is in any shape or form compatible with Liz Smith's intervention on me a few moments ago?

Sue Webber: The evidence that I hear from people when at committee, including on the attainment gap, which we see widening, and the dropping of regional, national and international

statistics says something, and we need to acknowledge that.

I want to acknowledge that the people who work and volunteer in the sector, including parents, carers, young people and teachers are all ready to embrace the change that is needed and the reform that they are seeking. They are ready for significant change.

We have heard about the importance of a future Scottish education system that is welcoming and inclusive of all children and young people, including attention to early identification and adequate resources and specialist support to enable everyone to learn and flourish.

The Scottish Conservatives would encourage use of digital from the earliest stages of school and in all subjects—not just in the ones that are traditionally associated with information technology, such as computer science and administration. Our young people want to use technology in their learning, but teachers and pupil support assistants must be provided with continuing development opportunities to keep pace with the change—it is rapid—in how and what people are learning. We should also deliver a laptop or electronic device of some sort to every pupil, thereby eradicating the technology divide between rich and poor.

One of my constituents is a music teacher, and he has raised with me concerns about various discrepancies in music teaching across Edinburgh. He works in a number of primary schools across the city with the youth music initiative. Although he acknowledges the additional funding that has been announced for the youth music initiative, he does not believe that it is enough. That goes back to the extracurricular work that Liz Smith mentioned. We are already seeing a situation across the UK in which most of the young people who go on to study music at university are privately educated, because they are among the few people who receive adequate music education. The Scottish Conservatives' new deal for teachers would allow more children to learn music.

Linked to music is the fact that it is now abundantly clear that the wellbeing and the health of children and young people is one of the most pressing and important issues in Scotland. Without proactively addressing wellbeing and mental health, attempts to improve learners' achievement and attainment levels will be undermined.

We know that there is a growing need for support for children and young people, with most long-term mental health problems beginning in adolescence: 75 per cent of mental illnesses start before a person's 18th birthday. Schools and colleges should be utilised to provide early

preventative mental health support to children and young people across Scotland.

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we are doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around us. Teaching mindfulness, and therefore resilience in our young people, will help them with the challenges that they face now and into the future. The nurturing and supportive environment in our education system must start as soon as possible. It makes our young kids more resilient, as I said. Through mindfulness, they can help to understand what is normal in terms of feelings. Being anxious and nervous is part of life; it is when that becomes overpowering that support and help are needed.

Currie primary school has nurture clubs, a worry box, a de-stress zone, and a time in the day for mindfulness colouring and calm music, just to relax. A focus on health and wellbeing and making sure that there is a safe space and available staff to support pupils who are struggling is important. People need a safe place to go and calm down and someone safe to speak to when they are upset, overwhelmed or angry.

Although we acknowledge that there are many policies, instances of good practice within schools, and supportive groups that already focus on the issue, from conversations with children and young people it is clear that much more needs to be done. A future education system must uphold norms, practices, and values right across the system in order to remove barriers to learning that young people encounter. The need for change is accepted by all those who are taking part in the discussion, so let us be brave and make the wholesale changes that are needed.

16:24

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. As my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy said, Scottish Labour welcomes the Government's national discussion on education and the publication of the report, but they must now lead to the right action and positive change.

It is essential that the voices of those in the education sector, especially children, parents and teachers, are not only listened to but acted on. It should be clear that we will not create an education system that meets the needs of all our children and young people without that.

The sad reality is that pupils who live in more affluent families are still more likely to succeed in school and higher education. We will not close the poverty-related attainment gap unless we give our teachers and staff the proper resources to do their jobs. Pam Duncan-Glancy made some important

points about non-contact working time in that regard. Resources will also be needed to better support children with additional support needs and to tackle issues such as violence in our schools. It will take the efficient use of resources to make our shared objectives a reality.

A national discussion or vision for education will be a national success only if it delivers positive results for the whole country, and places such as Renfrewshire in the west of Scotland in particular.

I now want to discuss the major challenges facing children and education staff in Renfrewshire. Renfrewshire children are currently facing a double whammy when it comes to resources, which will make positive change more difficult, rather than easier, to achieve. Not only are local pupils and staff facing cuts to attainment challenge funding; they are also facing a massive bill due to the disruption of the Dargavel school debacle.

Four of the nine authorities that have been allocated attainment challenge funding are in my West Scotland region: Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire and Renfrewshire. That is a stark reminder of the scale and concentration of poverty in the west of Scotland, but those areas all face massive cuts to their share of attainment challenge funding—in Renfrewshire, it is 71 per cent. I say to the Government that I do not have a problem with providing extra money for education in every council across Scotland where it is badly needed or with reviewing how existing funding is being used and considering improvements. However, I have a problem with funding extra money for all councils by taking it from the councils that the Scottish Government itself has identified as facing the biggest challenges in relation to the poverty-related attainment gap. Hitting the poorest families in the poorest areas hardest will only worsen the attainment gap.

One group of people with whom the cabinet secretary should definitely have an urgent discussion is the parents of children in Dargavel, Renfrewshire, where a primary school with a capacity of 430 was built when accommodation is, in fact, needed for 1,500 pupils. The former education secretary, Shirley-Anne Somerville, told me that she had not seen anything like it. I agree.

Stephen Kerr: Does that whole episode not point to a very important issue that lies at the heart of our local democracies, which is that nobody seems to be accountable for these things? Does Neil Bibby agree that something needs to be done to change that dynamic in our local democracies?

Neil Bibby: I absolutely agree that there needs to be greater accountability, including on this particular issue. There needs to be a full and

independent investigation by the Accounts Commission, which I will come on to shortly.

Renfrewshire Council's catastrophic failure to accurately estimate school roll projections has left children with the joy of learning in portakabins and Renfrewshire taxpayers facing a massive bill of at least £160 million to fix the mess. That money should have been paid by developers; it should not have cost the public a penny. I raise the issue not because it is just a little local difficulty but because it is a major and scandalous waste of taxpayers' money. It is the equivalent of £2,000 in tax for every Renfrewshire household, and the equivalent of nearly one of the CalMac ferries that we have discussed many times in this chamber.

The original mistake was bad enough, but the response by Renfrewshire Council has also been woeful. Parents have now lost confidence in Renfrewshire Council's chief executive and director of education, and they have called on council leader Iain Nicolson to consider his position.

That was not always the case. To be clear, when the debacle was first exposed, the parent council for Dargavel was clear that it wanted to work with Renfrewshire Council constructively and without recrimination in order to find solutions for the children and parents and for Renfrewshire as a whole. However, after months of trying to work with the council, it has had to give up, citing a lack of urgency in trying to fix the error, a lack of transparency regarding the fiasco and the poor state of planning for the new primary school. Rightly, it has also questioned the sufficiency of an extension to Park Mains high school to cater adequately for the area's secondary school requirements, which councillor Gillian Graham has described as a "sticking plaster" approach.

There needs to be accountability for the debacle and urgent solutions need to be found in order to ensure that no child in Renfrewshire is left to pay the price of the council's incompetence. An external review by the chief executives club, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, which was initiated and paid for by Renfrewshire Council, simply will not command public confidence. The council already appears to know the review's findings, given press statements declaring that no current senior employee at the council was responsible. A full and independent investigation must be carried out by the Accounts Commission. The Scottish Government should be demanding that, as well as accountability. It also needs to step in to ensure that solutions, including financial support, are delivered so that other children in Renfrewshire are not left to pay the price.

Families are asking how long it will take for the other schools that need to be built to get built.

They are also asking what other services, including education services, will have to be cut in order to pay for the failure. If families and taxpayers do not have confidence in Renfrewshire Council, I do not see why the Scottish Government should. Parents in Dargavel want a commitment from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills that she will have a discussion with them and for action to follow from that. In Renfrewshire, there are major obstacles that stand in the way of achieving anything relating to the national discussion for education. No child should lose out because of the council's incompetence.

16:31

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): This debate and the national discussion on education as a whole are important opportunities for us to reflect on where we have been, where we are and where we are going in Scottish education. As I consider my contribution to the debate and reflect on the report, I note that it was interesting that the cabinet secretary launched the report at Towerbank primary school this morning. I think that about four of my friends went to that school. One went on to be a professional athlete and then a journalist, another a successful academic, another a successful electrician who has their own business and the last is a successful painter and decorator. All of them did well. If I think about the circumstances at the time when they went to school in comparison with current circumstances, it is undoubtedly clear that Scottish education has improved. There has been more investment. There is more innovation and more room for creativity, and there is more acceptance and support for people who have different abilities. As we reflect on where we are, we also need to highlight the positives of what the curriculum for excellence has achieved. We know that recent statistics show that a high level of individuals are going on to positive destinations—the figure is 95.7 per cent for the academic year 2021-22, which shows that there are successful learners and effective contributors.

Stephen Kerr: Does the member agree that we ought to take the measurement of positive destinations further than just a few months into the post-school life of our school leavers? We ought to be tracking what happens to them. They are so important to the future of our country. Surely we should invest more effort in finding out what becomes of our school leavers?

Ben Macpherson: Efforts to improve our statistical analysis should always be under consideration. There are also aspects of the curriculum for excellence that are less measurable, such as the value that we place on creativity, which was a key element in the launch

of the curriculum and was the focus of the architects at that time. In 2008, I went to see Brian Boyd at the Edinburgh international book festival. He said that lots of things are excellent and that we need to consider how to value the different ways of being excellent. We have definitely developed in that regard and we have more confidence as a country—young people today are so much more confident than they were when I was growing up. They have a much greater sense of civic responsibility about issues such as climate change and how we improve our society. There is also a sense of internationalism that is much more prevalent than it was in decades past.

However, the situation is not perfect, and I am not pretending that it is. One issue that I want to highlight is violence against women and girls. In its briefing for the debate, Zero Tolerance Scotland highlighted that a survey carried out by Girlguiding shows that, in recent years, 64 per cent of girls and young women have experienced sexual harassment at school. I encourage all of us to continue to support initiatives such as the white ribbon campaign and to continue to focus all year round on how we challenge those negative behaviours and improve that situation, because it is concerning.

I want to pick up on some issues in the report. The issue of digital has been highlighted today. In its contribution to the report, the Royal Society of Edinburgh said:

“As the world steps further into the so-called fourth industrial revolution, marked by increasingly sophisticated and integrated technologies, the way in which education is delivered could drastically change.”

We cannot underestimate that issue, particularly with regard to artificial intelligence. Prompt engineering might well become one of the most important skills in an AI world. If there are efforts to be made to ensure that we are ahead of the game rather than catching up in terms of our IT skills, that is an area that needs focus.

That also highlights how important it was, particularly during the pandemic, that the Government took the initiative on digital access and inclusion, with the investment of £48 million to deliver devices to around 60,000 households, working with organisations such as People Know How, which is based in my constituency. Getting ahead on digital and technological issues is vital.

I want to highlight the points that were made around breaking down the academic and vocational divide, which is addressed in paragraph 4.4 of the summary report. One idea that I wondered whether we should consider is that of how we can marry up encouraging young people to engage with the arts with ensuring that they improve and enhance their digital and practical

skills. How we get that balance right is something that we could finesse.

Ross Greer was right to mention the issue of homework. For some time, I have had concerns about how homework contributes to the poverty-related attainment gap, in that it is much easier for some people to do homework than it is for others. That is an area of concern that we need to consider.

We also need to consider teacher training and continuing professional development, and whether there are measures that we need to take in that regard.

Overall, we are at the start of the next chapter of the conversation. As the cabinet secretary highlighted, we now enter a phase of engaging with young people and the profession. I am excited to see how that develops and I encourage the Parliament to be solution-focused and constructive. I look forward to seeing how the agenda is taken forward, and I support the cabinet secretary in her endeavours to do that.

16:38

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a former employee of East Lothian Council, which I might mention in my speech.

It is always a pleasure to follow Ben Macpherson—I find myself saying that more frequently these days than in the past. He highlighted some important matters that the report points to, particularly in his comments about violence against women and girls and about the 64 per cent of young women and girls who have suffered sexual harassment in school. That speaks to the earlier discussions about the fact that we have a cohort of young people who do not feel safe when they attend school. The responsibility for dealing with that falls on all of us, because, as all teachers—indeed, all human beings—know, if we cannot fulfil the basic elements of food, protection, safety and housing, it is almost impossible for our young people to achieve anything.

Ross Greer: Does Martin Whitfield agree that what is absolutely essential to tackling violence against women and girls in our schools is ensuring that every young person, during sex and relationship education, learns about consent? That is not currently the case, despite aspirations for it to be.

Martin Whitfield: I absolutely agree. Part of growing up involves pushing against boundaries, and people around us must explain to us why those boundaries are there. Through empathy and

understanding, and through discussion with adults and, indeed, with young people of the same age as them, as well as with those who are older and younger than them, people develop the tools to inhabit an adult life safely.

I think that we are letting our young people down, not just with regard to consent but in relation to a lot of other matters. We are not giving them the experiences that they need to draw on in order to become better adults. Indeed, one of the veritable foundations of curriculum for excellence is the aim to be a better contributor to and citizen of Scotland.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's introduction and, again, the consensus that she is striving to achieve across the chamber. To echo Pam Duncan-Glancy's comments, we will support the Government. Indeed, we will support anyone who has the right solutions to these problems, but they are urgent and they cannot wait any longer, because our young people are growing up. I slightly flippantly suggest that, if this is the cabinet secretary's P1 year, the Government is just finishing university, so there is a period that we have to address and there is a shortage of time going forward.

Brian Whittle: As I was going to say in my earlier intervention, although we talk about children today, one of the concerns that I have about our schools today is the rise in ill health, especially in mental health. If we do not tackle that, it will have a huge impact on attainment.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful for that intervention. A lot of the contributions today and, indeed, the report that the debate is based on have talked about the multifaceted nature of what a good education system looks like. It is not a simple solution and it is not the same solution for every young person, but there are essential elements, from the touch typing that we discussed earlier—with some level of humour but also importance, because it is a tool of communication—to outdoor education, sport and keeping fit, which our young people need to experience.

I am conscious of the time, and I apologise to the members I do not get a chance to mention, but I want to raise with the cabinet secretary the holistic and coherent approach across Government, with the publication today of the "Violence Prevention Framework for Scotland", in which the Scottish Government says:

"For example, we are committed to incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, through implementation of Getting It Right For Every Child."

I ask that that does not mean that we have abandoned the idea of bringing the bill back and placing it on the statute book here. Again, with a

holistic and coherent approach across Scotland, it would be good to see joined-up language, so that we do not end up with unnecessary questions being raised.

There have been some very positive contributions today, and a lot of them have picked up a number of important aspects. Ruth Maguire commented on the national youth work strategy and she picked out the joyfulness of learning. We need to recognise that it is not necessarily just about qualifications; experiences outwith school need to be reflected, because young people very proudly bring their lives into school, and schools should be places where that joy can be shared.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

The Presiding Officer: The member is in his final minute.

Carol Mochan: I will make my intervention very quick. We have not spent a great deal of time on further education, but, in some of the aspects that we have spoken about, it is quite key going forward. Can we have a commitment around that?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely—and it is right to say that education should be lifelong. In fact, there has been much mention of the different areas of education throughout the debate. To some extent, we have concentrated the contributions on primary schools, but we have also spoken about high schools and the reform of the assessment situation.

I am conscious of the lateness of the hour, which is disappointing, because I would have liked to mention the contributions of Liz Smith and Ross Greer.

In concluding, with regard to my declaration of interest, for many years, Preston Lodge high school in Prestonpans has had the aims and values of achievement, respect, learning and community but, above all, happiness. If our children can be happy in school, they can be confident; if they can be confident, they can learn; and, if they can learn, they can contribute.

16:44

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I feel that parliamentarians have been somewhat spoiled over the past two weeks, with not one but two debates on education. That is two opportunities for this Government to defend its record on its handling of our education system and two opportunities for the Scottish Conservatives to promote new, bold and ambitious ideas to restore Scotland's education system to its once-renowned world-class status. However, it is a shame and a missed opportunity that the Scottish Government has backed itself into its usual corner of denying

accountability for the mess that it has presided over for the past 16 years.

The Scottish Government has previously shown a lack of willingness to fight to improve education standards and learning outcomes for young people, has yet to announce any bold or new ambitious policies and has rightly been challenged by members on this side of the chamber and by other Opposition members during today's debate.

The Scottish Conservatives made our position clear again today—the SNP is presiding over an education system that is in desperate need of repair.

Ben Macpherson: I wonder whether Meghan Gallacher is going to talk about the ideas, the solutions and the proposals rather than just criticise, as the Conservatives see it, the Government. That would take us into a better space.

Meghan Gallacher: I will come on to that, but we need to look at the story of how we got here and why we are having a national discussion on our education system.

Members from across the chamber have examined the publication "All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education". It was an interesting read, but my worry is that it will be another report that will gather dust on a shelf at the back of a Government office, because that has happened before. In 2017, the Scottish Government announced a new education bill, which was subsequently dropped and has not been spoken of since. Therefore, I really hope that history will not repeat itself. After all, the Scottish Government has had plenty of opportunities to bring in substantial changes to improve outcomes for our young people and to give our young people the best possible start in life. They have been let down at every turn, and I did have a chuckle to myself when the Government referenced COSLA in its motion as a solution to

"turn this vision into a reality for Scotland's children and young people",

because the SNP has stripped local authorities of powers and made them penniless. How does the SNP intend them to reform education when they do not have the right infrastructure, finance and resource in place? That point was also raised by Neil Bibby.

John Swinney: Would Meghan Gallacher like to tell Parliament how much more money the Conservatives would have given to local authorities in the budget propositions that they put to the finance minister for the current year's budget?

Meghan Gallacher: A better question for Mr Swinney would be why, when he was in

Government, did the SNP squander so much money that could have been put into educational resources?

I will pick up on a couple of the themes that were debated today. On additional support needs, ASN provision is failing in many council areas, including in my own, North Lanarkshire. Children are being placed in the wrong learning environment, which is undoubtedly having a detrimental impact on young people who need more support. Stephen Kerr was spot on—it is time that we addressed that.

Other issues were directly highlighted in the report, including job insecurity; the exhaustion and stress that teachers face daily; violence and bullying in our schools, which are issues that we debated only last week; and classroom sizes, which must be one of the biggest missed opportunities of the SNP's time in Government. Why has it not achieved that goal, given that it was a manifesto promise in 2007?

Liz Smith raised the importance of extracurricular learning, which is vital to the development of a young person, both mentally and socially. That is why I am backing her member's bill, and I hope that MSPs across the chamber will, too.

With regard to mindfulness, which was mentioned by Sue Webber, having a focus on health and wellbeing in the classroom is crucial given the modern-day pressures that are placed on our young people.

The last theme that I will mention—it would be remiss of me not to—is touch typing, although Stephen Kerr's intervention stole my thunder. The Scottish Conservatives have adopted touch typing as part of our skills policy, and I am pleased that Fergus Ewing welcomes that decision.

I make no apologies when I say that the SNP has yet to make any real improvements to our education system. Teachers deserve better, teaching staff deserve better and pupils deserve better. I welcome the opportunity to have a national discussion about education—in fact, it is long overdue—but, unless it improves learning outcomes or closes the attainment gap, it will all have been for nothing.

Having listened to the debate today, I know that it is the Scottish Conservatives who have the ambition to bring something new and exciting to Scotland's education system. If we were in charge, there would be no more talking about change; change would already be happening.

For now, we will encourage this Government to do better, to give our headteachers more powers over their schools, to deliver a new deal for teachers, to establish a national college and to

introduce life skills as part of the core curriculum. That is the ambitious vision that our young people and teachers deserve, and that is the vision that the Scottish Conservatives will continue to promote.

We have had enough education reports to last us a lifetime. There should be no more dithering and no more delays. We need action from this SNP Government now, and everyone who has contributed to the national discussion will expect nothing less. Time will definitely tell whether the Government is up to that task.

16:50

Jenny Gilruth: I want to start on a note of consensus. Stephen Kerr said that he is proud of Scotland for our record engagement through the national discussion. People in Scotland care about our education system, and I think that we can all agree on that today.

Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke about the hunger for change in her speech. I agree with that. We heard some of that from Meghan Gallacher, although I would not agree with the substance of her contribution. However, more broadly, there is a hunger for change in the education system currently.

As I think I outlined in my opening remarks, the Government will accept Labour's amendment. The evidence tells us that increasing non-contact time can help to improve learning and teaching. That is really important. I give Parliament the undertaking that we will work with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers to progress that action and important focus of Government.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I welcome the fact that the Government will support our amendment. Will the cabinet secretary set out a timescale for when it will fulfil that commitment?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not able to give the member one currently, but I am more than happy to write to her before the end of this session to give her an update on the timescales.

Mr Rennie spoke in favour of mainstreaming. I very much agree on that. I think that he gave an example from a constituent. In all honesty, that sounded familiar to me, as a former classroom teacher. Teachers have also had to adapt to meet the needs of pupils in classrooms—that is part of the job of being a teacher. I suppose that the approach to the implementation of the Morgan review has really been about a partnership between the Scottish Government and local authorities which, fundamentally, are responsible for delivering education in schools. We had a progress update in October 2022, but I accept that we need to do more in that regard, particularly in

relation to the increase in the numbers of pupils who have identified additional support needs.

Christine Grahame spoke about the numbers of staff in relation to additional support needs, giving examples from her teaching career. Again, I could identify with some of those examples and how classroom teachers adapt. I think that we all need to be mindful that teachers are skilled experts: they adapt to the class in front of them and they tailor the lesson to the needs of those children and young people.

Willie Rennie: In my speech, I was quoting the national discussion report rather than citing an example from my constituency. However, it is a familiar example. I accept the cabinet secretary's point that teachers are skilled, but the situation is pretty overwhelming. The Government needs to understand that, on some occasions, it is almost impossible for teachers when so many pupils in one class have such a variety of needs. Does she accept that?

Jenny Gilruth: I do accept that, but we must also reflect the reality that we have the highest recorded level of support staff for additional support needs in schools. That is the direct result of the Government providing an additional £15 million a year to support those additional staff in our schools.

As I said, I accept the wider point. There is more that we will need to look at. That includes looking at the Morgan review but more broadly to the outputs of the national discussion and, I think, to the Hayward review, to ensure that we are providing that support when it comes to more challenging instances of additional support needs, and, as we heard in the chamber last week, changes in relation to behaviour and relationships and how that plays out in our classrooms.

Stephen Kerr: To be absolutely clear, despite what Jenny Gilruth has just said, the national discussion report said in paragraph 5.2.13 that

"responses from the National Discussion were clear that there were currently insufficient appropriate resources, including staffing and specialists, to fully support all children and young people's individual needs."

In reality, although the level of additional support needs has risen to a third, an increase in the proportion of resources being expended to support classroom teachers in teaching pupils with diverse needs is not being delivered by this Government, is it?

Jenny Gilruth: I am afraid that I disagree with some of what Mr Kerr has said. I recognise the critique from the report that he puts to me and, of course, the Government will come to respond to the report in due course. However, it is also worth saying that the Government spent a record-high amount last year alone on additional support

needs—a record £830 million in 2021-22. We are putting a significant amount of public money into supporting those children and young people in our education system. If Mr Kerr and the Conservative Party would like us to spend more money, from where in the Scottish Government budget should we take that money?

Ross Greer spoke about the openness of the approach that was adopted by the facilitators and the lessons that we can learn as we move forward with our reform agenda. We also heard from Liz Smith and Willie Rennie about the reform agenda, and I will come to Parliament in a few weeks to give an update on that. Ross Greer talked about more challenge of the narrative privilege, and I whole-heartedly agree, having worked for two of the organisations that I think he quoted in his contribution.

It is hugely important that we have a wider reach in terms of where we go on reform, and that we do not hear just from the same old voices in Scottish education. I think that the report has been very successful in that regard, in that it managed to get into local communities to speak to children and young people about their views.

Ross Greer, and I think Liz Smith too, spoke about a potential level of cynicism about the reform agenda. I think that how the teaching profession is engaged in the output of the Hayward review—particularly in the secondary schools sector—will be key in that regard, as I think that I said in response to Pam Duncan-Glancy earlier. Teachers need to be fundamentally a part of what comes next—we cannot do it without them—whether that is a diploma approach or an international baccalaureate approach, as I think we heard from Liz Smith, although I have not yet, of course, received the final report from Professor Hayward. All that should be up for debate. We need to engage directly with the profession, which, as we heard in a debate in the chamber last week, has been through quite a tough time, it is fair to say, in recent years.

It also has to be joined up. I think that we heard from Mr Rennie about interconnectivity between higher education and what happens in our senior phase in relation to assessment. Forgive me, it was Ross Greer who touched on approaches to continuous assessment, and I declare an interest as I am married to a lecturer. The difference in approaches that are now used in the higher education sector makes it night and day from when I was at university 20-odd years ago. It is hugely important that our school sector could learn from some of those different approaches that could better support our children and young people fundamentally to attain their potential.

It was good to hear from John Swinney. He spoke of the strengths in Scottish education. He

made three substantive points. One was on poverty and how it inhibits children and young people reaching their potential. I know from personal experience exactly what Mr Swinney means when he says that, and it is why the Government has a programme that tackles poverty in our schools. The report acknowledges a number of outside influences—particularly in relation to the cost of living crisis—that are also impacting on our children's attainment in our schools. The Government in Scotland is limited, to an extent, in what we can do to respond to those.

John Swinney also spoke about supporting the profession and about the role of local government in that regard. It is an interesting point and I am keen to take that forward with COSLA. Parity of esteem is also hugely important, with the output of the Hayward review but also with the output from the Withers review, which will look at the skills landscape. It is hugely important that we do not look narrowly at the senior phase in isolation but look more broadly at skills delivery, particularly in our schools, which are really good at finding out the best pathways for their young people.

Sue Webber spoke about digital provision. She will know, of course, that the Government provided substantial finance in 2020-2021 for the delivery of 72,000 devices, and we are working with local government to roll that out further. We know that about 55 per cent of learners might already have access to a device, but it is fair to say that we will need to go further. I recognise that point, particularly in relation to the outputs from the report.

Neil Bibby raised an important local issue in relation to school provision in Renfrewshire and Dargavel. I give him an undertaking that I will meet him and the parents affected. I know that he has written to me on this matter and met the previous cabinet secretary on the issue.

Finally, I give a commitment to Ruth Maguire that we will continue to engage with stakeholders on the outputs of the new strategy. It is important that that youth work strategy ties up with the broader approach that we have seen from the national discussion today.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude. Today has been an opportunity to seize the optimism that is highlighted in the national discussion. There is an eagerness in the teaching profession and among parents and carers. Fundamentally, there is a need for all of us to ensure that our education reform agenda delivers for our young people. I say to Parliament today that the national discussion provides us with a foundation for the agenda to move forward, but we all have an obligation to engage in that agenda in good faith. I commend the national discussion to Parliament and I commit

to work with all parties on delivering a Scotland in which every learner matters.

Urgent Question

17:00

Wildfire (Cannich)

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): First and foremost, on behalf of my colleagues and, I am sure, the whole Parliament, I send our heartfelt sympathies to the firefighters who were injured while responding to the wildfire in Cannich. That is an all-too-stark reminder of the risks that our emergency service men and women take day in, day out to keep us safe. We wish them a speedy recovery.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce the risk of wildfire in Scotland, in light of reports that an on-going wildfire in Cannich is estimated to become the largest by area on record and that two firefighters were injured while responding to the blaze.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing this important question to the chamber, and I echo her sentiments about the two firefighters. I am pleased to inform Parliament that they have been discharged from hospital, and I thank all the firefighters and others who are tackling the wildfire.

The weather and the condition of vegetation at this time of year lend themselves to fires starting easily and spreading quickly. It is crucial that people act safely and responsibly, because one heat source can cause ignition and, if the wind changes direction, the smallest fire can spread and devastate entire communities, hillsides, livestock, farmland, wildlife, protected woodland and sites of special scientific interest.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service works closely with a number of partners to establish a common understanding of the risk prevention measures and response procedures. Through the Scottish Wildfire Forum, a wildfire danger assessment is carried out regularly when the risk reaches “very high” or “extreme”, and the assessment is shared with key contacts. That information is also used to develop public-facing messaging.

Rachael Hamilton: The ability of our emergency service to respond to large-scale wildfires is, I hope, considered by the Scottish Government during every such event. Enabling the service to use all-terrain vehicles in hard-to-reach areas and placing the resources that are available on rural estates on to community asset registers, as is proposed by Scottish Land & Estates, would be important steps. With that in mind, what lessons has the Scottish Government

learned from previous wildfires? Has the Scottish Government made any specific investments in relation to those lessons?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government has learned lessons. This is an operational matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, but I have been assured that the service remains fully ready and able to respond to any instance of wildfire that occurs anywhere across Scotland.

The Scottish Government has continued the commitment to support SFRS service delivery and reform with a further uplift of £10 million resource for 2023-24, which brings the total available budget for the SFRS to £368.1 million for 2023-24. How that budget is spent is up to the SFRS.

Rachael Hamilton: I appreciate the minister’s commitment to ensuring that lessons are learned. However, we know that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. We cannot control the weather and clearly no amount of signposting or public awareness will prevent such fires from occurring. However, we can boost wildlife resilience in vulnerable areas. Managing the fuel load on such landscapes protects people, property and habitat, including peatland. The scale of this fire is due in no small part to the fuel load on the land. Therefore, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that land managers have the tools that they need to manage fuel load and reduce wildfire risks?

Siobhian Brown: I am aware that healthy, wet blanket bog peatland is crucial to mitigating the risk of wildfire. The Scottish Government has set a world-leading target of restoring 250,000 hectares of degraded peatland by 2030. Against that target, we have restored more than 65,000 hectares. That commitment will ensure that the recent upward trend in the annual restoration rate continues. When in good condition, peatland can offer multiple benefits and resilience to our environment and our communities.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park is a significant tourist draw in my constituency. How will the Scottish Government work with partners there to ensure that visitors are aware of wildfire warnings and the steps that they must take to reduce the risk of wildfire?

Siobhian Brown: I thank Evelyn Tweed for that important question. Through the Scottish Wildfire Forum, which the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service chairs, a wildfire danger assessment is carried out every five to seven days by a third-party expert. When the risk of wildfire reaches “very high” or “extreme”, the assessment is circulated across a wide network of key contacts, including those in the public and private sectors, to ensure the widest possible coverage. That

information is also used to produce public-facing messaging that the SFRS issues across various media channels to ensure that visitors are aware of wildfire warnings and the steps that they must take to reduce the risks.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Our thoughts, too, are with the firefighters who were injured. We hope that they make a speedy recovery. We also thank all firefighters for putting their lives on the line daily to protect the public.

In Cannich, there are early suggestions that the fire was caused by wild camping. Will the minister look at ways of better educating people on the countryside code when they are enjoying our outdoors?

The minister talked about the risk of wildfire. What work is being carried out to monitor moors and forests, especially when that risk is apparent, to ensure that there are firebreaks and that the risks are mitigated?

Siobhian Brown: I echo Rhoda Grant's sentiments regarding the firefighters.

I do not have any inside information on how the fire started, but I am happy to look into that to see how we can raise awareness and prevent such fires in the future.

In relation to what we can do, I go back to what I said in response to a previous question. Through the Scottish Wildfire Forum, which the SFRS chairs, a wildfire danger assessment is carried out every five to seven days by a third-party expert. As I said, that assessment is circulated across a wide network of key contacts.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I, too, extend our thoughts to the firefighters and their families.

Unfortunately, the climate crisis means that wildfires such as the dreadful one in Cannich will increasingly occur in Scotland. Evidence from the International Union for Conservation of Nature peatland programme and from ClimateXChange shows that healthy restored peatland can act as a natural firebreak in the landscape. Does the minister agree that further research is needed on that vital topic?

Siobhian Brown: I do. As a result of climate change, there has already been warming in Scotland, with more extreme weather events and rising sea levels. As a nation, we must continue to adapt to those changes and prepare for the impacts of global climate change that are already locked in.

Members' Expenses Scheme

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-09249, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, on the reimbursement of members' expenses scheme.

17:08

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I realise that there is not much that can excite the blood this late on a summer afternoon, but I hope that a change to the members' expenses scheme will be just the ticket.

I rise to move the motion on behalf of the corporate body. Members will be aware that they are able to transfer up to £5,000 from their engagement provision to their office cost provision or from their office cost provision to their engagement provision. However, although the office cost provision and the engagement provision have risen by the appropriate inflation index, the amount that can be transferred has not. As a consequence, the real value of the sum that can be transferred has been declining each year.

Members have brought the matter to the attention of the corporate body. It seems a reasonable request that that index should also be uprated by inflation. The consequence of passing the motion today will be that the sum that can be transferred in the current year, on which some members rely, will increase from £5,000 to £6,060, and by an inflationary sum in subsequent years.

It is revenue neutral to Parliament and all within the umbrella of the overall provision that members have, but it introduces a degree of flexibility that I hope that members will welcome and support.

I move,

That the Parliament, in exercise of the powers conferred by sections 81(2), 81(5)(b) and 83(5) of the Scotland Act 1998, determines that the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme, which was agreed to by resolution of the Parliament on 2 March 2021, be amended to—

(a) insert, in paragraph 1.2.4, after "considers appropriate." and before "Such increases"—

"Any such uprating shall also be applied to the limit on the amount by which Members may vary their office cost and engagement provisions up or down subject to the overall agreed combined annual limit, as set out in paragraph 4.3.1 and 5.1.3."

(b) insert, in the second sentence of paragraph 4.3.1 after "financial year," and before "subject to"—

"or by such sum as determined following the uprating of the variation limit applied under paragraph 1.2.4,"

(c) insert, in the second sentence of paragraph 5.1.3 after "financial year," and before "subject to"—

“or by such sum as determined following the uprating of the variation limit applied under paragraph 1.2.4,”

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

Business Motion

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-09251, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I call George Adam to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

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 Debate: Active Travel Transformation

followed by Appointment of Board Members to Environmental Standards Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

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

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill – UK Legislation

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
 Tuesday 13 June 2023
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
 followed by Education, Children and Young People
 Committee Debate: College Regionalisation
 followed by Committee Announcements
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 14 June 2023
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Wellbeing Economy, Fair
 Work and Energy; Finance and Parliamentary Business
 followed by Scottish Labour 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 15 June 2023
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
 followed by Members' Business
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body
 Questions
 2.15 pm Portfolio Questions: Net Zero and Just
 Transition
 followed by Ministerial Statement: Provisional Outturn
 followed by Debate on the Scottish Parliament's Gender
 Sensitive Audit
 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 5 June 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]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-09252, S6M-09253 and S6M-09254, on designation of lead committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Electronic Trade Documents Bill—[George Adam]

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

Decision Time

17:11

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-09213.3, in the name of Stephen Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S6M-09213, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on let's talk education—the national discussion, be agreed to.

Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:11

Meeting suspended.

17:13

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on amendment S6M-09213.3, in the name of Stephen Kerr. Members should cast their votes now.

For

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-09213.3, in the name of Stephen Kerr, is: For 29, Against 90, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-09213.1, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-09213, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on let's talk education—the national discussion, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-09213, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on let's talk education—the national discussion, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of *All Learners in Scotland Matter: Our National Discussion on Education*; acknowledges the significant levels of engagement that the National Discussion generated, with events and discussions taking place in every part of Scotland, led by schools, community groups and third sector organisations, and reaching more than 38,000 people; thanks the independent academic facilitators, Prof Carol Campbell and Prof Alma Harris, for overseeing this work; supports the guiding values of the report to ensure that all learners in Scotland experience an education system that is ambitious, inclusive and supportive; recognises the diversity of all learners and endorses the vision, which will safeguard the learning and the life chances of all children and young people in Scotland; agrees to work with the Scottish Government and COSLA to turn this vision into a reality for Scotland's children and young people, and the educators, parents and carers who support them; recognises that the implementation of the existing Scottish Government commitment to increase non-contact time is necessary, and calls on the Scottish Government to reiterate this commitment and set out when it intends to fulfil it.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is that motion S6M-09249, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary

Corporate Body, on reimbursement of members' expenses scheme, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament, in exercise of the powers conferred by sections 81(2), 81(5)(b) and 83(5) of the Scotland Act 1998, determines that the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme, which was agreed to by resolution of the Parliament on 2 March 2021, be amended to—

(a) insert, in paragraph 1.2.4, after "considers appropriate." and before "Such increases"—

"Any such uprating shall also be applied to the limit on the amount by which Members may vary their office cost and engagement provisions up or down subject to the overall agreed combined annual limit, as set out in paragraph 4.3.1 and 5.1.3."

(b) insert, in the second sentence of paragraph 4.3.1 after "financial year," and before "subject to"—

"or by such sum as determined following the uprating of the variation limit applied under paragraph 1.2.4,"

(c) insert, in the second sentence of paragraph 5.1.3 after "financial year," and before "subject to"—

"or by such sum as determined following the uprating of the variation limit applied under paragraph 1.2.4,".

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member objects, the final question is, that motions S6M-09252, S6M-09253 and S6M-09254, on the designation of lead committees, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Electronic Trade Documents Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Dewars Centre

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-08199, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the Dewars centre in Perth. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or to put the necessary indication in the chat function if they are joining us online.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the concerns raised by Scottish Curling that the potential closure of the Dewars Centre, in Perth, would be the death knell of a legacy of curling in Perthshire dating back decades; notes the belief that, if this proposal goes ahead, it would mean that the town and county with which curling is most closely associated has made a choice to de-prioritise the success of legends such as Rhona Howie, Eve Muirhead, David Murdoch and numerous others, all of whom have a strong connection between Perth and the Dewars Centre and their Olympic and World Championships successes; further notes that the Dewars Centre has a history of supporting grassroots curling, and the potential to enable critical growth and to play a central role in tackling isolation, reducing barriers to inequality, and ensuring that inclusion and a sense of community are at the heart of sport in Perth, and notes the calls for Live Active Leisure and Perth and Kinross Council to reach a decision that would enable the Dewars Centre to be retained.

17:18

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by thanking members from across the chamber who signed my motion to allow this matter to be debated in the Scottish Parliament. Although my motion focuses on the future of the Dewars centre in Perth, curling has a reach right across Scotland and the issues that affect the Dewars centre affect many other venues in different parts of the country.

It might seem strange to debate a sport that is played on ice on one of the warmest days of the year so far, but curling is a real Scottish success story. It is a sport in which Scotland excels, with Olympic gold medal-winning teams and world championship winners in the men's and women's sections in recent times. The 2022 women's curling gold medal-winning team at the winter Olympics was led by Eve Muirhead, whose home rink was Dewars. As a consequence of that victory, the whole team was awarded the freedom of Perth and Kinross by the council.

Curling is a success story, not just for those at the elite end of the sport. It is a pastime that is enjoyed by many thousands of people across the country, and it is popular with the older generation, who can continue playing when other sports become more difficult. There is also an important

social aspect to the sport, because it helps to tackle loneliness and isolation, again particularly among older members of society. However, it would be wrong to characterise curling as a sport that is just for older people. There is a growing interest among young people, which has been fostered at Dewars and other rinks across the country.

However, curling will have a future only if there are facilities that can host it. We have a network of curling rinks across the country, but the Dewars centre is regarded as the Hampden park of the sport, hosting national tournaments as well as providing a regular playing venue for locals. In addition, the Dewars centre hosts indoor bowling and provides space for a range of exhibitions, conferences and other events.

The Dewars centre is owned and operated by Live Active Leisure Ltd, an arm's-length organisation that is wholly owned by Perth and Kinross Council but has an independent board to manage it. Live Active Leisure also operates the adjacent Perth leisure pool, the Bell's sports centre on the North Inch in Perth and a range of other community sporting facilities across the county.

Just a few months ago, the future of the Dewars centre was very uncertain. There were real concerns that it might face closure. As with many similar venues, it has seen substantial increases in operating costs, particularly in energy, and a drop-off in user numbers since Covid. Live Active Leisure now has an annual deficit of some £600,000. It has managed to keep facilities open for a further year by dipping into reserves, but that is clearly not a sustainable funding model for the future.

The ultimate owners of the leisure facilities are Perth and Kinross Council but, given the scale of the cuts in the council's funding, it is simply not realistic to expect greater council funding in the foreseeable future. Live Active is looking at other ways to increase revenues at Dewars, such as by hosting more events and increasing user fees, but that is unlikely to fill the funding gap. There are other interesting ideas, such as creating a new Scottish curling museum at Dewars, which could attract more visitors.

Back in March, the United Kingdom Government announced a swimming pool fund to help under-pressure leisure facilities to meet rising costs, and there are Barnett consequentials from that. Although the sums involved are not substantial, it would be interesting to hear from the minister whether the Scottish Government intends to provide specific assistance to Scottish swimming pools to reflect the help that has been made available south of the border.

There are plans to replace Dewars and the adjacent leisure pool with a new combined complex under the PH20 project. However, due to rising construction costs, that has had to be delayed and is unlikely to be taken forward for some years. In the meantime, we face on-going uncertainty about the future of Dewars and similar facilities.

I am clear that we cannot contemplate the closure of a facility such as Dewars. It is only through the provision of such sports and leisure facilities that we can encourage sports such as curling and indoor bowls—sports that are vital in encouraging fitness, reducing barriers to inequality and fostering a sense of community. Without facilities in which to play them, those sports will wither and die, with enormous consequences for wider society.

I bring this matter to the chamber for debate because the Scottish Government needs to seriously reflect on these issues. The health and wellbeing agenda is rightly at the heart of what the Government says is important to it, but the provision of sports and leisure facilities, where those are delivered, is left to local authorities, and that delivery is not a statutory function. That means that, at a time when local councils face real-terms cuts in their operating funding, facilities such as Dewars are under threat.

The closure of ice rinks, swimming pools, gyms and sports halls, all of which are at risk today right across the country, would have a devastating impact on an ambition that is shared across the political spectrum: to improve our national health and wellbeing, with a knock-on impact on our economic output. That issue is also dear to the heart of my colleague Brian Whittle, who will contribute to the debate shortly. Those facilities will survive only with a long-term and sustainable funding model.

I encourage the Scottish Government to engage directly with bodies such as Scottish Curling, which is the umbrella organisation for the sport. It has been campaigning for the future of rinks such as Dewars across the country, to ensure a bright future for the sport. We will continue to see successes such as those of Eve Muirhead and Bruce Mouat only if there are the venues to support them and to produce the new generation of gold medal winners that we all want to see.

17:25

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the future of the Dewars centre, which is adjacent to my constituency boundary, in the city of Perth, and is in the constituency of my

colleague Jim Fairlie, who I anticipate will contribute to the debate.

As Murdo Fraser has set out, the Dewars centre is an important and significant facility that is very much the home of curling and has attracted a formidable amount of the talent that Scotland has produced in the sport. Murdo Fraser correctly attributes a huge amount of appreciation to the achievements of Eve Muirhead, who originates from Blair Athol in my constituency and has gone on to have the most extraordinary career in international curling, becoming an Olympic champion in 2022. This parliamentary debate gives me a welcome opportunity to compliment her and her squad.

Of course, Eve Muirhead is not the first woman to blaze a trail for curling in Scotland. This debate also gives me a really special opportunity to pay tribute to one of my late dear neighbours, Frances Brodie, who was the driving force behind the group that established the first world ladies curling championship in 1979, and who chaired the first official ladies committee of the International Curling Federation—later renamed the World Curling Federation. Frances was a most wonderful lady, who graced all aspects of the life of our village. From that very quiet Perthshire village, she made a phenomenal contribution to opening the sport of curling to women. She was in every respect a true trailblazer. In 1989, her contribution to world curling was recognised by the federation with the introduction of an award in her name, which has been presented at the conclusion of each women's curling championship since then. The recipient of the honour, who is selected by the curlers participating in the event, is the curler who

“by deed and action in the course of their performance, best exemplified the traditional curling values of skill, honesty, fair play, friendship and sportsmanship.”

I cannot think of a finer description of Frances Brodie, so I am delighted to have the opportunity to put that on the record today.

As Murdo Fraser said, the issues that the Dewars centre faces are challenging. David MacLehose, the chair of Live Active Leisure, cited the significant pressures of reduced customer income, rising inflation, high energy costs and the impact of long-term public finance constraints. Those are issues with which we all wrestle. As I told Parliament at the time, I set the budget for 2023-24—one of my last acts in Government—in the most challenging context in which I have ever had to operate. The pressure on the public finances will be felt by Governments, local authorities and leisure trusts into the bargain. It is therefore essential that, in every step that we take, we try to ensure that the resources are available to support activities that are precious in our society.

However, we must also recognise that that often involves hard decisions. I have to make the point that I was prepared to take a hard decision to increase the resources that are available in the Scottish budget by increasing taxation, but Mr Fraser and his colleagues were not prepared to support us in that endeavour. There are hard choices to be made if we want public expenditure to be used to support facilities of this type. [Interruption.] Therefore, if we are to have debates of this nature in Parliament, we have to follow them up by being prepared to take the hard decisions that are necessary to increase the resources that are available—I hear the usual muttering from the Conservatives that I always hear when I point out the hard financial realities that exist in this respect. Although I am wholly supportive of the future of the Dewars centre, I point out the hard financial realities that the Conservatives always duck in this chamber.

17:30

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, and I congratulate my colleague Murdo Fraser on bringing it to the chamber. I also put on the record the fact that I am a past chairman of Perth and Kinross Live Active Leisure.

As we have heard, the Dewars centre is reckoned to be the Hampden Park of curling, because of its reputation. Indeed, Murdo Fraser's motion rightly states that the potential closure of the Dewars centre would be

“the death knell of a legacy of curling in Perthshire dating back decades”.

As a former chairman of that leisure company and a former councillor, for 18 years, in Perth and Kinross Council, I am acutely aware of the issues that are at stake. During my tenure as chair, the board and I, and other colleagues, had to make difficult choices on a number of occasions, but we always looked to what we could achieve in Perth and Kinross. The Dewars centre was always seen as a priority, and funding for that facility was always made available—that was an issue because, at that time, it faced certain circumstances. The stature of that facility at the local, national and international level of curling enhanced Perth's reputation worldwide, so we felt that it had to be seen as a priority.

The families and the organisations that have supported curling over the decades must be congratulated on their pioneering work in ensuring that the centre was given the status that it rightly deserves. With regard to its reputation, and to see how much the facility matters to the community and the sport, we need look only at the accolades and awards of those associated with it, who range

from local champions to, as we have heard, Olympic gold medallists.

The threat of closure stems from nothing more than the decades of chronic underfunding that councils, including Perth and Kinross Council, have had to endure under the Scottish National Party Government. In March this year, the United Kingdom Government announced that there would be £63 million of investment support for leisure centres and swimming pools in England. As we have heard, major sporting bodies urged the Scottish Government to match that on a per capita basis, using the associated funding that came to Scotland through the Barnett consequential. I know that Mr Swinney has made comments about making difficult decisions, but when we have a world-recognised facility that has a global reputation, supporting it is a possibility that should be considered.

The speciality of the sport is vitally important, not least because, as we all acknowledge, sporting pursuits make it possible for individuals of all ages to expand their potential and develop their physical and mental health and wellbeing. We know that the national health service saves an estimated £357 million as a result of people being actively involved in doing things.

We are where we are. It is a fact that, across Scotland, we hear time and again of sporting facilities being threatened with closure.

In conclusion, the overwhelming evidence is that the Dewars centre has a contribution to make to curling and its stature on the world stage. I strongly urge the minister to consider the situation and look at the long-term security of facilities such as the Dewars centre, because they make a massive contribution. The closure of the facility would have far-reaching consequences for Scotland's curling and the sport in general, so we need to support that rink, we need to support that sport and we need the Government to stand up and support those facilities in the interests of our communities and our constituents.

17:34

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Murdo Fraser for bringing this debate to the chamber. I also apologise to members for having to leave early, which means that I will miss others' speeches. Thank you, Presiding Officer, for accepting my request in that regard.

Although the motion itself predates the decision to continue funding for the Dewars centre for the next year, it gives us a welcome opportunity to talk about the need for longer-term security for the centre and to highlight its role in supporting sporting participation and community activity, as well as to note the well-known success stories.

We are always happy to celebrate Scotland's successes on the sporting stage, such as the winning of the recent world men's curling championship in Canada. However, behind those victories lie years of dedication on the part of sportspeople and coaches, spent in venues and facilities that allow people a place to develop, to train and to work towards their goals.

A key part of sporting success is the provision of quality facilities for those starting out as well as professional-level competitors, and that needs long-term investment and commitment. Although the decision to continue to fund the Dewars centre for the next 12 months is welcome, there is still a question mark over its longer-term position. I know that Scottish Curling is committed to working to ensure that curling remains in its prominent place at the Dewars centre and I—like, I am sure, other members—have been contacted by constituents imploring MSPs to do what we can to help ensure the continuation of curling at the centre, highlighting the various clubs and members who regularly travel to play there, with some travelling not inconsiderable distances.

Earlier this year, I was pleased to visit the Dewars centre, where I met Vincent Bryson and Graham Lindsay of Scottish Curling, as well as Debbie Scott, who is the senior facilities manager of Live Action Leisure, to talk about their work to increase participation in curling, as well as the importance of the centre as a training venue. We also discussed what the centre offers in addition to its importance to curling, both as a leisure venue and as somewhere that provides exhibition space and conference facilities. Alongside the swimming pool, the Dewars centre is an important part of the Perth community. That was demonstrated when proposals to close both venues emerged and many people contacted Live Action Leisure to plead with it not to do that.

Although both facilities have been secured for another year, part of the funding solution was to allocate funds from Live Action Leisure reserves alongside a fee increase across activities, and that might need to be looked at again next year. Further, although the planned PH20 looks like a great prospect, the construction timeline is not clear, and a way forward has to be found that recognises the strategic importance of the Dewars centre and commits to the PH20 project.

More broadly, we are increasingly seeing leisure facilities and provision across the country at risk as a result of underinvestment in local authorities and, more recently, increased energy costs, and much more needs to be done to protect communities that are at risk of being left without access to those services. Multi-use venues such as the Dewars centre must be supported to attract more exhibitions and conferences that can

increase their income across the year and can enable them to diversify and expand their offer into other areas.

Further, by encouraging a more active population, we can increase participation, which in turn generates the income that is needed to keep those facilities open in our communities. It is in those communities that our sporting successes begin, and it is in those communities that we see the related benefits of pursuits such as curling and their contribution towards social cohesion, addressing loneliness and allowing people to get and stay active for their physical and mental health. Those important cross-cutting benefits of sporting activity extend across our lives, and we should recognise the vital role of quality venues in delivering them across Scotland.

17:38

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Murdo Fraser for bringing such an important debate to the chamber and also for broadening the debate out from the threat to the world-class curling facility at the Dewars centre in Perth to the increasing threat to many other key sporting facilities across Scotland.

This debate once again allows me to focus on the wider implications of our continuing to lose sports facilities. Physical activity in sport has a significant impact across all of society. The physical health benefits are maybe the most obvious but, as Murdo Fraser alluded to, it has a massive impact on mental health outcomes, loneliness, isolation and inclusivity, and there are wider impacts across the whole of the country.

For example, the greatest drag on Scotland's economy is our poor health record. We are the unhealthiest nation in Europe; the last time that I checked, around 13 per cent of our working population were unable to work because of ill health. Given the need that Mr Swinney alluded to of having to raise the tax take to pay for our under-pressure services, surely tackling that inactivity should be a focus for the Scottish Government.

If it were the priority, the Scottish Government would have been ensuring that physical activity was easily available to all, irrespective of background or personal circumstances. However, as I have consistently highlighted in my time in this place, sport is becoming the bastion of the middle class. To compound that decline, school physical activity, especially in extracurricular activities, has seriously declined. School introduced sport to many of us, and it had a positive effect on attainment and behaviour, as has been much discussed in the chamber in the past couple of weeks.

Murdo Fraser's motion highlights the threat to the Dewars centre. That threat is reflected in threats to sports facilities throughout Scotland—threats to ice rinks, including in Ayr, swimming pools, hockey pitches and football pitches. Even the national athletics stadium in Grangemouth was under threat. Even where facilities have not been under threat, we have heard many stories of councils considering significant hikes in costs to use them, excluding even more people.

If we do not reverse that decline, the nation's health will continue to struggle. That will require more and more investment in tackling ill health, leading to even less investment in facilities and a slow spiral downwards. Would it not be better to begin to move investment upstream, to invest in our sports facilities and to give everyone the opportunity to have the joy and pleasure of physical activity?

17:41

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I congratulate my colleague Murdo Fraser on securing this members' business debate, which celebrates Dewars ice rink. I should say that, although it might be the Hampden in that respect, Dumfries and Galloway certainly provides the feeder clubs for our national success.

It is clearly a worrying time for ice sports enthusiasts, whether they be curlers, skaters or ice hockey players. Sadly, many of Scotland's ice rinks face prohibitive energy price increases that threaten their very existence. As the Scottish Ice Rinks Association has stated, we have literally come to the end of the road unless someone can wave a magic wand and get energy prices down to a realistic level or we receive significant external funding.

Annual bills used to be between £50,000 and £60,000, but many are now heading towards almost £200,000—or three to four times the increase. That is purely for energy, but energy is needed to make the ice. There is no way around the matter; essentially, ice rinks are massive refrigerators. Talks are being held with governing bodies, utility firms and the Scottish Government to find a way forward. Given that Scotland's ice rinks have been the breeding grounds for such exceptional international talent, we need to support them in those efforts.

In the south of Scotland, we have three different ice rink models: one in a hotel in Stranraer, a council-run facility in Dumfries and a registered charity in Lockerbie. The North West Castle hotel was the first hotel in the world to have its own indoor curling rink, and it continues to attract visitors from around the globe. It was recently taken over by Bespoke Hotels, at the time when

the energy crisis was having the strongest hit, and like other groups, it was worried about how to continue curling. Thankfully, with a season now under the belt, things now look slightly more encouraging. I put on record my thanks and the thanks of the people of Stranraer and the wider community to the management of Bespoke Hotels, including the ice rink manager, Gail Munro, for the sterling work that it has done to keep curling in Stranraer—which, arguably, is the most prolific breeding ground for world champions.

Dumfries ice bowl has an enviable reputation for nurturing world-class curlers, too. It has been successful in attracting the world ice hockey championship, and it is home to award-winning figure skaters and synchronised teams: the Solway Stars, Solway Eclipse, Solway Lightning and Solway Comets. All of that, along with the ice hockey team that is based there, helps to sustain the venue's two ice rinks, and the hard work of the team there deserves to be recognised. Much of the success has been initiated by the vision of Dumfries and Galloway Council staff, particularly Richard Grieveson, who went on to be the chairman of Ice Hockey UK for five years.

Sportscotland has provided £1.75 million to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, but more financial aid is needed. We must ensure that the legacy of the phenomenal success enjoyed by our curlers is felt for years to come. Winning a gold medal at the world championship in Ottawa was the crowning glory of the Scottish men's curling team; it was skippered by Bruce Mouat, who was assisted by three team mates from the south of Scotland. Bobby Lammie and Hammy McMillan from Stranraer are the latest trailblazers to have carried on the fine skills developed by their respective families. Those lads were joined on the winner's rostrum by Dumfries curler Grant Hardie and their near-perfect curling saw them defeat the home nation favourites 9-3. That glorious achievement came just months after team Mouat clinched their third European men's curling championship in Sweden, adding that to the silver medal that they won in the 2022 winter Olympics.

Joining those curlers on the conveyor belt of talent from Stranraer is Hugh Nibloe, who helped Scotland win bronze at the world wheelchair curling championships in Canada, reaching his century of appearances for the Scottish national curling team. He has also represented Great Britain at the Paralympics, where he won a bronze medal in 2017 and silver in 2019.

Not to be outdone, Fay Henderson from Dumfries and Robyn Munro from Stranraer helped Scotland's women strike gold at this year's world junior championships in Germany. Scotland's junior men's team, skippered by Orrin Carson with teammates Logan Carson, Archie Hyslop, Charlie

Gibb and Scott Hyslop—all from Dumfries curling club—won a bronze medal at the world junior championships. There was also success for Blair Haswell from Stranraer and Jack Carrick from Dumfries, who won gold for team GB at the winter session of the world university games at Lake Placid in New York state.

I cannot pass up the opportunity to praise my own daughter, who scored the one and only—and first ever—goal for the team GB ice hockey squad, against Japan, at the same games. She has had the wonderful experience of playing ice hockey on rinks right across Scotland, the United Kingdom and the world. It has been a huge part of her life and continues to be so.

The achievements of all those players are now inspiring many youngsters to take up sport, which can be only good. To ensure that those sports have a future, though, we must ensure the future of our much-loved ice rinks.

17:46

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will make a very brief comment, doing so not only as a member for Mid Scotland and Fife who has, for many years, greatly valued the Dewars facility for all the reasons set out by Murdo Fraser in his opening speech but as convener for 10 years of the cross-party group on sport. I know that my predecessor, the late Margo MacDonald, would have been saying exactly the same thing in this debate, which is that Dewars is the epitome of a local sports facility that provides not only for elite athletes, especially curlers, but for grass-roots sport. We lose that at our peril.

In an age when grass-roots sports matter more than ever in helping to address the concerns and anxieties resulting from Covid and when there is a dearth of extracurricular activity in many schools—an issue that we debated earlier—I implore the Scottish Government to think very carefully about its current approach, for the reasons that Brian Whittle cited. I have no doubt whatsoever that the Scottish Government wants to be constructive and helpful, but I believe that the time has come to properly re-evaluate policies and their effects on grass-roots sport. I know that the members of my cross-party group feel exactly the same.

I thank my colleague and good friend Murdo Fraser for bringing this debate to the chamber, not only because of Dewars but because of the wider implications for Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Smith. As Brian Whittle and I can testify after our footballing exploits on Monday, there is also a downside to physical activity.

Jim Fairlie is the final speaker in the open debate and is—I hope—joining us remotely.

17:48

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I apologise for not getting to the chamber, Presiding Officer. Unfortunately, the Edinburgh traffic had a lot to do with that.

There is no question but that Perth and the surrounding area are world renowned for excellence in curling. The facilities there have helped to spawn the golden sporting careers of legends such as Rhona Howie, Eve Muirhead, David Murdoch and others.

Although we should take every opportunity to highlight those wonderful achievements in Parliament, I regret that Murdo Fraser has muddled a happy and celebratory subject by drawing members' attention to local politics and is doing so when he frankly does not have a leg to stand on. Any of my constituents who are tuning in should be aware that this is a members' business debate: the Scottish Parliament will not vote on the matter because, rightly, the issue is one for local government to decide on.

As we address the issue head on, let us discuss what Murdo Fraser has brought to the local matter before us. We can look back at his words from September 2019, when Mr Fraser encouraged the introduction of mayors to Scotland's cities, saying:

"This would give the opportunity to devolve more power from the centre. The SNP is very keen on devolution from Westminster to Edinburgh, but not at all keen on devolution from Edinburgh any further afield. This situation needs to be reversed, with much greater autonomy for local areas."

A few years on, here we are discussing a local government decision in Parliament.

If there is one thing that the Tories know well, it is how to do hypocrisy. Perth and Kinross councillors of all affiliations have long advocated for a modern replacement of leisure facilities such as the Perth leisure pool and the Dewars centre, so it is surprising to read the motion fearfully describe that there might be an imminent threat to curling facilities locally.

The modern replacement is known as the PH20 project. It will provide modernised leisure water facilities as well as an additional 25m pool and training pool, bowling, curling, skating, a health spa, family play activities, conference support and a cafe. It is a centre fit for the 21st century, built to Passivhaus standards and representing a major step forward in the area's contribution to meeting Scotland's net zero carbon target by 2045.

It is necessary to replace the existing facilities, which are showing their age, from a financial perspective and an environmental one. That was

recognised back in 2021 by the Conservative leader of the council at the time, Murray Lyle. When committing to replacing Perth leisure pool and the Dewars centre, he said that

“both were coming to the end of their useful lives”,

and it is clear that he had a point. The annual utility costs for Perth leisure pool and the Dewars centre are running at a highly expensive £500,000, while the facilities face significant pressure, primarily from reduced customer income, rising inflation and high energy costs. I think that we can all agree that that is something that we should be talking about.

All those factors, as well as a lack of workforce, which is causing another great economic disaster of the Tories’ making as a result of Brexit—not to forget Liz Truss—have meant that the project has proven to be difficult to get off the ground. However, that need not have been the case. When the Tories were in administration, they dithered on introducing the project, despite financial evidence from council officers warning of the necessity of the project and the significant cost implications of delaying. When in power, the Tories knew that the project should have been a priority, but it was not until they were voted out of office and replaced by the SNP that the project has got going, with the current administration ring fencing £90 million for it to go ahead.

Something else that does not add up is that, as soon as the Tories were voted into opposition, they introduced an amendment targeting an uncosted £350,000 commitment to keeping Live Active Leisure facilities open in Perth during 2023 and 2024. I understand that there is a need to ensure convenient access to leisure facilities, but why throw that money blindly at an issue, other than to create a political stir?

In contrast, the SNP administration has reacted responsibly, not only securing the long-term future of the curling services in Perth by setting the gears in motion for PH2O, but working alongside the arm’s-length organisation Live Active Leisure to provide £110,000 of additional support to assist the financial challenges faced by the Dewars centre in this financial year, saving hundreds of thousands of pounds in so doing that could well be used.

The SNP celebrates Scottish curling and will ensure that Perth continues to be the home of champions in years to come.

17:52

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Murdo Fraser for bringing the motion to

Parliament, and I thank members from across the chamber who have contributed.

As members will all know, I am absolutely passionate about sport. I have watched with immense pride the fantastic achievements of Scottish curlers, from Rhona Howie’s final-stone triumph in Salt Lake City to Eve Muirhead skippering her team to Olympic gold in Beijing and, just recently, Bruce Mouat’s team winning the world men’s curling championship. Scotland’s curlers continue to succeed at the very highest level on the world stage.

The Scottish Government understands that part of that success is due to the fantastic facilities that are available—not only the Dewars centre in Perth but other facilities around Scotland. We also have the Olympic performance programme for curling based here in Scotland; in fact, it is the only UK Sport Olympic and Paralympic supported programme that is based in Scotland. That reflects the history of the sport, which as many members will know was invented in Scotland, as well as the fact that the overwhelming majority of curling clubs are located in Scotland.

I truly believe that you have to be able to see it to be it, and the children and young people of Scotland are fortunate to have those amazingly successful Scottish curlers as role models. However, that visibility is only part of the story, as our young people also need the opportunity to try curling and to fall in love with the sport, so any threatened closures are a real concern.

As has been noted during the debate, Live Active Leisure has committed to keeping the Perth leisure centre and the Dewars centre fully open until the end of March 2024. That is welcome news in the short term, and it will, I hope, allow time for Live Active Leisure to work collaboratively with Perth and Kinross Council on a long-term solution.

I am aware that that has resulted in price increases of between 10 and 15 per cent, and I understand that some will be disappointed with the decision, but I am delighted that Live Active Leisure has committed to freezing charges for people who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit. It is essential that we do not increase the barriers to physical activity, especially for our children and young people. Freezing prices for concessions will help to protect the most disadvantaged people in our society and it can make a real difference in reducing health inequalities for people across Perth and Kinross.

We all know that local authorities are operating in very challenging financial circumstances.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): As Murdo Fraser mentioned in his contribution, the Scottish Government received

Barnett consequentials as a result of the UK Government announcing extra funding for swimming pools in England. Will that money be passed on to our local authorities so that sports facilities such as Bucksburn swimming pool in Aberdeen can be saved?

Maree Todd: I know, because we have seen it during the past few days, that it is really hard for my Conservative colleagues to understand that devolution enables us to make different decisions in Scotland.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: Let me finish. The UK's decision to fund swimming pools results in Barnett consequentials for the Scottish budget, but they go into the block grant as a whole and Scottish ministers decide how to allocate those resources. Some of the different decisions that we have made in Scotland are on things such as protecting Scottish citizens from the bedroom tax, or things like that game-changer in tackling poverty, the Scottish child payment, and so on.

Douglas Lumsden: What the minister does not seem to understand is that we are talking about additional funding after the block grant allocation, so it should not have been allocated to something else. It was additional, so it could have been moved to local authorities to save our local sports facilities.

Maree Todd: The member does not seem to understand that the Scottish Government spends millions of pounds every year on mitigating policies that wreak havoc on our citizens in Scotland and cause immense pain and poverty. The bedroom tax particularly targeted people with disabilities. I am proud that, in Scotland, we protect people.

John Swinney: For the sake of completeness, I need to advise the Parliament that Mr Lumsden is wholly incorrect. The allocation of funding for swimming pools was made in the United Kingdom budget of October 2022, so it formed part of the block grant that I distributed in December 2022. What Mr Lumsden has just put to the minister is therefore wholly wrong.

Maree Todd: As part of the process, we will consider what support can be provided to the sport and leisure sector in Scotland. We will continue to work with sportscotland, our national agency for sport, to understand accurately the provision of facilities and predict the landscape in the short, medium and long term and to ensure the sustainability of these important facilities.

Brian Whittle: Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: I have given way a number of times. Let me continue and finish my point.

We have called repeatedly on the UK Government to use all the powers that it has at its disposal to tackle the cost of living crisis and to provide appropriate energy bill relief to leisure facilities. I am sure that we can all agree that that would be a useful strategy for the Westminster Government to pursue.

Give that most of the levers for responding to financial challenges are reserved, we continue to urge the UK Government to use all of its powers to tackle the cost of living crisis. I remind members that the UK is facing a worse cost of living crisis than European Union countries. The UK Government should act now.

For its part, in 2023-24, the Scottish Government increased the resources available to local government by more than £793 million. That is a real-terms increase of £376 million, or 3 per cent. However, as independent corporate bodies, it is for local authorities to manage their budgets and allocate the total financial resources that are available to them, including for leisure facilities, on the basis of local needs and priorities. We will continue to work in partnership with our colleagues in local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve.

Sportscotland and Scottish Government officials recently met representatives of the Scottish Ice Rinks Association to discuss the difficulties facing rinks. We know that they face significant energy costs and that energy efficiency remains a concern. Between 2008 and 2018, sportscotland invested almost £4 million in capital projects to replace the refrigeration systems in Scotland's ice rinks. We also supported 13 privately-operated ice rinks with £2 million during the pandemic.

Sport and leisure facilities play such a critical role in improving people's lives, whether they are taking part in sport and physical activity for the first time, attending regular clubs and activities that help to develop friendships as well as confidence and skills, or progressing and achieving success. They are community hubs that bring people together and make a positive contribution to building healthier, happier, safer and stronger communities.

We know about the significant physical, mental and social benefits of physical activity and, as minister, I want everyone, even my colleagues who are limping this week because of their football match on Monday, to be able to benefit from sport and physical activity. We are working hard to remove the barriers that still exist to people being physically active.

I have to inform my colleague Brian Whittle that it is not a new problem that sport is reserved to the middle classes—it has always been thus. Sport

has always favoured the rich, and this Government is determined to change that. It is important that facilities, including ice rinks, are accessible for everyone in Scotland so that everyone can benefit from sport and physical activity and the future curling world and Olympic champions of tomorrow can access the pathway to success. I am sure that my fellow members would all delight in seeing Scotland's curlers continue to be successful on the world stage. As the minister responsible for sport, I will continue to look for opportunities to provide support for the Dewars centre and for all sport and leisure facilities throughout Scotland.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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