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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 1 November 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time. To get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Minimum Wage (Devolution of Powers)

1. **Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact that any future devolution of powers relating to the minimum wage to the Scottish Parliament would have on its fair work and wellbeing economy policies. (S6O-02648)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): In “Building a New Scotland: A stronger economy with independence”, we propose setting a national minimum wage at a rate that better reflects the cost of living and doing business in Scotland. Responsibility for setting future rate increases could fall to a Scottish low pay commission, which could signal a new consensus-building approach to minimum wage setting.

While such key powers remain reserved to Westminster, we continue to promote our fair work agenda to deliver fairer working practices, including the payment of the real living wage, which is now set at £12 per hour for workers outside London who are aged 18 or over.

Ivan McKee: As we know, low pay is a prime driver of poverty, and control over the legally binding minimum wage is a key lever in tackling that. What level would the Scottish Government set a Scottish minimum wage at, if it had the power to do that?

Neil Gray: I agree that low pay is a key driver of poverty. We propose establishing a fair minimum wage at a level that better reflects the cost of living in Scotland. That would be a single rate for all age groups, which would end the current approach of discriminating against young workers.

We continue to call for employment powers to be devolved to enable us to create fairer

workplaces, enhance workers’ rights in Scotland, help to shift the curve on poverty and deliver a fairer, greener and growing economy and a more prosperous Scotland. In the meantime, we remain committed to promoting the real living wage as part of our fair work agenda.

Onshore Wind Farms (Approvals)

2. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what proportion of onshore wind farms approved in the past year had majority support from the local community. (S6O-02649)

I refer members to my registered interest in relation to two 12kW domestic turbines.

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish ministers determine applications for consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989. The Scottish Government does not collect data on community support for applications that are determined under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. Before deciding on an application, decision makers consider all relevant material that is available to them, including the application documentation, consultation responses, representations and other material information.

Alexander Burnett: Last year, the Garbet wind farm, which borders my constituency, received consent from the Scottish Government despite overwhelming objection from the local community and Moray Council. Similarly, the Scottish Government approved the Meall Buidhe wind farm this summer despite more than 200 objections from residents and Highland Council.

There are now fears that approval for the proposed Dunecht Estates Hill of Fare wind farm, in my constituency, is a foregone conclusion despite just one in 10 residents supporting the plans. Will the minister back my call for communities to be given a statutory voice on applications for wind farms whose capacity exceeds 50MW?

Gillian Martin: It is interesting that Mr Burnett’s original question was about majority support, which suggests that he is calling for some kind of vote or recording of support from every person who is of voting age. I am not sure that we can ascertain from a consultation whether there is majority or minority support, because that is not how planning applications are done.

We have an onshore wind sector deal under which the Government committed to streamlining processes, which was what the industry asked us for. We have asked the industry and the sector to engage with communities at the earliest possible opportunity during the project development cycle in order to agree a community package that will

meet or exceed the principles that have been set out in the good practice principles for community benefits. We want them to engage with communities on their plans as early as possible to see what would work where, and where the best compromises could be made.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The onshore wind sector deal that was signed last month at the Scottish Renewables onshore wind conference is very welcome. How will it ensure that local communities benefit fully and share in the rewards of onshore wind developments?

Gillian Martin: I alluded to that deal in my answer to Mr Burnett. I thank Mr Beattie for his warm words on it, as it is a significant milestone in ensuring that communities are fully engaged in and benefit from our green energy transition. The industry is committed to engaging with communities from the earliest possible opportunity in a project development cycle and it has agreed to a community benefits package that exceeds the good practice principles that have been set out. I have tasked it with making more meaningful offers in relation to what that might mean for communities. I have often made the point that a lot of rural communities that are the sites of onshore wind developments suffer from a great deal of fuel poverty. There may be something more constructive that can be done on that.

The industry has also committed to promoting supply chain opportunities, supporting increased local content of projects and providing an appropriate number of apprenticeships, training opportunities and skilled jobs across the sector and related industries for the lifetime of the sector deal. Those commitments demonstrate the importance that both the Scottish Government and the industry continue to place on good community engagement and the delivery of meaningful benefits.

Offshore Wind (Infrastructure) (Ports)

3. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of whether Scotland's infrastructure is equipped to deliver the current offshore wind pipeline of up to 42GW, including in relation to port infrastructure. (S6O-02650)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Scotland's natural resources, high wind speeds, skilled workforce, excellent port structure and strong innovation hubs make Scotland one of the best places in the world to develop offshore wind and its supply chain. My recent trade visit to Port Esbjerg in Denmark was an excellent working example of maximising port infrastructure and our strategic investment model alongside the recently announced £500 million of

Scottish Government investment. I took with me a trade mission of people who represent ports including Forth Ports, the port of Leith and the Port of Aberdeen so that they could learn from Esbjerg. To fully maximise the benefits, however, we must continue to call on the United Kingdom Government to deliver an enhanced transmission grid infrastructure at pace, which would make all the difference.

Daniel Johnson: It is important that we build consensus on the infrastructure investment that we need in order to realise our renewables potential. However, I wonder whether the minister read the recent *Financial Times* article that quoted the chief executive of Haventus, which is currently redeveloping the Ardersier port. He said:

"With current port capacity, it would take at least 50 years to achieve the 45GW that is already licensed for Scottish waters".

That is in line with the view of the floating offshore wind task force, which has said that we need £4 billion of investment.

What steps is the Government taking to ensure that there is sufficient public and private investment so that we have the port infrastructure to realise our offshore renewables potential?

Gillian Martin: Daniel Johnson makes some really good points. I have not read the article that he mentioned, but I am familiar with the arguments in it.

We are doing a couple of things. The £500 million of investment is directed to port infrastructure because it is apparent that we need to beef that up in order to deliver on our ambition. We are working in collaboration with the public and private sectors to develop what is called the strategic investment model—or SIM—and move from project-led investment to sector-led investment that will better support growth in port and supply chain capacity and capability.

Government money cannot deliver on its own. There has to be public and private investment, which is why the First Minister announced the additional £500 million of investment. We are working with the ports as well as the offshore wind industry on what that money could be used for and where it can best be deployed, for the reasons that Daniel Johnson outlined.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The absence of offshore wind in the recent contracts for difference auction was extremely disappointing. It signals that the United Kingdom Government has failed to recognise the current market challenges that the sector faces. With that in mind, can the minister provide an update on Scottish Government investment that will help to deliver on the full economic potential of offshore renewables projects?

Gillian Martin: The results of allocation round 5 sent a shockwave through the industry. When they came through, I was on my visit to Esbjerg with quite a lot of partners, including people from Scottish Renewables, and there was great concern about the fact that nobody bid for those licences because the strike price was too low. I hope that the United Kingdom Government has heard the reaction to that from the sector and the Scottish Government, and will improve things for AR6.

However, we have recently announced £500 million of Scottish Government investment into that supply chain to help us to deliver for Scotland. That will stimulate and support private investment in infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to the growth of a world-leading offshore wind sector, as I mentioned to Daniel Johnson.

The UK Government must now address calls from the industry for the next round of contracts for difference allocations to deliver on those projects at scale, not just for Scotland but for the whole of the UK. Crucially—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, minister.

Gillian Martin: —it must also heed the calls for grid infrastructure to unlock the enormous potential that Scotland's renewable energy transition holds.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We need to build confidence that the supply network is going to grow. One ScotWind project recently warned of significant unanticipated changes in the Scottish and UK offshore wind industries and of challenges regarding the availability and capacity of Scottish, UK and European supply chains. What early results can the minister secure in developing that supply chain so that we can build confidence and maximise the potential for Scotland?

Gillian Martin: I thank Willie Rennie for highlighting the supply chain. The strategic investment model that I mentioned—the SIM—is critically important in that regard. Applications to it closed in June, and it attracted a high level of interest. There were 44 applications, which involved an estimated total capital expenditure of more than £4 billion. Some 41 per cent of them are for port infrastructure projects, and the remainder are for other types of supply chain investment.

The SIM model is moving really fast. The industry asked us for that and we are delivering it. It looks like it is working. For the reasons that Willie Rennie outlined, we have to have collaboration with the industry and move on supply chain benefits as much as possible.

Hydrogen Production

4. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to boost hydrogen production in Scotland. (S6O-02651)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The “Hydrogen Action Plan” confirms that the Scottish Government will support the hydrogen sector through a programme of capital funding to increase Scotland's production capabilities. Earlier this year, we launched the hydrogen innovation scheme and offered over £7 million in grants to projects that will accelerate innovation in hydrogen production. Last month, we announced £200,000 of funding for the North Sea alliance research project, which will investigate pipeline infrastructure between Scotland and Germany and match Scottish hydrogen production to German hydrogen demand. The green hydrogen fund, which will launch later this year, will further boost hydrogen production in Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: I welcome the minister's recent announcement in Aberdeen of funding for that hydrogen pipeline research, which is really important. What are the Government's intentions with regard to reviewing regulatory and planning guidance to aid hydrogen production in Scotland?

Gillian Martin: Kevin Stewart raises an important point about why it is critically important that ministers work together. I am absolutely mindful of the fact that I need to work with my ministerial colleagues in planning to look at what can be done to accelerate the regulatory and planning processes so that we keep ahead of innovation in this space.

Innovation in renewable energy, and particularly in hydrogen, is happening really fast. Aberdeen is leading the way in that, with the collaboration between Aberdeen City Council and BP on plans to set up yet another hydrogen hub. It is important that we look at the learning that is happening in Aberdeen and make sure that other places around Scotland can learn from that.

I give Mr Stewart my word that I will speak to my planning colleagues about the issues that he has raised, and I am happy to have further conversations with him about that.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is good to hear the minister confirm that the green hydrogen fund will launch this year. Will she confirm how quickly the Scottish Government intends to allocate the £90 million that it has committed, so that we can see the investment that is needed to boost green hydrogen production and, critically, to help to decarbonise transport and industry?

Gillian Martin: I will give Ms Boyack some information. In addition to the £90 million for

renewable hydrogen projects through the green hydrogen fund, we have already invested £15 million in the early stages of the Aberdeen Hydrogen Hub, which I mentioned. We are working with other regions that have similar ambitions to co-ordinate local hydrogen projects and production activity. Those things are happening even before the deployment of the £90 million.

Things are happening at pace. We are looking at all the projects that have made applications to the innovation fund. We will look at the projects that we think will accelerate the hydrogen production that Sarah Boyack mentioned, and I will keep her up to date on that as much as possible.

Scottish Cluster (Financial Support)

5. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it will outline details of its £80 million of financial support for the Scottish Cluster carbon capture project, which it announced in January 2022. (S6O-02652)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): As Mr Lumsden is aware, the United Kingdom Government has not yet provided a timeline for the Scottish Cluster's deployment, and it has not provided a concrete timeline for the deployment of the Acorn project at St Fergus. In the absence of that vital information, it is not possible at present to establish how the Scottish Government can best tailor our support for the Scottish Cluster, but the £80 million that we promised to the Scottish Cluster will be deployed in collaboration with it as the project develops. It is important to say that we will take the lead from the Scottish Cluster on how that £80 million will be deployed.

Douglas Lumsden: The UK Government has selected the Acorn project at St Fergus near Peterhead for funding as part of the £20 billion carbon capture and storage investment package. Acorn is expected to support around 21,000 jobs at its peak. The Scottish Government promised £80 million to go towards that vital project, but then snatched the money away. When will that money be reallocated, or is that another broken promise to the north-east of Scotland?

Gillian Martin: I am glad that I finally have the opportunity to rebut Mr Lumsden on that. I have heard Mr Lumsden attempt to deploy a complete misrepresentation of the £80 million funding. That £80 million funding is still there—it is available, and it will be deployed in a manner that suits the multiple partners in the Scottish Cluster. Frankly, Mr Lumsden needs to stop that misrepresentation. Carbon capture, utilisation and storage—CCUS—

is a good news story for both the Scottish Government and the UK Government.

Douglas Lumsden: That is betraying the north-east.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden.

Gillian Martin: CCUS could show what can be done when we work together and take the politics out of this. The £80 million is there, and it will be deployed as the Scottish Cluster wants it to be deployed.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The UK Government's recognition of the enormous potential of the Acorn project and the Scottish Cluster was long overdue. However, it is concerning that the UK Government has committed only to setting out details for the next critical steps in the process in due course.

Can the minister provide an update on any recent engagement with the UK Government that seeks to avoid further delay? Will she join me in urging the UK Government to work at pace with the Acorn project?

Gillian Martin: The Scottish Government is in regular contact with the UK Government, and our officials regularly engage with Department for Energy Security and Net Zero counterparts.

In September, Mr Gray wrote to the UK Government to urge it to do exactly what Kevin Stewart said—to avoid further delays and to work at pace to secure the fastest possible deployment for Acorn and the Scottish Cluster. I join Kevin Stewart in urging the UK Government to show that ambition and to publish the concrete timeline for the delivery of Acorn that the sector is looking for. Acorn is vital for a just transition that supports the decarbonisation ambition for the range of Scotland's key strategic and economically significant industries.

Yesterday, I was at an Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce round-table meeting on energy with people from the region. They made exactly the same points. They need clarity and an expedited timeline as soon as possible.

“Initial Plan Framework Sectoral Marine Plan for Offshore Wind for Innovation and Targeted Oil and Gas Decarbonisation (INTOG)”

6. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival in the chamber.

To ask the Scottish Government when it anticipates that the sectoral marine plan for offshore wind for innovation and targeted oil and gas decarbonisation will be formally adopted. (S6O-02653)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

Our aim is to adopt the plan in 2024. We are aware of developers' interest in the sectoral marine plan and the impact on delivery of projects, and we are working hard to streamline the process to address their needs.

Audrey Nicoll: I recently met stakeholders in the Salamander offshore wind project. In further correspondence, I was informed that they have concerns about resource funding for statutory bodies that are involved in the consenting process. As an example, I was informed that NatureScot has concerns with its levels of core grant funding. That was highlighted by its director, Nick Halfhide, at a recent Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee meeting.

What engagement is the Scottish Government having with statutory bodies such as NatureScot to ensure that they have the support that is required to continue their work in that important process?

Neil Gray: I thank Audrey Nicoll for her work in that area of crucial importance.

Our Government officials are aware of the resource challenges that NatureScot is facing, and we are liaising with it to ensure that the required support is in place for the timely planning, licensing and consenting of offshore energy projects and related infrastructure. I would be more than happy to write to Audrey Nicoll with further detail on that.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The newly approved Rosebank field will emit around 12kg of carbon dioxide per barrel of oil produced, but if electrified pursuant to INTOG or an equivalent scheme, that would fall to 3kg. Given that imported liquefied natural gas emits on average around 79kg of carbon dioxide per barrel, does the cabinet secretary agree that swift approval and deployment of INTOG will help to make the already strong environmental case for on-going production from the North Sea incontrovertible?

Neil Gray: Obviously, we want to see the decarbonisation of North Sea production, which is why we are supporting the INTOG process. However, Mr Kerr will be aware that the import of oil products in particular will need to continue, as we cannot fully utilise all that is produced in the North Sea in our domestic production. However, our decarbonisation of oil and gas will continue through INTOG.

Brexit and the Covid-19 Pandemic (Labour Shortages and Skills Gaps)

7. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is addressing any labour shortages or skills gaps

affecting the economy as a result of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6O-02654)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

Labour and skills shortages are complex and, for some sectors, they are the result of a combination of factors, including the United Kingdom Government's immigration policies, Brexit, the pandemic and systemic issues within the sector.

The national strategy for economic transformation skilled workforce programme sets out actions that we are taking to work with employers to address labour and skills gaps, including better aligning the education and skills system with the needs of employers, promoting lifelong learning and expanding our available talent pool.

We are also in the process of introducing a talent attraction and migration service, which we hope will assist.

Rona Mackay: Will the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is working with the UK Government and other devolved Governments to ensure that the immigration system is flexible and responsive to the needs of Scotland's economy and society?

Neil Gray: All sectors of the Scottish economy are experiencing labour shortages as a direct consequence of Brexit and the ending of the freedom of movement. Scottish ministers have written to the UK Government on several occasions to outline their concerns and those of employers across Scotland.

The UK Government's immigration system is not designed to meet our needs. It is having a damaging effect on Scotland's economy and communities. We have proposed amendments and improvements, such as a rural visa pilot, but those have not been taken up as yet.

We are working productively with businesses and acting in areas that are within our responsibilities, including promoting fair work practices and the provision of upskilling and retraining opportunities that are aimed at the hardest-hit sectors. However, it goes without saying that having a damaging migration service is not helping.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I do not understand the obsession of members on the Scottish National Party benches with Brexit. Legal migration into the United Kingdom has doubled since Brexit and is today at record levels. The real question is, why does Scotland not attract our population share of migrants compared with other parts of the United Kingdom? Why does the cabinet secretary think that Scotland is such an

unattractive place for migrants to come to, and what is he doing to try to turn that around?

Neil Gray: I thank Murdo Fraser for coming back to a question that he has posed to me previously. For every year since 2001-02, inward migration from the rest of the UK to Scotland has been greater than outward migration from Scotland to the rest of the UK. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Neil Gray: If Murdo Fraser thinks that it just happens to be the Scottish Government that has an obsession with Brexit and its impact on our economy, he just needs to talk to our stakeholders in the business community, who will tell him very clearly the impact that it is having on their trading environment, their access to labour and the Scottish economy.

Skills Gaps (Long-term Labour Market Strategy)

8. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its long-term labour market strategy, what steps it is taking to address any skills shortages affecting the economy. (S6O-02655)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): As I have just set out in my response to Rona Mackay’s question, we are taking a range of actions to address labour market and skills shortages, including better aligning the education and skills system with the needs of employers and the economy, as outlined in the national strategy for economic transformation.

Through the publication of the initial priorities of purpose and principles, the Scottish Government has committed to taking responsibility for skills planning at national level, working with partners to set clear priorities against future skills needs and supported by a regional approach.

Paul O’Kane: On that regional approach, the skills shortage that is highlighted in the Withers report and by others is particularly acute in my region. Regional employment has grown by only 0.6 per cent over the past decade, compared with a nationwide average of 4 per cent. Furthermore, according to figures from Skills Development Scotland, productivity is well below the national average. Indeed, we have had proper challenges in West Scotland, with large employers leaving the region. Just in the past few weeks, we have heard about uncertainty over jobs at Rolls-Royce in Renfrewshire.

What is the cabinet secretary doing across Government to tackle the shortages in the skills base, to ensure that we retain businesses that are badly in need of skills?

Neil Gray: It is about both those things. I very much recognise the situation that Paul O’Kane has set out. I have been working with some of the employers in the west of Scotland who have been looking at either reducing their workforce or moving out, to try to support those businesses to remain, as he would expect.

On the skills front, we will be coming forward with our response to the Withers review. In addition, in terms of our work on the green industrial strategy, it is critical to ensure that we have a skills system that is aligned to the forthcoming green energy revolution.

I am more than happy to collaborate with Paul O’Kane in the areas that he has an interest in to ensure that we are getting this right.

Finance and Parliamentary Business

Local Authorities (Sport and Leisure Facilities Funding)

1. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to allocate more funding to local authorities in its 2024-25 budget to enable them to maintain and invest in local services, including sport and leisure facilities. (S6O-02656)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Decisions on future local government budget allocations are subject to negotiations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the results will be confirmed as part of the Scottish budget on 19 December.

Fulton MacGregor: The minister will be aware that, just a few weeks ago, my constituents in Coatbridge and Chryston, along with people across North Lanarkshire, heard the devastating news that the Labour-run North Lanarkshire Council had decided to close 39 leisure centres, swimming pools, community hubs and town halls, many of which are integral to our communities. Thanks to hard-fought campaigning by individuals, groups and politicians across the area, the council eventually made a U-turn on that decision.

How can the Scottish Government support local authorities and impress on them the incredible importance of those community facilities, to ensure that they are not making such flippant and politically driven decisions in the future?

Joe FitzPatrick: The Scottish Government places great importance on sport and leisure facilities, which are vital in supporting the physical and mental health of the nation. SportsScotland, our national agency for sport, is working with local and national partners to help it to assess the impact of

any potential facility closures, and those discussions will continue over the coming weeks and months.

Mr MacGregor highlighted the local campaigns that encouraged North Lanarkshire Council to change its decision. Although it is for democratically elected councils to make decisions on the priorities for their local areas, it is always good to see communities influencing those decisions.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Considering the widening deficit in local authorities' funding, can the Scottish Government confirm what efforts are being made to raise funds for local services?

Joe FitzPatrick: The member will be aware that there is a joint approach with COSLA to look at various means of raising money for local government, which is headed up by my colleague Tom Arthur.

A number of streams of work are under way. One recent stream of work is the proposal to allow local authorities to raise 100 per cent additional council tax from second homes.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister's announcement of a council tax freeze without consulting councils will have a detrimental effect on local services if it is not fully funded. Last week, West Dunbartonshire Council warned that it faces a funding gap of £17.3 million next year. Will the Scottish Government provide a fair funding settlement for all councils, including West Dunbartonshire, so that local services such as sport and leisure facilities are protected?

Joe FitzPatrick: The council tax freeze will be fully funded. It is important that, at this time of pressure on family budgets and other financial burdens, we are able to remove that uncertainty. It took two weeks, but it is pleasing that the Labour Party now appears to support the council tax freeze. I do not know the Conservative Party's position on the council tax freeze, but it is important that, at a time when family and household budgets are so pressed, we do everything in our powers to support people, and that is what we are doing. I am pleased that we have Labour's support.

Financial Memorandums (Monitoring)

2. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it monitors the overall effectiveness of financial memorandums. (S6O-02657)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): In preparing financial memorandums, the Scottish Government always learns from and applies any

comments or recommendations that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has made on previous memorandums. In order to ensure that memorandums are effective in informing Parliament of the financial impact of proposed legislation, they are subjected to a high level of scrutiny and review. Scrutiny is carried out by finance officials, the Parliament's legislation team and, finally, the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

Michelle Thomson: Significant changes in projected spend, such as the 50 per cent uplift for the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill and the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, indicate too little up-front detailed policy analysis. The large ranges in estimates also indicate considerable uncertainty.

Speaking as a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, I am concerned about the general quality of the FMs that are being presented to us. In an extremely tight fiscal environment, that suggests the need for more rather than less up-front planning. Is it time to look again at the guidance that is being offered to ministers?

Shona Robison: Michelle Thomson makes some fair comments. As I said, we are committed to maintaining the effectiveness of financial memorandums and ensuring that they remain fit for purpose. I would be happy to engage with the committee on its concerns and to consider how guidance could be improved, in the spirit of consensus.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Michelle Thomson is absolutely right. With the Government making increasing use of the co-design principle, which is important in the Government's relationship with stakeholders, one of the key issues is that, if we get the financial memorandum ahead of the final co-design process being completed, the Finance and Public Administration Committee is in serious difficulty because we cannot scrutinise the memorandum properly. What can the cabinet secretary do about that?

Shona Robison: Again, in the spirit of consensus, Liz Smith also makes some valid points. As I said to Michelle Thomson, I am happy to engage with the committee on the issues that might be limiting its scope for scrutiny. Liz Smith outlined one way to try to improve matters, so, in the spirit of consensus and co-operation, I suggest that we look at how we can take that forward.

The Presiding Officer: Question number 3 was not lodged.

Council Tax Freeze (Cost)

4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it estimates the financial cost will be of its recently announced council tax freeze policy. (S6O-02659)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): We have committed to working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the detail of the implementation of the council tax freeze over the coming weeks. The quantum will be discussed and agreed in partnership with local government, and that will form part of the broader funding decisions that will be made in the context of the Scottish budget for 2024-25.

Mark Griffin: For the policy to be credible, the Government must set out how much it has set aside to cover it. Although households will welcome any freeze in their bills right now, they will want to know that it is fully funded. Can the Government give a guarantee that the freeze will not lead to any redundancies, reductions in services or increases in other council charges?

Shona Robison: As my colleague Joe FitzPatrick said earlier, we have made a commitment to fully fund the council tax freeze. That will be done by negotiation, because there are various ways in which the final quantum could be calculated, and there might be various opinions about that in local government. It is important that we do that in partnership with local government in order that we reach a common agreement on the quantum.

I say to Mark Griffin that it has taken two weeks for his leader to come to a conclusion about whether he and the Labour Party support the principle of the council tax freeze. I assume that, now that they do, they will support the council tax freeze as part of the budget-setting process. We look forward to working with them on that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Labour has spent a fortnight protesting about the Government introducing a council tax freeze, yet the Saturday before the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election, Labour distributed a leaflet that said:

“Vote to stop the SNP making you pay more council tax”.

There was no mention of a freeze or of it being fully funded. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Labour's contortions on the issue betray the blatant cynicism of a party that will say anything for perceived political advantage?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer on the substantive related point, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Kenny Gibson is absolutely right: Labour has been all over the place on the

issue. However, as I said, in the spirit of consensus, it is now good to see that Labour is supporting the freeze. I very much look forward to the budget to see whether Labour votes for the freeze to help hard-pressed households. If Labour changes its mind again in that vote, the public will judge it on that.

The freeze will provide much-needed financial relief, particularly to vulnerable households. With household bills rising, the freeze will give some certainty to households for next year. We look forward to seeing how other parties vote in the chamber.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Councils are responsible for provision of community assets such as swimming pools and other sports facilities, youth clubs and art and drama classes. Does not the cabinet secretary recognise that starving councils of funds is a false economy and that taking those funds out of one page of the ledger means that they will appear on other pages, such as those on health, welfare, justice and education, and with some interest?

Shona Robison: The tone of that question suggests that Brian Whittle is saying that the Conservatives will not support a council tax freeze as part of the budget. That is a very interesting position for the Tories to take. *[Interruption.]*

We have increased resources to local government by more than £793 million, which represents an increase of 3 per cent in real terms. Of course, that is an increase beyond the flat-cash position that was set out in the 2022 resource spending review. *[Interruption.]* Given the position of local authorities in England—where Brian Whittle's party is in charge—with some going into administration and going broke, I do not think that any Conservative member of this Parliament is in a position to come and lecture the Scottish Government about support for local government finance. *[Interruption.]* We will get on with supporting local government and discussing the quantum of support as we take forward the budget this year. We will just leave the Tories to snipe from the sidelines, as normal.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members could avoid giving a running commentary, because it makes it difficult for all members to hear.

Electoral Reform (Improved Voter Participation)

5. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its proposed electoral reform bill will seek to improve voter participation within the electoral process. (S6O-02660)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote can do so. We will seek to improve the electoral process through the reform bill later in the session. The proposals are likely to include ways to increase registration among underrepresented groups, and to make voting more accessible for those who face barriers, such as people with sight loss. As always, I remain open to suggestions from others with regard to improvements.

Bob Doris: Votes must not only be cast; they must also count. I have met the minister about my concern that, at the 2022 council elections, the Canal ward, which is in my constituency, had the highest rate of spoiled papers in Scotland—three times the national average—as a result of voter error. The minister was receptive to my suggestion about placing on the Electoral Commission a statutory duty to carry out on-going work with communities in order to reduce the number of votes that are inadvertently spoiled. Will the minister update me on Scottish Government work in the area and say whether the proposed electoral reform bill can help to deliver that aim?

George Adam: Mr Doris is correct that we had further discussions at that meeting. At the 2022 local elections, 1.85 per cent of ballots were rejected. Although the overall number of spoiled ballots at those elections was down slightly, I recognise that in some areas—such as the Canal ward, which Mr Doris cited—the numbers remained too high.

I agree that more must be done to ensure that no one loses their vote, so I am interested in any proposals that could help to achieve that. I am fully committed to working with Mr Doris on the issue, as work on the proposed electoral reform bill progresses. His specific suggestion that the Electoral Commission be given a more formal role will be given full consideration.

Public Procurement (Circular Economy) (Discussions)

6. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth has had with ministerial colleagues regarding efforts to ensure that circular economy practices are embedded in public procurement. (S6O-02661)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Tom Arthur, the Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance, is on an international engagement in the United States during which he will speak at a plenary session at the Obama

Foundation leaders event in Chicago. He will hear at first hand experiences of best practice relating to community wealth building initiatives in the United States of America.

The minister has regular discussions with ministerial colleagues on a range of matters, including the circular economy and procurement. The Scottish Government is committed to using public procurement to contribute to the strategic priority of a transition to a more resource-efficient and low-carbon economy.

Maurice Golden: I wish the minister well on his low-carbon trip to the United States of America.

The public sector spends more than £14 billion a year on goods and services, so making that spend more circular could lead to enormous environmental and social benefits. Given that just 1.3 per cent of Scotland's economy is circular, it is worrying that circularity has not been appropriately embedded in public procurement.

Does the minister agree that circular economy principles should be built into all appropriate contracts, in relation not only to goods and services that are bought but the scoring matrix for contract awards? If so, how does he intend to progress that agenda?

Joe FitzPatrick: I know that Maurice Golden takes the matter very seriously, despite the cheap political point he made at the start of his comments, so I will answer the question on that basis.

Maurice Golden is absolutely right about the importance of moving to a more circular economy in relation to procurement. Our sustainable procurement tools include circular economy e-learning that helps public bodies to take account of the climate and the circular economy in their procurement activity. There is also guidance on materials and waste that is aimed at making best use of resources, including by using circular economy principles. [*Interruption.*]

We will promote the updated guidance on procuring for repair, reuse and remanufacturing from Zero Waste Scotland once—

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us remember the requirement to treat one another with courtesy and respect and to listen to one another.

Joe FitzPatrick: A number of tools are in place. Clearly, we are not yet where we want to get to, which is why we are working really hard to get there. I know that ministerial colleagues engage with Mr Golden regularly on this really important issue and that he wants to work to help the Government and the Parliament to get this right.

Non-domestic Rates

7. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of a potential £200 million rise in non-domestic rates. (S6O-02662)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The Scottish budget delivers the lowest poundage in the United Kingdom for the fifth year in a row, and the package of reliefs for 2023-24 is estimated to be worth £749 million. Decisions on non-domestic rates for 2024-25 will be made in the context of the Scottish budget, which will be published on 19 December.

Sue Webber: Given that business investment delays are one of the main contributors to Scotland's weak growth, does the cabinet secretary agree that reducing business rates would provide much-needed relief to the sector?

Shona Robison: We have been working with business, and the new deal for business established a consultative sub-group to advise on the non-domestic rates system, which Tom Arthur chairs. The group provides an important opportunity for discussion on further enhancements to the operation and administration of non-domestic rates following the implementation of the Barclay review's recommendations. We will look at how we take forward the group's recommendations after it publishes its plan on 19 October.

I make this point: in 30 minutes of parliamentary business this afternoon, the Tories have asked for more money for local government and more money for business, at a time when the United Kingdom Government is likely to deliver a real-terms cut to our resource and capital budget for 2024-25—[*Interruption.*]

We know about our priorities—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: We are very clear about our priorities—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary! Cabinet secretary!

Members will have different views on a whole range of issues. That does not mean that they need to join in from their seats when it is not their opportunity either to put or to answer a question.

Shona Robison: I think that the panto season has started early for the Scottish Conservatives.

The Conservatives—from a sedentary position, as always—were barking about priorities. This Government is very clear on our priorities of tackling child poverty, net zero and delivering strong public services and a growing economy.

What we hear from the Conservatives in the chamber is a scattergun approach of more money for everything, with absolutely no credible propositions or ideas about how to fund it, with a budget cut—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: —from their Tory masters at Westminster. We need to see some credibility from members on the Tory benches. I will not hold my breath, though.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): It is welcome that the Scottish Government continues to deliver the lowest rate poundage in the UK. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on how much that is expected to save ratepayers this year?

Shona Robison: I heard Tory groans about having the lowest poundage in the UK. Do they not want us to have the lowest poundage in the UK for the fifth year in a row to support business?

The freeze in the poundage for 2023-24 was businesses' biggest ask on non-domestic rates, and it is expected to save ratepayers £305 million this year, compared with an inflationary increase. I know that business welcomes that; it is just a pity that some members in the chamber cannot bring themselves to welcome it.

Budget 2024-25 (Priorities)

8. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its priorities are for its 2024-25 budget. (S6O-02663)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): We are clear on what our priorities are. The Scottish Government is committed to delivering on the priorities that were set out in the First Minister's policy prospectus and in the programme for government in September. The three missions of equality, opportunity and community will guide us, and I will lay out the tax-and-spending plans to Parliament on 19 December. This will be a budget of difficult choices, as the economic conditions are set to remain challenging—we all know the reasons for that—with inflationary pressures continuing to impact on households, businesses and public services.

Neil Bibby: The Government announced that it wanted to freeze the council tax for the upcoming budget at the Scottish National Party conference. We know that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Greens were not consulted on that beforehand. The Government has failed today to give us any sort of figure for how much the policy will cost. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether civil servants were

involved in helping to develop and formulate the proposal prior to its announcement?

Shona Robison: Yes, we were given advice from civil servants in the normal manner. However, I am beginning to get confused about Labour's position on the council tax. One minute Labour is against it; the next minute it is for it; and then it seems to be against it again. The member needs to read the comments from his leader, who said that Labour would back it.

This is a budget of difficult choices, and we have to balance the difficult choices on household finances and the cost of living crisis caused by the Conservative Government with the need to invest in public services. We will bring forward proposals that do that, but we need to see from Labour any alternative, costed, credible policies. I will wait to see what those policies are. All the policies that we will lay out on 19 December will be costed, and I look forward to seeing Labour's alternatives to them.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As we look beyond the upcoming budget, what assessment has the Scottish Government made of the challenges that Scotland's ageing population will pose to the funding of public services? Will the Deputy First Minister comment on whether the challenge has been exacerbated by a hostile Westminster migration system, which Scottish Labour also continues to back?

Shona Robison: The Tories do not like to hear the truth, because it is uncomfortable for them. The challenges of an ageing population are considered when planning our budget. As Karen Adam said, it is clear that the UK Government's immigration policies are not meeting the needs of Scotland's communities, especially those in rural and island areas.

We are unable to set our own immigration policies. We have given solutions, such as the rural visa pilot proposal, yet the UK Government's focus is on restricting migration and putting barriers in place for those who might seek to come here to build a new life, which is completely wrong headed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. I will allow a moment for the front benches to organise before we move on.

Flooding (Support for Communities)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11036, in the name of Maurice Golden, on supporting communities to mitigate flooding impacts and increase resilience.

I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak button.

14:50

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Storm Babet has left a terrible trail of destruction in its wake, and the north-east of Scotland, Perthshire and Tayside have been hit especially hard. There was widespread damage to infrastructure, families were evacuated from their homes and, tragically, people lost their lives.

We are joined in the public gallery today by Councillor Gavin Nicol and other residents from Brechin who have been affected by the flooding. It is on that personal level where the real impact of the storm is being felt—by the individuals who have been left to pick up the pieces.

Let me tell you something of those people who fear that their plight might too easily be overlooked, such as those in Milton of Finavon, which I visited last week. Most people in the chamber, or who are watching the debate at home, will not have visited Milton of Finavon, but they will have driven past it. It is a hamlet of 25 homes, and it is adjacent to the busy A90 between Forfar and Brechin. That road became one source of flooding from the run-off.

On one side of the village is the Lemno Burn, which is now a river; on the other side is the River South Esk. Both breached their banks during storm Babet, meaning that, in effect, the small village was assaulted from all sides. The effect was devastating, with the River South Esk surging through farmers' fields, destroying crops and wrecking homes. The devastation was massive and deeply distressing.

I met a family who had only just moved into their home in February, but now all their appliances, their furniture and their kitchen have been destroyed. What is left of their possessions has been bundled into their car while they search for a rental property. Another resident had to leave their home a year ago and was due to move back in last month before being flooded again. Another family who were forced from their home by the floodwater faced the additional stress of the temporary accommodation being unable to

accommodate their disabled children, who require specialist equipment.

I could go on and on with more heartbreaking stories. Sadly, those experiences are common throughout Angus and beyond. What would help those people now is action to deal with the aftermath of the storm and to mitigate the damage from future storms. Both are issues in their own right, so let me deal with each in turn.

At the outset, I express my admiration for the emergency services and local authority staff who worked incredibly hard, in treacherous conditions and at risk to themselves, to preserve life and support the most vulnerable people in our communities. *[Applause.]* I also commend the efforts of utilities and other services to restore power systems, repair infrastructure and reopen transport links. However, the question now is about what help will be provided to those who have been affected and who are now trying to rebuild their lives.

I appreciate that the First Minister pledged support during his visit to see the damage in Brechin. It was right that he came to see the town because Brechin was one of the worst affected. Record levels of flooding caused the local river to swell a staggering 4.4m above normal levels, overwhelming the recently installed flood defences and forcing the evacuation of more than 350 properties. Some residents will not be able to return to their homes before Christmas or perhaps later, while others might not be able to return at all.

Although the First Minister pledged support, he did not confirm how much, which was understandable at that stage. However, let me be clear that the storm is one of the costliest weather events in Scottish history, with a repair bill that could hit £500 million. Therefore, it is fair to ask for the detail of how much support will be provided and how long it will be provided for. The people who have been forced out of their homes or who are counting the cost of ruined businesses face months of disruption. Their fear is that the warm words coming from politicians will have no follow-up, and I have already heard such concerns on adaptation measures.

That echoes the Climate Change Committee's findings last year that progress on climate change adaptation had "stalled". Flooding was among the worst of the areas that were assessed. To be fair, the Scottish Government has accepted the need to do more, such as the need for better evidence, monitoring and evaluation. I hope that it will show that same willingness today and listen to Opposition calls to take further action to mitigate the risks from future storms. Those risks include damage to infrastructure, transport and energy systems, with the added danger that future

incidents of coastal erosion and flooding will become more frequent.

In its Scottish emissions report last December, the CCC pointed out that, compared with 30 years ago, Scotland's winters have become wetter and the sea level around our coasts has risen between 10mm and 30mm per decade, which is increasingly problematic in places such as Montrose.

October is already the wettest on record for some parts of Scotland with almost 1 foot of rain falling. At the start of the month, we saw extensive flooding across Aviemore, Argyll and Perth, which I am sure that colleagues who represent those areas will discuss in more detail. Then, of course, towards the end of the month, we had storm Babet.

The same CCC report warns:

"Further climate change in Scotland is ... inevitable, no matter how rapidly global greenhouse gas emissions are reduced."

That does not mean that it is not important to reduce emissions. In fact, it is vital that we do so to avoid even worse climate change effects. However, we must combine our net zero efforts with adaptation measures to protect ourselves from the risks that are already on the horizon.

An obvious start would be to look at development on flood plains. That was not fully developed in the fourth national planning framework and a long-term goal should be to assess the impact of such development.

River basin management should also be reviewed. Back in June, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition stood in the chamber and declared that she had "absolute confidence" in the current plans. That was despite the CCC having pointed out more than a year earlier that there were no adaptation actions in the plan. We can all agree that those plans could do with a review.

We should also keep support options under review to ensure that at-risk properties can still access insurance cover. We can help to reduce insurance costs by thinking about how to make home adaptations easier for people. Alongside that, we should consider where action such as dredging might deliver flood protection benefits that outweigh potential environmental impacts.

We also need to consider what more can be done to support local authorities and partner agencies in the immediate response to such storms. There is the Bellwin scheme to support councils dealing with emergencies, but that is activated against the backdrop of years of cuts from the Scottish Government that have left local authority finances in tatters. Therefore, I hope that

ministers will consider our calls for local climate resilience funds to be deployed in the event of severe weather. Ministers could also look at how to improve the provision of emergency and temporary shelters, including those that are suitable for people with disabilities.

At the most basic level, local authorities should have a good supply of sandbags, but I have heard from people on the ground in Angus that they were issued with just two sandbags per property. That is clearly inadequate, and it suggests a need for better co-ordination of the provision of resources to low and high-risk areas during an emergency.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I am appreciating the contents of Mr Golden's speech. As part of what he is advocating, does he see there being a role for community resilience groups to be strengthened and supported to ensure that they have a formidable presence on the ground in all communities and that they can work collaboratively with public sector organisations in the event of such incidents?

Maurice Golden: I whole-heartedly agree with John Swinney, because it is the people on the ground, rather than the council or another agency, who know which properties are most likely to be affected. There is certainly a need for communities to be resourced to help to protect themselves.

The concern that I mentioned in relation to resources in Angus also plays into a wider concern that I have heard expressed in local communities that there is insufficient leadership from the Scottish Government. As I touched on earlier, there is a view that ministers turn up, listen sympathetically and then leave it to the local authority to sort things out. Well, that cannot work, because water flows and flooding are beyond the scope of any one local authority or organisation. For example, is a cash-strapped council going to instigate measures that, although needed, will only benefit communities in another local authority area? At an individual level, how are householders to understand how adapting their property might affect flood impacts downstream?

The best way to manage such risks is to bring together all the key players and work to a strategic plan to mitigate flood damage across Scotland as a whole. That is why we are calling for a multi-agency task force led by the Scottish Government. Such a task force could provide the strategic direction that seems to be lacking and could direct adaptations, guidance and resources to where they are most needed. I note that the Scottish Government is committed to the next flooding resilience strategy, bringing together new partners, and I hope that it will take that commitment to its logical conclusion with a strategic element.

Any efforts to build up our resilience and adapt to future storms must involve members of our food-producing community. They know the land, they know what works and they know just how bad it could get if we do not take action. The flooding at the start of the month had already caused millions of pounds-worth of damage to crops, and storm Babet has heaped more misery on our food producers. NFU Scotland was already warning that some farmers would not be able to absorb the costs. Wafer-thin profit margins will not allow farmers to keep withstanding future floods. I urge the Scottish Government to provide them with direct support now and to explore what more can be done to invest in food producer-led adaptation measures that benefit us all.

Whether it is food producers, families or local firms, what they all want from the Scottish Government is leadership and a multi-agency task force. Yes, they need support in the here and now to clean up and repair, but they also need some hope that there is a plan to make sure that the next time we face such a situation it does not hit as hard.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the severe impact of Storm Babet on communities across Scotland, and is greatly saddened by the resulting loss of life and widespread damage to property and infrastructure; further recognises the serious incidents of flooding across many communities, particularly in the north east across Aberdeenshire, Angus, Dundee and Perth and Kinross, which saw hundreds of people evacuated from their homes; notes the damage that the floods have caused to farming communities, particularly with regard to the loss of crops and livestock; commends the efforts of emergency services, local authorities and others to preserve life, support the most vulnerable and restore services as quickly as possible; expresses concern at reports of limited supplies of anti-flood measures in some areas, and believes that there is a need to review how local government resources are coordinated to support areas most in need; is concerned by the potential for more frequent and more intense extreme weather events fuelled by climate change; acknowledges the need to consider what further adaptation and mitigation options are available to minimise impacts from future extreme weather events, and calls on the Scottish Government to establish a multi-agency taskforce to develop a strategic plan for minimising the impact of flooding and to ensure that affected communities continue to be supported during the clean-up and repair efforts.

15:04

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to respond for the Government on this most important issue.

Storm Babet was an exceptional weather event for Scotland that had some terrible and, at times, tragic consequences. I want to make it absolutely clear to all members in the chamber, and to the

guests who have joined us in the gallery, that we are committed to supporting the people who have been impacted by storm Babet, and that—as with all exceptional events—we are committed to learning every lesson that it is possible to learn from our response and the recovery process.

Before proceeding to the substance of my speech, I offer my heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of the individuals who tragically lost their lives in storm Babet. They are mourning the loss of loved ones in tragic circumstances, and my heart is with them.

Likewise, I wish to express my continuing sympathy for those whose homes and businesses have been impacted. I know very well, personally and from my constituency, how traumatic flooding is and how frightening the experience is as it unfolds. There is also the stress and uncertainty of the aftermath. Again, my heart goes out to those people.

I must also begin by recognising that storm Babet was met with an impressive response by emergency service providers, local authorities, community groups and other resilience partners. Working in often extremely difficult conditions, those groups ensured that help and support were available to those who needed them. We were very grateful for their dedicated efforts, and I am sure that everyone in the chamber will wish to join me in thanking them. I expect that we will hear that being echoed throughout contributions today.

I am confident in speaking so fulsomely about that co-ordinated and impressive response because I was able to witness it at first hand and on an on-going basis through meetings of the Scottish Government resilience operations, which were chaired by ministers throughout the severe weather event. During media interviews in the midst of the storm, in the morning following the water levels breaching flood defences in Brechin, I noted that Scotland's preparation had been early, that Scotland was co-ordinated in the response phase and that we would be co-ordinated in our recovery. I repeat that commitment today.

SG resilience meetings took place on 18, 19, 20 and 21 October, and I was able to attend them all. I saw at first hand how the Met Office, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Police Scotland, other emergency responders, our utilities companies and—crucially—our local resilience partnerships, among many others, were working determinedly to prepare and deliver in a co-ordinated way, and always with the welfare and best interests of our communities at the heart of their work. Of course, the storm and its impacts ended up being as severe as the Met Office, SEPA and Police Scotland had advised, particularly in the red-warning area.

As Maurice Golden noted, last week the First Minister visited Brechin. He met residents and engaged with the local community, and he took the opportunity to set out that the Scottish Government stands ready to provide support throughout recovery. Subsequently, the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning visited Montrose and Brechin on Monday in order to gain a better understanding of the scale of the impact on the local communities and of how the Scottish Government can best help. My colleague Mairi Gougeon has been visiting food producers that have been impacted by both of October's storms.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Last week, I asked when the Scottish Government would, in the light of storm Babet, carry out a review of existing and planned flood prevention infrastructure. Will the cabinet secretary give us a timescale for that today?

Màiri McAllan: Sarah Boyack is absolutely right to raise the issue. The process is on-going on a number of fronts, most of all in respect of SEPA's flood forecasting, which is a very important tool. Obviously, the work has to adapt to the increasing risk of climate change and to practical things such as the flood defence in Brechin having been compromised. That work is on-going, and I will speak more about it in the debate.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

John Swinney: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Màiri McAllan: I will give way to Mr Swinney.

John Swinney: I would like to follow up on the point that Sarah Boyack raised. I make a plea that in the work that SEPA is undertaking to examine future forecasting levels—I am certain that this will be the case—it takes into account the dramatically different set of circumstances that we have all experienced in the past few weeks. Storm Babet cannot be written off as an isolated incident. Circumstances have to be reflected in future policy on a variety of aspects—flooding preparations and planning, for example—or we will simply be turning a blind eye to a significant change in circumstances that has affected our country.

Màiri McAllan: I am very happy to give John Swinney a concrete assurance that the storm will not be regarded as an isolated incident. It is never wise to attribute one weather event to climate change, but we know that such extreme weather events are exacerbated by climate change and that climate change is an increasing threat. It will be absolutely incumbent on SEPA and on planning policy developments across a range of matters to be cognisant of that. I can assure Mr Swinney of that.

The process of assessing the full damage that was caused by storm Babet will take time—Maurice Golden reflected that. Further rainfall since the event has made the task more difficult. However, we know that the scale of the damage and disruption has been significant, and that we are on a long road to recovery. As my Government colleagues have already set out, and as I wish to reiterate today, we will continue to support our partners to ensure that communities can recover as well and as quickly as possible.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: I am going to make progress, because I am a bit concerned about time, but I will be glad to hear members' points during the debate.

I will use the time that I have left to set out some of the immediate responses that we have made. On Tuesday, 24 October, at the first Cabinet meeting following the storm, the Cabinet discussed the impact and agreed that a Scottish Government task force would be set up to co-ordinate, for our part, the recovery phase. In furtherance of that, on Monday this week the cabinet secretaries—myself included—met senior officials in relevant policy areas to receive a situation report on relevant issues and to discuss the beginnings of that task force. Therefore, I agree with Maurice Golden on his point about a task force and can assure him that development of the same has been under way since last Tuesday.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Màiri McAllan: I am afraid not; I am keen to make progress.

We know that local recovery plans are being drawn up and delivered through vital partnership working. The Scottish Government stands ready to support the partners.

By way of practical support, a very important first step was made when the Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance agreed to activation of the Bellwin scheme on Tuesday 24 October. The scheme exists to give special financial assistance to councils that face undue financial burdens as a result of large-scale emergencies. To date, six local authorities have notified the Scottish Government of potential claims. We will work with them to progress those.

Otherwise, the Scottish welfare fund and crisis grants that come from it are also available to families and people in Scotland on low incomes who have been hit by crises such as flooding. They can be applied for through local authorities, and I encourage people to apply.

Should people be looking for support in that regard, they can work with the Scottish Flood Forum, which undertakes with local communities and recovery partners the really important support work on the ground. I am very grateful for the work that it has been doing since we began funding it in 2009. It is important that, in response to this event, members of the forum have been involved with local communities. Two members of the team have been based in Brechin this week, and have offered free advice and information to almost 100 residents on issues such as recovering from flooding and supporting insurance claims.

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, you must conclude.

Màiri McAllan: I have noted that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands is engaging with the impact on food producers and has already committed to funding support for the repair of flood banks.

I have tried to use my opening slot in the debate to set out some of the immediate operational support that we are putting in place. I will be very glad to hear members' contributions throughout the debate, and I will try to mention in my closing remarks some of the strategic forward-looking work that we will be undertaking in response to the event.

I move amendment S6M-11036.2, to leave out from "calls on" to end and insert:

"notes that the Scottish Government will continue to engage with and support the already well established and effective local mechanisms bringing together key partners to support communities to recover from such events, and will establish a ministerial taskforce to supplement the activities of local mechanisms, as well as continue to engage on and develop a National Flood Resilience Strategy for Scotland."

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next member, I would be grateful if all members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

I call Sarah Boyack to speak to and move amendment S6M-11036.1.

15:13

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Last week's statement on storm Babet gave us all the chance to send our condolences to the families who had lost a loved one and to thank those in our public services who worked so hard to rescue people and support communities.

However, as has been observed in the first two speeches, the floods have had a devastating impact on people's homes, businesses and farming communities, so we really need to do two things. First, we need to support those who have

been affected, because it could be months before people are able to live in their homes again. Secondly, we need to urgently learn lessons from this devastating incident.

My amendment is an add-on amendment. I want it to be constructive and to highlight concerns about the need for action.

Last week, I pointed out that the Brechin scheme was built only seven years ago, and it was designed to deal with a once-in-200-years incident. We urgently need clarity from the cabinet secretary on what work is being done to review existing and planned flood prevention infrastructure. We need to reflect on what worked during storm Babet and, crucially, what did not work. We also need to know what will be done to accelerate flood resilience to support communities, businesses and farmers.

It is disappointing that the Scottish Government wants to delete the recommendation for a multi-agency task force. It is important that we have a collaborative approach and that we also have a regional approach. It will be crucial for the Scottish Government and local authorities to work across boundaries, given the scale of the potential change.

Labour's amendment highlights that the Scottish Government has failed to report on progress on flood risk management plans, as required by the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009. We need more political leadership, and we need that progress report. I hope that the cabinet secretary will give us that clarity in her concluding remarks.

We need expertise, and we need people to come together with investment and action now. That means having a partnership approach between the Scottish Government, local councils, businesses and farming stakeholders, and also with the transport sector and environmental campaigners. We need people with experience in the room together.

As the motion rightly states, we are likely to see more frequent and more intense extreme weather events that are fuelled by climate change, such as storms. That could mean forest fires, drought and flooding in urban and rural communities, as well as the impact of sea level rise. Those events could put people's lives and livelihoods at risk by damaging homes and buildings, vital infrastructure, agricultural land and our natural habitats. They could also cause damage that could put our cultural heritage beyond repair.

Brian Whittle: We know that prolonged water scarcity—particularly before big storms—can have a significant impact on flood conditions, with impacts such as soil compaction. To what extent does the member think that the impacts of drought

should be considered in a flood management plan?

Sarah Boyack: There has to be a joined-up approach to tackle extreme weather conditions, because what the member described is experienced in other countries as well. He is right. There are floods, droughts and extended extreme weather periods and there could be storms, so we need to be prepared for the combination of those impacts.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service said that one in 22 of all residential properties in Scotland is at risk of flooding from rivers, the sea or heavy rainfall. By 2050, it is estimated that the annual cost that floods will have on United Kingdom businesses could exceed £1 billion. It is a now issue. We need to do the heavy lifting now to build resilient infrastructure that protects our biodiversity, uses our natural environment to mitigate the impact of flooding and delivers crucial adaptation projects to deal with the change that is already here or is coming.

The Government's amendment states its intention to produce a national flood resilience strategy for Scotland. It is fair to ask why we do not yet have one. We passed two climate acts and a flood risk management act years ago, so it feels that we are behind where we need to be.

The second part of Labour's amendment is about having a fire and rescue service that has the resources and capability to support communities and save lives in times of crisis. The Scottish Government needs to be worried that 93 per cent of Fire Brigades Union members agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is not

"adequately resourced enough to deal with the increase in climate-related incidents such as wildfires and flooding."

The firefighters I spoke to at the FBU rally last week were clear that they are already pushed to the limit. I spoke to one firefighter who said that he had had to do 20-hour shifts, and that is not uncommon. That is not safe for him, the colleagues he is working with or the people whose lives he is working to save.

During storm Babet alone, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service took more than 750 emergency 999 calls and attended almost 300 incidents. We need to acknowledge that the FBU's "Firestorm" report says that

"Water Rescue resources are regularly unavailable due to not enough competent crew being available",

and we need to get that investment.

The SFRS stated earlier this year that, with a cut of £11 million from its budget, appliances have had to be withdrawn—including one at Polmadie, which provided a dedicated water rescue service.

That is putting us into reverse by making us less resilient and more prone to disaster. We are not taking seriously the impacts of climate change.

With one in 22 homes at risk and firefighters who do not believe that they are adequately resourced to respond to flood and emergency events, we have a disaster waiting to happen again. We need action. This is a current crisis.

Appliances used in times of flooding are being withdrawn now, leaving communities without protection. When the next severe flood comes and the rescue services are not just cut to the bone but have been cut beyond repair, what will happen to those communities? We need to act now and invest in our key public services to address the economic, human and environmental impacts so that we can avoid the devastating impact that we saw last month. With one in 22 homes at risk and an environment scarred beyond repair, that cannot be allowed to happen. We need to act now. The Scottish Government needs to lead and work constructively and collaboratively.

I move amendment S6M-11036.1, to insert at end:

“; regrets the Scottish Government's failure to report on progress on flood risk management plans, as required by section 52 of the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, for the last two years; notes with concern the warnings from the Fire Brigades Union that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will struggle to respond to the increased number of extreme weather events due to Scottish Government funding cuts, and calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it will ensure that communities facing extreme weather will not be impacted by this loss of capacity.”

15:20

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): On Saturday afternoon, I met residents in Auchtermuchty who had been subjected to significant floods. Their houses were dirty and damp, and the smell still pervaded their whole premises. That is the reality of flood: it is fast to arrive but slow to leave. In recent weeks, I have also visited Freuchie, where residents have had to leave their properties twice in the past two years. One particular resident cannot sleep at night every time it rains for fear that her house will be flooded. On Sunday, the high tides demolished a large part of the St Andrews aquarium at the West Sands in St Andrews and threatened homes in Pittenweem and Anstruther. A large part of the coastal path near Elie was wiped away completely.

That is the reality of climate change. If anyone had any doubts, it is here. No single weather event can be directly attributed to it, but there is no doubt that the frequency and the extremity of these events are significant. If there was any doubt about it, inaction is more expensive than action.

We need to look to the long term and provide the investment that we need, not just in mitigation but in meaningful climate change measures.

John Swinney: Before Mr Rennie reflects on the lessons of this particular weather incident, would he agree with me that part of what we have to understand is the enormous power and severity of the weather? I know that it has affected the coastal communities of his constituency very dramatically in scenes that some of us never thought we would experience. Understanding the severity and impact is critical to recognising the scale of the challenge that we face.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I will give Mr Rennie the time back.

Willie Rennie: Understanding is important, and I will come to that later, because with understanding comes confidence that we will be safe. We need to have the understanding in order to plan for the future so that we can adapt much more significantly than we ever thought was possible. I have never really witnessed such extreme weather events. Of course, there have been individual events, but the frequency and the extreme nature of recent ones are much more significant, and we therefore need to revise plans for the future.

Another lesson from the past few weeks has been the ability of the emergency services to respond. There is no doubt that they deserve huge credit for what they did in Angus and Aberdeenshire, Tayside and Perthshire. In extreme circumstances, they came together and made a significant impact. However, the capacity of local authorities to respond to extreme weather events is limited. I have witnessed many communities who cannot get through to call centres, partly because of the volume of calls but also due to the limited capacity of teams at the other end to respond to them. Fire services are also much more limited. That is why we will support Labour's amendment at decision time.

John Swinney is right about community resilience. If we have community resilience teams in areas that are able to have the expertise and knowledge to be able to respond and work in partnership, they could act much more quickly than any emergency service. If they have the knowledge and understanding, they can also assist. I have to call out Fraser Kotlewski from Auchtermuchty, who has done a tremendous job over the past few weeks in supporting his neighbours. We need more people like Fraser across the country in order to be able to make a real difference.

I will come back to common understanding. I am a strong supporter of farmers, who are great custodians of the land and are the experts in it.

They know how their land works, how it has changed, where water flows and where it does not and how they deal with all of that.

We have some brilliant advice, examples of best practice, research and guidance from various institutes. We have funding in place for special schemes, such as at Eddleston in the Borders and the West Sands in my constituency. We have agricultural support in relation to swales and reservoirs. However, we need to go a step further, because I am not sure that neighbours next to farmland really understand whether the land that is neighbouring their property has been properly managed and is adapting to the change that is coming, which John Swinney has rightly highlighted.

Over the weekend, I received reports about dredging in the River Eden. It has not been dredged significantly for some time, and the current view is that dredging is not in vogue and that we should have a much more naturally flowing river. However, there is anxiety in the community that the lack of dredging is holding the water back in the tributaries and is having an effect on the ability of the water to flow freely. There is a lot of expert advice on that, but the communities clearly do not understand it and do not understand how it applies in their communities. Therefore, an extra job needs to be done in order to get a common understanding.

I am leading some work in Strathmiglo, the village that I grew up in, along those very lines. I am getting the farmers together with the council and various authorities to get a common understanding about dredging and also about rewilding in that community, as well as about issues such as how potatoes are sown in the field. If they are planted up and down the field rather than across, what difference does that make? Apparently, the machinery only allows the planting to go up and down the field. However, people with properties neighbouring the field get concerned that the dreels go up and down, because they think that the water is going to go right into their houses—and, in some cases, it has. How do we deal with that? Do we continue to grow potatoes next to certain properties? All that needs to be properly explored, and I am not sure that that is happening.

John Swinney: Mr Rennie is making an important point, but will he extend it to the issue of forestry harvesting? Significant removal of trees, which is commonplace in many parts of Scotland—it is very significant in my constituency—potentially creates new channels for water to go places much faster than it would have if the trees had been left there. Does the approach to that need to be strengthened in the forestry management framework?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, you need to wind up.

Willie Rennie: I have so much more to say.

I absolutely agree with Mr Swinney. Riparian trees are also important, as they hold the river banks together. It is incredibly important to ensure that we understand that issue, and that we adapt policy to reflect that.

Everything that I have touched on means that we need to have a look at our policy and educate, inform, debate and discuss to ensure that neighbourhoods have confidence that the right plans are in place and that the land is managed properly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to the open debate. I call Liam Kerr, to be followed by Kevin Stewart.

15:27

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Storm Babet was a powerful reminder of the perilous position of many of our river and seaside communities. We saw devastation of homes, businesses, farms and communities across Scotland, including in the north-east, in places such as Peterculter, St Cyrus, Marykirk, Montrose, Monifieth and, of course, Brechin, whose flood defences were simply swept aside as—Maurice Golden's statistics bear repeating here—the South Esk rose 4.4m above normal and 350 homes were evacuated. The North Esk Park settlement was evacuated and the lower North Water bridge is still closed because of major erosion to its support.

I was struck, as I think we all were, by the bravery of our emergency services, the resilience of our communities and the response from our local authority officers in particular. However, the Scottish Government's planning and preparedness for the scale of the flooding and the recovery have been found wanting. It is not as if it was not warned, given what storm Frank brought to Ballater in December 2015; the evacuation of homes in Port Elphinstone and Inverurie a month later, when the Don and the Ythan burst their banks; and the fact that tens of thousands of people were left without power amid winds of more than 100mph by storm Arwen just two years ago. That is why the sheer complacency that is expressed in the Government's amendment, which talks about establishing a ministerial task force and engaging on and developing a strategy, is breathtaking.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I hear Liam Kerr's understandable concern on behalf of constituents who faced a devastating situation. In genuine good faith, I ask him to suggest which interventions make the biggest

difference. In my speech, I will say what has made a big difference in Dingwall, but who could have envisaged 4m rises in Brechin? They were quite remarkable.

Liam Kerr: We have already heard really important solutions from the likes of Willie Rennie and Maurice Golden, but I say to Kate Forbes that one of the key things—this is the point that I was making to Parliament—is that we need to heed the warnings.

Shortly after my election in 2016, I raised the issue of flooding and coastal erosion in Montrose. I worked with the council, Montrose Golf Links and the ports to raise awareness and get action. There was a petition and there were parliamentary questions that received soothing answers that studies would be done.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: I ask Mr Swinney to let me make some progress. I will try to come back to him.

I teamed up with the former Lib Dem MSP Mike Rumbles to invite the then Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, to see the situation for herself. She declined, but we eventually persuaded her to attend a community meeting. She heard John Adams, the links convener in Montrose, say,

“Either you spend £25 million now, or spend £100 million in five ... years ... or you put Montrose underwater”.

All the right noises were made about the fact that something must be done, but it was not done. Instead, the buck was passed to the underfunded, underresourced Angus Council. Six years later, there was a £350,000 award from the nature restoration fund for an options appraisal, but it turns out that physical works will probably cost 10 times the 2016 prices.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Kerr for giving way. I do not want in any way to sour the tone of the debate, but I might end up doing so. Mr Kerr indicated that he believes that there is a necessity for action. Will Parliament forgive me for pointing out that, when the Government brings forward measures to tackle climate change, Mr Kerr and his colleagues resist them? There is no need for Mr Kerr to shake his head. I would rather that he addressed the point that I am making.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I will give you the time back for the intervention.

Liam Kerr: I address that point simply by saying that that is absolute nonsense. I say that from a position of authority as a former shadow cabinet secretary for net zero, energy and transport.

As for the second part of the amendment's promise, which is to

“continue to engage with and support ... local mechanisms”

and bring together “key partners”, let me stay with the situation in Montrose, where there is devastation on the beach front. There is a major breach in the sea defences opposite the coastguard station, which has been closed. Chunks of the promenade have collapsed, as has part of the road. The famous William Lamb “Minesweeper” statue is at risk of falling into the sea.

The Scottish Government's response was to dispatch Joe FitzPatrick. As people in the north-east have said to me, it is difficult to conceive of a problem to which the most immediate solution will be to send Joe FitzPatrick. In any event, far from “bringing together key partners”, he met invited Scottish National Party councillors. Dedicated local councillors Iain Gall and Tommy Stewart, who were democratically elected to serve the people of Montrose, were not invited. People tell me that the SNP is concerned less about Montrose and more about a photo shoot. If members need evidence of that, they should look around the chamber for Joe FitzPatrick now, because he ain't here.

Let us talk about how we go forward. *The Courier* reports that there is a repair bill of about £500 million. The question that the Government needs to answer is where that will come from. Humza Yousaf pledged support to Brechin after local councillors such as Gavin Nicol demanded it, but he declined to say how much would be provided or when it will be available. From Montrose to Monifieth, Ballater to Brechin, and Peterculter to Port Elphinstone, the people of the north-east have had enough. Thanks to brutal SNP cuts, Scotland's local authorities already have gaping holes in their budgets and they need support now for repairs and rehousing. Babet was not the first storm disaster that we have faced and it will not be the last.

The Government must work collaboratively to build better local resilience and co-ordination in order to prepare for future extreme weather, and it must set up local climate resilience funds. Above all, it must cease its complacency when it comes to storms and the north-east.

15:34

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I take the opportunity to recognise the tragic impact of storm Babet. I extend my sympathies to all the families and communities that have been affected and I pay tribute to the first-class response by local resilience partnerships, councils, community groups, emergency responders and SEPA.

In my constituency, although both the Dee and the Don have flooded in recent years, including at Market Street in the harbour, Aberdeen got off relatively lightly on this occasion from storm Babet, despite severe flooding only a few miles away.

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will make some progress first.

The pattern of storms that we are enduring is the reality of climate change. There is more violent and focused rain such that one place gets hit hard while places next door are often missed. Climate change will not only give us more rain, but give us less rain at other times. A joined-up water management strategy is key. Flood defences are an important part of that—I am sure that others will speak to that—but a holistic, whole-of-Scotland approach is needed, with a focus not just on where the water ends up, but on the situation upstream in our fields, our hills and our mountains, where the rain falls. We need to restore our land's ability to hold, slow down and retain water. That dampens the effect of surging winter storms, but it also improves our water supply.

The Scottish Government has provided £500 million to the just transition for the north-east fund. That is not only about transitioning to a net zero economy and ensuring that our oil and gas industry can transition to renewable energy, because a just transition is also about the two pillars of adaptation and resilience to climate change, as well as environmental protection and restoration.

Liam Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will take a brief intervention from Mr Kerr.

Liam Kerr: I do not disagree with Mr Stewart's comments, but I point out that the Government has not invested £500 million in the just transition fund. It has invested only about £75 million to date.

Kevin Stewart: As Mr Kerr well knows, the just transition fund is £500 million over a decade. We have invested in the early stages in a number of things. In the first few years, that includes work that has begun in Aberdeen thanks to a £7.2 million award to the world-leading James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen to set up a just transition hub. That will be a world-class, state-of-the-art innovation hub with the capacity to be a global centre of excellence. With funding from the Government, it will place the north-east's scientific resources at the heart of innovation, nature-based solutions and a green recovery. Three of the hub's areas of work will be peatland restoration, carbon sequestration and flood management.

Peatland restoration is critical to dealing with the increased rainfall from climate change. Through the most recent planning legislation, we took action on peatland restoration. I pay tribute to former member Claudia Beamish, who did a lot of work on that front with me when I was the planning minister. Peat is a giant sponge that is capable of absorbing huge amounts of water and then slowly releasing it again. In the past, peat was more widespread, and restoring that peat will allow the land to absorb vast amounts of the rain that, today, simply rolls off the land, first into burns and streams and eventually into rivers, causing the flooding that we have seen. Peat restoration is one of the answers.

There is also carbon sequestration—

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will not, because I have a lot more to say.

Mr Rennie and Mr Swinney alluded to the fact that modern farming techniques have been vital in feeding the world's increasing population. However, that has come at the cost of soil loss and degradation. The degradation of our soils has been a major factor in increased flooding risk. As soils have got thinner and less rich, their ability to hold water has decreased, with water quickly running off into drainage ditches and then into rivers, carrying soil and crops with it. Carbon sequestration is about increasing the amount of organic matter in the soil to make our soils richer and more able to hold water and resist the ravages of rainfall.

However, with climate change, those land restoration strategies will not be enough. There will still be flooding, and the hub's work on flood management will be important, too. We need to understand Scotland field by field and we need to know what can be done field by field on land restoration and flood management. Our rural folk will know the James Hutton Institute well. It is the home of the Macaulay land capability for agriculture classification system. That long-standing system maps every field and hillside in Scotland, including the rainfall, the type of soil, the depth of the soil, the slope of the land and the drainage. By funding that team to develop the just transition hub, we are building on the Hutton's expertise and knowledge of every field and burn in Scotland. We can do much more to ensure a much better future for our country.

15:41

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Storm Babet brought huge damage to the country. I pay tribute to the hard work of our emergency services and local communities in their response. I

also send my condolences to those who have lost loved ones in terrible circumstances.

It is clear to us that such storms are increasing, so the importance of proper investment in resilient infrastructure continues to grow. We must ensure that we are better prepared and able to deal with them. The impacts of climate change are evident and are expected to worsen, and we must ensure that we are prepared for extreme weather events becoming more common. The reality of that is compounded by recent comments from the UK Climate Change Committee, which has underlined missed targets and, in its words, the

“glaring gaps in the Scottish Government’s climate plan”.

This has to do about the remedy and the cure.

We have seen in recent weeks and in similar events in recent years that our flood resilience and defences need to be bolstered. Part of that must be about ensuring that councils in areas that are affected and at risk are properly resourced to deal with those events. It also means investment in transport resilience, infrastructure and the front-line responders in our emergency services.

Yesterday’s members’ business debate, which was led by Katy Clark, went some way to highlighting the importance of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in protecting our communities not just from fire but in response to events such as flooding. The rescue aspect of the service is vital to our response to extreme weather events, which can often lead to additional related incidents to respond to, such as traffic collisions and fires. The additional pressure that is put on our emergency services at those times is huge, and we must ensure that they are able to respond as best they can. The way to ensure that is with adequate investment in the service, the workforce and the fire estate. The Scottish Government must heed the FBU’s warnings that the service will continue to struggle to respond to extreme weather events without improved funding.

In my region, Perth and Kinross was included in the red weather warning ahead of storm Babet. Rail services were cancelled on a number of routes and people were advised to avoid travel where possible. The last time that a red warning for rain was issued in Scotland was in 2015. Such a warning means that people must take action to keep themselves and others safe from potential impacts. As those types of events increase, individual and community awareness of what to do in such situations becomes more important. I have been heartened to read many examples of how local businesses, national health service staff, volunteers and others have gone above and beyond to help others through the worst of the weather.

In the aftermath of the storm, Perthshire continues to experience days of rainfall and the closure of road and rail routes. The current priority is investigating the extent of the flooding and why it happened, while the longer-term work of repairing the damage begins. For the communities that are affected, the impacts will be wide ranging. Communities and households must be assured that infrastructure will be restored and that they will be supported to rebuild their lives, businesses and communities.

There have been other significant floods, and we have to ask whether enough has been done since then and in respect of the lessons that should have been learned. Just a couple of years ago, in August 2020, torrential rain and stormy conditions wreaked havoc across large parts of Scotland. In Glenrothes, it was estimated that 20 million litres of water fell in a night. A landslide at Pettycur Bay holiday park in Kinghorn caused around 200 people to be evacuated from their beds as caravans slid down the hillside. Twenty-seven had to be rescued by fire crews. Around 450 mobile homes at the park were at risk of sliding into each other.

The same weather that year caused a number of staff vehicles that were parked at Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy to be submerged and carried by the flood. They suffered extensive damage. Another landslip blocked part of the railway line, roads were closed because of flooding and potential collapses, and schools and nurseries were closed.

Willie Rennie talked about the on-going challenges in Fife, where there are many coastal communities that are even further exposed.

The storms pass, but the consequences for homes, businesses and communities can be long lasting. For people who are displaced from their homes, for farmers dealing with flooding on their land and for transport routes and other local amenities, the time and financial investment needed to repair and rebuild can be huge. We need to ask whether local authorities are in a position to do that work. A strategic and long-term approach must be adopted.

We also need to ensure that there is better planning, regulation and resilience preparation, including more investment in transport resilience. The review of existing and planned flood prevention schemes needs to be brought forward, and we need to consider how we can improve and accelerate flood resilience to protect our communities, homes and businesses.

As the cabinet secretary knows, the Economy and Fair Work Committee recently did an inquiry into a just transition for the Grangemouth area. That highlighted problems for local authorities in

relation to the cost of flood defences. The proposed Grangemouth flood protection scheme is the largest flood defence project in Scotland and among the biggest in the UK.

Although Grangemouth has, fortunately, avoided significant flooding in recent years, it has high priority, given the potentially huge costs of an extreme flood event. The proposed final scheme is expected in 2024, but the scale of the scheme, at a cost of around £600 million, means that the local council has expressed doubts about whether it can contribute 20 per cent of the cost.

Falkirk Council's predicament is of a significant scale, but local authorities across the country are having to increasingly plan a response to flooding. If local authorities can get support for increased resilience, with adaptation investment being made available, the amount of money that will be needed for any crisis response can, I hope, be reduced, the devastation that households and communities face can be reduced, and the worst of what people have recently experienced can be avoided.

15:47

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I express my sincere condolences to those who lost loved ones during the recent storms. As a representative of the north-east, I am deeply aware on a professional level and a personal level of the devastating impact that extreme weather events such as storm Babet and storm Arwen before it had on our communities.

One of the first major events that I faced as an MSP was when storm Arwen hit in late 2021. I had to make the decision that we as an office should stop work on everything else and focus our efforts solely on helping those in the constituency who were affected by the storm. What was most apparent was that the help that many people wanted was to be supported to help others, to be signposted, and to have access to resources. Many individuals, businesses and community groups reached out to offer everything that they had, whether that was a place to stay, a hot meal or transport to get to safety. They pulled together to support the many people in need as the storm left thousands of homes across the north-east without power. I put on record my heartfelt thanks to everyone who showed us the best of humanity with such selfless acts.

The way that I saw communities, particularly on the ground in Banffshire and Buchan Coast, working together and supporting one another through that storm made me ponder what resilience means in practice. Does it mean flood defences and electricity generators? Yes, but it also extends to empowering people on the ground

to be resilient and supporting those who are first on the scene, as my colleague John Swinney mentioned in his intervention.

One of the most concerning issues that was brought to my attention by constituents during the storms was access to essentials. The bare supermarket shelves were a real worry. I raised that issue last week in the chamber. Those extreme weather events pose a threat to the marketplace, including the delayed arrival of everyday essential goods. Disruptions can sometimes last for several days.

Food security is one of the most pressing aspects of extreme weather events, which will only get more frequent and more intense. I ask all of us to prioritise that topic and embed it into all and any conversations on resilience.

It is not just in the marketplace where we see the vulnerability in our food chain. The storms have directly affected agricultural yields and fish catches, and have highlighted the vulnerabilities in our food production systems. Flooding, power outages and crop spoilage all contribute significant risks to our food security.

As the cabinet secretary alluded to, no single storm can be attributed to climate change. However, as I said, the impending increase in the strength of these extreme weather events presents a significant threat to our supply chains. Therefore, our efforts to build resilience must, of course, focus on mitigating the threats of floods and power outages to our food production sector in the first instance, which emphasises the pressing need to address climate change and its consequences.

The motion that we are debating is right to raise the concerns of farming communities and to highlight the particular impact that the storms and floods have had on the north-east. However, I would have liked the motion to have gone further in detail in a number of areas. It goes without saying that we are

"concerned by the potential for more frequent and more intense extreme weather events fuelled by climate change".

However, further detail on what climate action looks like for the Scottish Tories would have been a helpful addition.

Liam Kerr: Will the member give way?

Maurice Golden: Will the member give way?

Karen Adam: I will give way to Maurice Golden.

Maurice Golden: First, it is as basic as meeting the targets that the Scottish Government has set. You have failed to meet eight out of your last 12 emissions targets. You have failed on your recycling target for 2013 and on your peatland restoration target.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Maurice Golden: The member should concentrate on meeting the targets, which we very much support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for that, Ms Adam.

Karen Adam: That is the point—there is no action or support there to help to deliver that.

John Swinney: I wonder whether Ms Adam noticed as much as I did that, in the intervention from Mr Golden, not a single solution was offered to the challenge that she posed. Does she think that that is a matter of regret?

Karen Adam: I absolutely do. I thank John Swinney for that intervention, because my point was that there was no detail on how to tackle the issue. The Conservatives are all about the problems and never about the solutions, unless they are creating the problems.

The last time that I checked, the Conservative UK Government had backed fracking for shale gas, reduced subsidies for solar energy, voted against more ambitious carbon emission reduction targets, and provided financial support for fossil fuel projects, to name but a few. It was little over a month ago that the Conservative Westminster Government U-turned on its plan to ban new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, watered down its plan to phase out gas boilers, and scrapped the requirement for energy efficiency upgrades to homes.

On those roll-backs, I have to say that I have respect for Maurice Golden MSP, because he said:

“it’s a regressive move that isn’t only damaging environmentally but economically and socially too. It drags net zero into the territory of culture wars. The way the changes were framed and delivered will polarise communities and create a binary environment where you’re either for climate change initiatives or against them.”

I could not agree more with Maurice Golden, and I thank him for speaking up on that. We face a climate crisis, and the communities that are most affected by flooding, which will become ever more common, deserve better than petty culture wars. They deserve our unwavering support and commitment to tackle the root causes of climate change and to mitigate the worst of the impacts.

I note the work of the Scottish Government, which includes a £500 million just transition fund, supporting a move to more sustainable and renewable energy; crisis grants from the Scottish welfare fund; funding for the Scottish Flood Forum and flood protection schemes; the Scottish climate change adaptation programme; the national flood resilience strategy; and a commitment to establish

a ministerial task force to supplement the activities of local mechanisms. Those are just some examples that give a clear indication of the Scottish Government’s commitment.

I am by no means saying that we cannot go further, but the Scottish Government’s unwavering dedication to tackle climate change in the face of critical opposition is a very clear message to our young people, who are the future stewards of this planet and who we are all ultimately responsible for.

15:54

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Storm Babet sadly caused the first red warning in Scotland for eight years. It was the wettest day in Angus since 1891. The storm ruined homes, damaged roads and destroyed infrastructure. Most tragically, it cost lives. My thoughts and the thoughts of my colleagues are with the families who are in mourning and who must somehow cope with the grief from losing a loved one so soon.

I am also thinking about people who have been displaced across Aberdeenshire, Angus, Dundee, Perthshire and Tayside. Some of them will not be back in their homes by Christmas. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for those people to look at the devastation that has been caused to their homes, towns and communities. The Parliament must give its full attention to recovery efforts and must not allow itself to become distracted by small-fry political issues, as has just been demonstrated.

Storm Babet was extraordinary, but such freak events are becoming more common as the climate changes, so the Government’s planning for such events must also become more common. Attention cannot turn to communities that are likely to be affected by adverse weather only when disaster strikes. As others have articulated, there needs to be more preparation at an earlier stage so that, when exceptional events occur, the Government is fully ready for them.

What can the Government do? Flood defence plans and infrastructure investment plans must receive more focus. They should be updated annually to account for the ever-changing circumstances that we face. The current infrastructure investment plan earmarked £150 million for local authorities to spend on flood prevention schemes. So far, only £31 million of that money has been allocated. Surely storm Babet shows the pressing need for the allocation of the rest of the funding to be accelerated.

The Government is working on a new flood resilience strategy. Of course, that is welcome, but, according to the current timeline, the final

version is to be published in autumn 2024, which is a year away. That seems a very long time to wait for something that is essential. Had that strategy been in place before storm Babet, it would not have stopped the damage, but it might have helped to limit it. Every week or month that we wait for the new strategy potentially represents a lost opportunity to keep our communities safe.

The Government must use its wider budgets wisely and consider carefully which services it will need to rely on when a storm hits. Whenever such an event happens, it is our police officers, firefighters and emergency service workers who run towards danger and help to protect lives. If the Government insists on going ahead with budget cuts, particularly to Scotland's police and fire services, how will they be able to respond as swiftly as they want to such storms in the future? How will they have the capacity to help all households in need? The answer is simple. If the SNP cuts their budgets, they will not be able to maintain the same standards of response to national emergencies, and there will be greater risk to public safety.

The SNP's on-going cuts to council budgets must also be reconsidered and reversed. For more than a decade, local authorities have been told to do more with less by the Government.

Craig Hoy: Is Rachael Hamilton aware of the severe damage that was done to North Berwick's 400-year-old harbour wall this weekend, when huge sea swells left behind a 5m trail of damage and destruction? Will she therefore join me in urging the cabinet secretary to free up emergency financial support for the clear-up and relief efforts, rather than—as the Scottish Government does all too often—forcing our councils to fund important repairs?

Rachael Hamilton: I totally agree with Craig Hoy. The harbour wall is an integral part of North Berwick, and the work that is done by the North Berwick Harbour Trust, primarily by volunteers, is incredibly important. The community should be supported by the Government not only from a safety point of view but through investment in the wall so that we prevent issues in the future.

The funding position has never been sustainable, but it is now impossible for councils across Perthshire, Tayside, Aberdeenshire and the north-east, which now must rebuild infrastructure and put more investment into planning for future floods.

Màiri McAllan: Rachael Hamilton is right to narrate the exceptional work that our emergency services did throughout storm Babet, and we will, of course, continue to support them as we plan for next year's budget. However, will she reflect in all candour on the impact that her colleagues in the

UK Government have had on the exceptionally difficult financial circumstances that we are in, not least through 14 years of austerity and a mishandled Brexit, which was pursued in the middle of a pandemic that was also exceptionally mishandled?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Rachael Hamilton, I note that we have exhausted whatever time we had available, so interventions will need to be brief from here on in.

I can give you that time back, Ms Hamilton, but not an awful lot more.

Rachael Hamilton: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am sure that Màiri McAllan would like to reflect on 16 years of SNP austerity.

The immediate priority must be to get people back into their homes and help communities to recover swiftly. During the cabinet secretary's statement last week, she repeatedly said that there would need to be an assessment of costs for flood defences and rebuilding efforts. I am keen to know what timescale the Government is putting on those efforts, what assessments have already been done, and when others will take place. A tracker should be collated and published to ensure that those assessments happen swiftly in every community, and the Government's efforts must be scrutinised.

In closing, I note that one group that has been overlooked is the farming community, which could be the solution to the Government's lack of effort over the preventative solution and mitigating against future floods. Those in the farming community have sustained heavy losses, and RSABI and Forage Aid have been fantastic at stepping up and picking up the pieces when the Government did not intervene. However, as John Swinney said, we must ensure that their voices are also heard, particularly the voices of food producers and suppliers. We need to understand the impact that the community's losses has had on food security, so they should be added to the flood resilience partnership review.

I could go on, but I will close there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I said, we have exhausted all the time that we had available, so members will have to stick to their speaking allocations and accommodate any interventions within that.

16:01

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Storm Babet brought devastating consequences to communities up and down the north-east region. It is the latest extreme weather

event that must be taken as a serious wake-up call for all of us who have been elected to serve our communities. The climate emergency is here, and it is our responsibility to support measures that will address the impacts and mitigate the risks for people and for our share of the planet.

That the Conservatives have alighted on the issue of flooding for today's debate, however, smacks of hypocrisy. Let us not forget that this is the party that, a decade ago, vowed to "cut the green crap", contributing to increased climate emissions and soaring energy prices, and the same party that, just a matter of weeks ago, scrapped its support for a raft of policies that are required to deliver on net zero. The Conservative Party is not fit to grapple with the climate challenges that we face, with their anthropogenic causes or with the threats of tomorrow.

According to Met Office statistics, storm Babet brought the wettest day that Angus has experienced on record since 1891. That is part of an emerging trend: four of the most recent 10 wettest days in the region occurred within the past five years. The Met Office is clear in its findings that

"these statistics ... are illustrative of the expected increases in rainfall extremes as the UK's climate continues to warm."

That means more years in which crops are destroyed in fields, people's homes are damaged, transport links are disrupted and, most distressingly, lives are lost. A party that has resolutely turned its back on the policies that we badly need to deliver climate resilient infrastructure, emissions reduction and nature-based solutions cannot be trusted to protect our communities from these threats.

Others have outlined the work that has been done by the Scottish Government and its agencies and local partners to develop flood prevention strategies and deliver public support. We must recognise and value the multilevel and cross-partner work that is already in place to tackle flooding and its aftermath.

However, it is clear that we must do more. As the national flood resilience strategy is developed, I hope that it will recognise that east coast floods are different to those that are seen in the west. The differences in geology and watershed patterns require that different mitigation methods are put in place—a standard Scotland-wide approach will not work.

Brechin's defences were clearly not adequately future proofed when they were constructed just a few years ago. Is now the time to review the processes for assessing the suitability of the flood defences that are currently in place?

The aftermath of Babet has also made clear the importance of physical infrastructure and emergency response in times of disaster, as well as the need for strong communities who can support each other in times of crisis, as Karen Adam discussed. Policies across Government portfolios need to support community resilience, taking a holistic approach to place making through planning, health and local economic policies. Community groups such as Perth Community Flood Aid are providing up-to-date flooding information to local residents and investing funds into local flood protection and water level monitoring, but there needs to be co-development of long-term strategies with such communities by local authorities and any cross-partner task forces that are established.

I will say a little about the need to bring in nature-based solutions to adapt our communities to heavy rainfall and flood flows. Flooding is a part of a natural cycle. It cannot be entirely prevented, but there is plenty more that we can and must do to adapt our ways of living to safely manage the risk. Investing in a range of nature-based solutions can increase our resilience and diversify our approach to managing extreme weather.

Catchment restoration—letting watercourses move freely, increasing vegetation along banks and removing old infrastructure such as weirs—increases the catchment's natural capacity to absorb excess water and reduce the risks further downstream. Establishing wetlands, floodplains and woodlands can all act as natural buffers during storms as well as increasing biodiversity throughout the year. Thriving coastal habitats and dune systems likewise mitigate the impacts of tidal surges during extreme weather.

That is why the nature restoration fund is providing vital investment in locally-led projects, such as the work by the Cairngorms National Park Authority to restore the Dee and Don catchments. That includes restoring the floodplain at Braemar and removing artificial embankments to establish new wetlands in the catchments. Funding has also been given to projects to improve natural floodplains in Glen Clunie, Mar Lodge and at Tarland.

Changes to wider land management practices are also needed to mitigate future flood risks. Peatlands can be vital upland buffers, with a healthy peat bog acting, in effect, as a sponge for excess rainfall. However, when a peat bog is cut, drained and its vegetation set alight, its ability to act as that natural flood defence is diminished, if not destroyed. That is why we must control the burning of our muirlands, recognise the vital role of peatlands in the climate and nature emergency, and encourage management measures that prioritise the health of peatlands.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is about to conclude.

Maggie Chapman: The reintroduction of the beaver has also been an important step in increasing our natural flood defences. As nature's engineers, that keystone species plays an important role in adapting their environment in ways that manage flooding risks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Ms Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: Those nature-based solutions can be implemented alongside some more traditional grey infrastructure, but we must ensure that we take a balanced approach and consider natural solutions, particularly in upland areas to mitigate consequences downstream—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: —I look forward to future discussions about the role of nature-based solutions in the development of the national flood resilience strategy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Chapman.

16:08

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To be subject to flooding, at either your home or business, is horrible and heartbreaking. The Borders, in past times dependent on the rivers and waterways to power the mills, has seen many parts of its communities flooded. I recall several incidents in my early days here when I visited homes in Hawick, Selkirk and Stow and businesses in Gala where all people's worldly goods were heaped outside in a sodden pile, the floors and cupboards of homes were warped by the floodwater and stock was damaged beyond recovery. What images on the news cannot tell you about is the stench that quickly follows the receding waters and, in summer, the invasions of flies.

The Borders learned the hard way how to deal with that, how to co-ordinate responses and what preventative measures could be taken, including simple measures such as accessing sandbags as well as electronic monitoring of waterways through sensors, particularly upstream, linking the data directly to fire and rescue as an early warning, and, more fundamentally, dealing with water flow upstream.

Today of course, the fall-out that we reap from global warming adds pressures to communities

living by waterways in particular, where more are vulnerable as flood risk areas spread. In an area whose economy was, historically, founded on the wool and weaving mills where machines turned through the power of the river, the risk from rivers in spate remains, despite the fact that many of the mills have long gone.

However, I am impressed with the systems that Scottish Borders Council has put in place, supplemented with Scottish Government funding for flood prevention schemes. Therefore, I consider that, in the Borders, where people have developed skills and responses over decades, learning from bitter experience and with excellent inter-agency emergency communication, there is no need for an additional bureaucratic layer. The council already has a functioning multi-agency task force. Category 1 responders in the Borders include the council, the police, the fire service, the Scottish Ambulance Service, health boards and integration joint boards.

There are several phases to an emergency. There is prevention—I will speak about that later—and preparation with pre-warning. Much has improved these days, with local detail forecasts through the Met Office, which enable preparations such as providing places where people can access sandbags, opening rest centres or simply putting staff on standby in readiness to respond.

There is also recovery. Floodwaters subside. Help and assistance have to be provided to communities to get people back into their homes and businesses, clear up debris and signpost residents to funding and other support. Care for people is key in the event that floods manage to invade private and commercial properties. In preparation for that, emergency accommodation must be on standby. People must be prepared to provide food, water and other necessities.

There is transport. We need to utilise the voluntary sector, such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and to provide financial and other assistance.

Much of that is already in place in the Scottish Borders, where we have learned from bitter experience over the decades. Several flood protection projects have been completed or are planned for towns across the Borders. They include, in my constituency, the Galashiels flood prevention scheme, which was completed in 2014. Next on the list is Peebles. Innerleithen, Broughton and Earlston are currently having flood studies undertaken in order to gain an understanding of the flood mechanisms and appraise mitigation options.

Upstream from Peebles, as Willie Rennie mentioned, the Eddleston Water project, which I have visited several times, is already functioning.

The Eddleston Water, which is a tributary of the Tweed, has been reshaped to make its route wind more, with the planting of suitable vegetation at the water's edge, all to slow the water flow downstream into Peebles and to protect, in particular, the vulnerable Tweed Green, which is right at the banks of the Tweed.

To date, much has been successful. I hope not to tempt the rain gods but, on Bank Street in Galashiels, where shops and businesses were once flooded when the tributaries upstream burst their banks and flooded down the brae past the volunteer hall, such flooding has been prevented through interventions and early warning alerts to agencies to unblock any blockages and, therefore, divert a build-up of water. Low-lying parts of Stow used to be flooded by Gala water, but its course and depth have also been altered and, so far, all that has flooded is the park, which protects all properties and businesses round about.

Those are just some examples of places where I have visited flooded properties in the past and seen remedies that work. There has been much progress with local government taking the lead, supported by the Scottish Government and SEPA. With funding and other national mechanisms for emergencies, such as COBRA and the Scottish resilience room, I do not see a need for more bureaucracy. What works in the Scottish Borders could work elsewhere.

16:13

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow Christine Grahame's contribution about some of the positive work that is already going on.

This debate on mitigating flooding impacts and increasing the resilience of communities is particularly important in the light of storm Babet, and I welcome the points that Maurice Golden and Sarah Boyack made in their opening speeches. As Claire Baker said, three people tragically lost their lives in the storm, and I associate myself with the condolences that she sent. I also pay tribute to our emergency services, the affected communities and local authorities for their efforts in responding to the storm.

Unfortunately, however, as Willie Rennie made clear, storm Babet was not a one-off extreme weather event. The reality is that extreme weather events are becoming more common and are going to occur more frequently as the climate emergency worsens. That means that we must be better prepared to deal with the changing climate and that the warnings from organisations such as the Climate Change Committee and Audit Scotland cannot be ignored. They have been very clear

about the lack of progress made on climate adaptation measures.

Last year, the CCC warned that progress in delivering adaptation had actually stalled. It highlighted that there was a lack of clear targets and monitoring in place to determine what progress the Scottish Government was making in delivering climate adaptation measures. Back in April, Audit Scotland published a report in which it highlighted that adaptation was the area in which the Scottish ministers were making least progress.

Despite the Parliament declaring a climate emergency in 2019, it would appear that the Scottish Government is failing not only to make significant progress in meeting its own emissions-reduction targets, but to deliver vital climate adaptation measures. As has been said, the Climate Change Committee and Audit Scotland made a number of recommendations, including on the need for clearer adaptation targets and improved oversight of their delivery. I would be grateful if the minister could give an update on whether those recommendations are being acted on.

In addition, it has been revealed that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has faced real-terms funding cuts of 26 per cent since 2010, and two former SEPA chief executives have warned of the damaging impact that those funding cuts will have on the organisation's ability to protect Scotland's environment and respond to climate-related risks.

Yesterday, I held a members' business debate on the cuts that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service faces. Over the past decade, the SFRS's budget has been cut by 22 per cent, or £64 million, in real terms, 1,200 firefighter jobs have already been lost and it is believed that a further 780 jobs will be under threat if the planned budget reductions go ahead. Those job losses could be accompanied by a further reduction of dozens of appliances.

The SFRS has a statutory duty to make provisions for flooding and, in its climate change response plan, the service has identified that the threat of flooding will become more frequent and severe. The service has highlighted that one in 22 of all residential properties in Scotland are now at risk of flooding from rivers, the sea or heavy rainfall. It has said that it is placing specialist resources, such as flood response stations and swift water rescue units, in areas at greater risk of flooding.

However, the "Firestorm" survey that FBU Scotland published last week found that 93 per cent of the Fire Brigades Union members who were involved—that is about 1,500 members—took the view that

“The SFRS is not adequately resourced enough to deal with the increase in climate-related incidents such as wildfires and flooding.”

That is why FBU Scotland is calling on the service to increase its capacity to deal with the predicted increase in incidents of flooding. Of course, an increase in incidents of wildfires has already been observed in Scotland over recent years.

As of 20 October, the fire service had responded to almost 70 weather-related incidents across Scotland, which included rescues from homes and floodwaters as a result of storm Babet. Ultimately, it is clear that we need to do more if we are to be able to respond to what is an increasing threat. Therefore, I repeat Scottish Labour’s call, which I made in yesterday’s debate, for an emergency funding package for the SFRS to enable it to deal with the challenges that the climate emergency poses.

16:19

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Like many other members, I have communities in the Highlands that have faced the challenges of severe flooding not just once but several times over the past few weeks. However, I want to start on a positive. In previous years, another part of my constituency has faced particularly severe flooding, yet this year, although there were threats and concerns, the people there did not see the same level of extreme flooding that they had seen in previous years.

I recall visiting, a few years ago, a number of families in the town of Dingwall who were absolutely devastated. We met in one of the affected families’ homes, and the entire house was ruined. There were no carpets or floorboards. Water had flooded in, and one lady described it bubbling through the floor and devastating their home. Those families had been affected by flooding in the past, which had made it particularly difficult to get insurance, so they were left high and dry by the latest flood.

A few days ago, I visited a conservation biodiversity project upstream of the same river that, in previous years, had devastated families. I met two environmental consultants who are based near Dingwall. Last year, they undertook a large-scale river restoration project. They had acquired funding through NatureScot’s nature restoration fund, and they had invested it in improving biodiversity upstream. Critically, they had invested it in a slightly different way to reduce the risk of downstream flooding in Dingwall. The success of that project can be seen online—they produced a short video of that work.

I was absolutely blown away. Too often, there is a complete disconnect between our investment in

environmental initiatives, our investment in reaching net zero and the very pressing reality that families face up and down the country, yet that initiative revealed that investing in biodiversity, conservation and ways to avoid a flood risk downstream could completely transform the lives of the families I did not have to visit a few weeks ago because they had not been flooded.

It is critical that, when we are looking at how to ensure that this does not happen again, we think broad. The speeches from across the chamber have adequately captured the level of devastation. I could talk about the families, households and businesses that were affected a few weeks ago in Aviemore and Kingussie, in my constituency, and about the communities in Fort William and Mallaig that were affected by train services and public transport being off elsewhere. I can tell you about roads being shut between Salen and Kilchoan and being closed elsewhere because of the risk of landslips. I am in no way downplaying the absolute devastation that many saw a number of weeks ago, and I pay credit to council workers, council officers and local community groups, as well as some of our front-line responders in Network Rail, Police Scotland, SEPA and Scottish Water, who had to respond.

If anything is to come out of the most recent experience of devastation, whether in Brechin, Aviemore or other communities that have been referenced, we need to think differently. The day after some of the worst flooding in Brechin, I heard a report that said the thing is this: if we build a wall that is 2m high, thinking that that will stop the flooding, what happens when the water is 3m high? If we build something that is 3m high, what happens when the water is 4m high? We could build a flood defence that is over 4m high, but that would just be responding by looking backwards. We need to think a lot more creatively and holistically, and that must include investment in biodiversity and in conservation to deal with the root cause instead of just the symptoms.

I will close by paying credit to the families who have been greatly affected by the most recent flooding. I cannot begin to imagine the upheaval and the worry that they are enduring. However, let us pay credit by ensuring that it does not happen again.

16:25

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): This is an important debate. We have heard powerful and passionate speeches from across the chamber on support for and mitigation of all-too-frequent flooding issues.

We are all having to cope with extreme weather, not just in Scotland but UK-wide and globally. The

effect of climate change is well and truly here, and we are literally in the eye of the climate change storm. We have to face up to that with practical and efficient solutions, and I found Kate Forbes's speech particularly fascinating in that regard.

The Scottish Government is taking action across agriculture, transport, forestry, water, industry and planning in order to integrate flood resilience measures. Crucially, we are developing a national flood resilience strategy to tackle on-going problems. Although no country can mitigate the risk of flooding entirely, the Scottish Government has committed an additional £150 million over this session of Parliament to deliver improved flood resilience.

Liam Kerr: As the member says, £150 million has been allocated, but I understand that only £31 million has been paid out. I am finding it very difficult to find out where the money has gone. Can the member enlighten me?

Rona Mackay: In a word, no. I am quite sure that that money is there, ready to be put to use, but I cannot speak to that question, as I am not in the Government.

Crucially, we are developing a national flood resilience strategy to tackle on-going problems. There is no doubt that measures must be put in place now to protect our communities and prevent more catastrophe in them. It has been heartbreaking to see people lose everything as their homes have been destroyed by filthy water and to see landmarks such as the harbour at North Berwick and many other places that have been mentioned today crumble under the pressure of the crashing waves.

In my constituency and where I live, which is 7 miles from Glasgow, we experienced very little of the devastation that colleagues have described. Very heavy rain, high winds and some flooding in low-lying areas was my experience, but not the lasting damage that we have been hearing about this afternoon. That said, as in every community, there are certain areas with a long-standing problem of flooding in houses and the areas surrounding them. A part of Bearsden South was particularly badly affected by storm Babet, and the residents, who are already suffering sky-high insurance quotes, cannot see light at the end of the tunnel.

When people tragically die during extreme weather episodes, as happened during storm Babet, it is time for urgent action and resilience planning. As has been said, the weather warnings from the Met Office, local authorities and politicians were accurate and timely, but nature is a force to be reckoned with.

As the motion says,

“the efforts of the emergency services, local authorities and others to preserve life”

must be commended. Once again, we saw how much we rely on the professionalism and bravery of those services to support the most vulnerable and to restore services as quickly as possible.

Responsibility for development and delivery of flood protection schemes rests with individual local authorities, which are best placed to respond to local resilience needs. Since 2008, the Scottish Government has made available £42 million per year to local authorities, and a commitment is in place for another £150 million, as I mentioned.

We are already developing a new flood resilience strategy for Scotland with communities at its heart, and, through the flood risk management plan, the efforts of all organisations that work to improve flood resilience are coordinated, helping us to target investment where it is most needed. A joint working group between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is considering funding arrangements for flood risk management actions, which answers the call for the multi-agency task force that is called for in the Conservative motion.

Reducing flood risk will become even more crucial if, as expected, climate change increases the frequency and severity of flooding across Scotland. For households, the Scottish Flood Forum can offer advice, information and support to help those who are flooded. It provides advice on managing insurance claims, drying homes, finding a builder and protecting properties from future flooding. Crisis grants are available to families through the Scottish welfare fund, and people in Scotland who are on low incomes and who have been hit by crises such as flooding can apply for a grant through their local authority, as the minister outlined.

Help is at hand, and we must always plan ahead to mitigate and protect communities from the destructive force of climate change that we are currently experiencing.

16:31

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I begin by offering my thoughts and sympathies to everyone in Scotland who has been affected by recent flooding. We have had quite a lot of flooding across Scotland recently, and lives were lost. I send my condolences to the families who have been so cruelly and shockingly impacted. I also add my voice to those of members who have paid tribute to our first responders and to people who work in our local authorities who put everything on the line to serve the communities that they live and work in.

I am particularly mindful of people living in the immediate vicinity of River Street in Brechin, because quite a few of the people who live on that street are seniors, and they have lost their homes and cherished possessions. Some of them will be out of their homes for some time; in fact, I learned earlier today that some might not ever return to their homes, which is very sad.

I am really disappointed and surprised, given the relevance of the topic to the other members who represent people in my constituency—in the Falkirk and Grangemouth area, in particular—that none of Falkirk's MSPs have come to the chamber to listen to the debate. I am perhaps even more surprised that none of the Angus MSPs have come to the chamber to listen to the debate, because it is a timely and appropriate issue for us to discuss as a Parliament. I think that, like me, the people who live in those areas will be confused as to why their representatives—their constituency MSPs, in particular—did not come to today's debate.

Climate change is a reality, and the changing weather patterns that we have been talking about are here to stay. I agree with what John Swinney said during his opening intervention in the debate; these events cannot now be easily categorised as exceptional.

There are two important lessons for the Parliament to learn, and there are some significant things that we need to take on board. The first is the need for improved flood defences in vulnerable areas. Kate Forbes gave a very impressive speech on that, and I compliment her on it. The second issue is the need to increase the immediate support that we offer to those who have suffered from flooding.

Liam Kerr made the very important point that the SNP Government was apparently—in fact, I would say, clearly—not prepared to deal with these flood events. The communities and local authorities that were impacted by the recent storm should not have been wondering whether the Scottish Government would be on hand to give them the necessary help, but that is the reality. I read in *The Courier* the other day that Angus Council has had to take money from its reserves, because it presumably cannot be sure that it will have money from the Scottish Government available to it.

The Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme, which is in my constituency, is of local and national importance. I am very grateful to Claire Baker, who made the case very clearly in her speech for the importance of that particular flood protection scheme in preventing and responding to flooding. However, since I became an MSP for Central Scotland in 2021, I have become increasingly frustrated at the snail's pace at which the project has been moving. The first hurdle is a

funding debate, which is another of those difficult decisions that ministers get paid a lot of money to make about political priorities. The stark truth is that Falkirk Council cannot hope to fund a £700 million flood defence project. Asking the council to deliver that would bankrupt it. Bearing in mind the importance of Grangemouth to Scotland's national economy, I ask the minister to adopt a common-sense position and state that the Scottish Government will fully fund that particular flood defence scheme.

The second hurdle is that there is too much talking and not enough action. I was intrigued by the cabinet secretary's description of the Government's response during the first Cabinet meeting after the flood had occurred when it set up a task force. In response to the immediate needs of people in Brechin, the cabinet secretary went on to talk about how they could make applications to various different bodies. That is all well and good, but the people who live on River Street do not need to be told that they need to go online to fill in an application form. Why was the Scottish Government in its Cabinet meeting not able to agree that an initial designated fund of money would be made available to people in Brechin who were victims of the flooding? Instead, the advice was to make an application online. That is really not what people want to hear. When people read about this debate in *The Courier* tomorrow, as I hope that they will, they will be astonished to learn that that is as little as the Government is prepared to concede when it comes to giving practical support.

As usual, time is running away from me.

John Swinney: Yes, it is.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you.

As I have said, the second hurdle is that there is too much talking—[*Interruption.*—]—and not enough action from the SNP Government. What it does—and I am glad that John Swinney agreed with my point—is to go in a perpetual cycle of reviews, consultations, published results, more consultations and more working groups.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Nothing ever gets done. No nettles are ever grasped.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr!

Stephen Kerr: How well will that go down in Brechin?

16:37

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): There is a startling contrast between Maurice Golden's considered contribution that opened the

debate, which has been a thoughtful rehearsing of serious issues, and the type of commentary that we have just heard from Stephen Kerr, who said that nothing ever happens. In 2002, when I had the privilege to represent the people of the city of Brechin, I walked along River Street and experienced the sorrow and hardship that those individuals had faced, as I have experienced in other parts of the constituencies that I have had the privilege to represent over the years. What happened as a response to that flood? The SNP Government put up the money to build the flood defences in Brechin, so Mr Kerr has just been demonstrated to talk palpable nonsense to the Parliament.

To make the miserable political speech about the issues that Mr Kerr has just made does no service to the people whose lives are turned upside down by flooding. In my experience, flooding is the most upsetting and distressing thing to happen in people's lives, other than bereavement, because it affects everything. I have walked into houses where wedding photos have been positioned in frames on the floor and they have been ruined. Those are moments that people never forget. It inflicts trauma on them. To present them in the fashion that Mr Kerr has is, in my view, wholly unacceptable.

In the course of these events, I have seen significant impacts in my constituency, including the flooding of homes in Invergowrie and in the city of Perth. On Monday, I visited two families who live at the confluence of the River Isla and the River Ericht and who have been flooded on countless occasions in recent years when very robust flood banks that have been in place for many years have been overtopped by the severity and extremity of the watercourses that we are now experiencing.

I have stood with farmers—I agree very much with the point that Willie Rennie made—who are trying their level best to grow crops in land that has always been able to be cultivated right up until December, but who found that that was not the case this year, when they have lost crops. The other day, I was in a field at Dowally with the president of the NFU Scotland and saw that 42 acres had been utterly destroyed by flood water, with huge financial implications for that farmer.

There are new and more extreme circumstances. On Friday, I visited another farm at Ballinloan near Trochry, by Dunkeld, and saw that the Ballinloan Burn, which is usually the most meandering little trickle down from the hills, is now a monster, with huge land erosion. I will appeal to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for some pragmatic thinking about how that farmer can restore the land on his farm, to enable him to service his livestock and other projects on the

farm, which is a necessity. I would be grateful if the minister would encourage SEPA to engage pragmatically on those questions.

Resilience is everybody's business. A flood incident is not just the responsibility of individuals, a council, the Government or the responder agencies; it is everybody's business. That is why I am so grateful to resilience groups in Alyth and Aberfeldy in my constituency, which have had their fair share of flooding problems in the past. The communities have responded to those flooding incidents by developing the capacity and capability to withstand them. In very difficult conditions, Aberfeldy and Alyth were largely able to be protected by the diligence, activity and energy of local volunteer groups. I pay warm tribute to the groups—I am sure that Christine Grahame will be familiar with such kinds of groups in her Borders constituency—and I ask the Government to consider whether modest sums of money could be made available to support more of those community groups to establish more of that resilience capability, so that we can address those issues.

This afternoon, members have talked about the extremity of the climate change issues that we face, and I have made my contribution in that regard. That is why it was absolutely correct for my friend and colleague Karen Adam to make the blunt point to the Conservatives that it is all very well having a debate about flooding and coming here with complaints, but we all know that the flooding that we are experiencing is a result of climate change, so we have to do something about it and we must not put obstacles in the way of the measures that are necessary to tackle that.

Liam Kerr: Mr Swinney was the finance secretary while I was campaigning to get the very reinforcements that are required in Montrose. Precisely how much money did he, as the finance secretary, put towards that reinforcement?

John Swinney: What I would say to Mr Kerr is that there is a process of agreeing schemes between local authorities and the Government, agreed through COSLA, and Mr Kerr knows that as well as I do.

I will close my speech by returning helpfully to the question of money. In today's debate, the Conservatives have called for more money for local government, fire and police. They have to wake up and smell the coffee. There is not a limitless sum of money—not since the destruction of the public finances by the Conservative Party. Hard choices have to be made. The Government is prepared to make them, but we know that the Conservatives are incapable of doing any of that on any occasion.

The Presiding Officer: We move to winding-up speeches. I call Mercedes Villalba.

16:43

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): We have heard today from Sarah Boyack of the real-terms 22 per cent cut to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service budget over the past 10 years. We have also heard how 15 per cent of the workforce has been lost and another 780 jobs are currently at risk. In the face of our climate emergency, that is not sustainable. In just the first two days of storm Babet, the service received more than 750 emergency calls and attended almost 300 incidents, including rescuing people from homes and vehicles. Our fire and rescue workers put themselves on the front line for us every day, yet they are having to fight for the fundamental resources that they need in order to do their jobs.

The Scottish Government might argue that the reduction in rescue workers should not concern us, that the Government is reducing—in other ways—the risk to life from flooding, and even that those jobs are no longer necessary, but all the evidence suggests otherwise.

As the minister acknowledged in her statement last Wednesday, and as has been emphasised again today, our changing climate is bringing more extreme weather events with increasing risks of flooding. In 2015, SEPA described the event of 100 homes being flooded in the Brechin area as a once-in-200-years chance, but it happened again just eight years later. In 2021, SEPA estimated that hundreds of homes and businesses in Brechin would be evacuated by floods in the 2080s, due to climate change. Just two years later, hundreds of my constituents have had to be evacuated. Climate change is affecting our environment vastly more rapidly than we have been prepared for, and although we hear time and again about the steps that are being taken to protect communities, clearly they are not enough.

The Scottish Government might argue that it aims to tackle the risk of flooding at source—by tackling climate change. We heard from Rona Mackay that we are in the eye of the storm of climate change. We know that climate change is global and that the effects are likely to cascade, and will trigger more and more extreme events, such as storm Babet, at home and across the world.

However, dramatic action and leadership still have the potential to make a huge difference, so we cannot afford to keep missing our emissions targets. Yes—we are more than halfway to net zero, but our emissions reductions have been slower than planned, despite the significant drop in

travel during the pandemic. That means that Scotland is continuing to contribute to climate disasters, both at home and globally, with little sign of them reducing any time soon. The decisions that we make here impact people everywhere, because our climate is connected. We must act now or we risk endangering more lives.

The good news is that we are not powerless to save our climate and there are lessons from nature that we can learn. We heard from Maggie Chapman about natural flood management solutions. Those can be hugely effective and offer a way to increase resilience while also meeting biodiversity, carbon capture and other environmental goals.

Willie Rennie spoke about the benefits of riparian woodlands, which can slow river flows, cool water temperatures, improve water quality and increase biodiversity. In addition, our abundant peatlands can act as a natural sponge to prevent rainfall in higher areas causing rivers downstream to overflow. That is why it is so concerning that the Scottish Government has missed its woodland creation targets for the past five years, that 80 per cent of our peatland is in a degraded state and that the Scottish Government has missed its target for peatland restoration for five years in a row.

Today, we have heard that targets to reduce climate change, create woodland and restore peatland are not being met. We have heard that the Government has failed to report on flood risk management plans and to adequately fund the Fire and Rescue Service, and that that has failed communities such as Brechin.

We know the problems that we face from climate change, because they are well documented. We know the solutions that are needed for climate adaptation—they are within reach. However, we lack a Government that is willing and able to rise to that challenge.

The Presiding Officer: I call Màiri McAllan to wind up the debate for the Government.

16:49

Màiri McAllan: I thank all members who have contributed to today's debate: we have had some positive contributions.

First, I welcome how consistently members across the chamber put at the forefront of their remarks the individuals and the families who have been affected not only by storm Babet but by earlier storms in October. It is absolutely right that they should be at the forefront of our minds and of our remarks.

In my opening speech, I was keen to stress the need for collaboration, so I was pleased to hear that being echoed by a number of members. I stress that because we need collaboration. This matter, driven by climate change and our responsibility to respond to it, has to go beyond party politics. The people who are suffering, whom we have all mentioned in our remarks, require that of us.

A particular theme emerged a number of times.

Liam Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: Yes—of course.

Liam Kerr: I am very grateful. Genuinely in that spirit, on the question that I posed to Rona Mackay, will the cabinet secretary tell me which local authorities the £31 million from the infrastructure investment plan has gone to and in what proportions, or where I can find that information?

Màiri McAllan: The £150 million, which is on top of the £40 million per annum, has been allocated to the local authority capital grant and is agreed on an annual basis according to distribution. I can tell Liam Kerr that in 2022-23 £21 million was allocated. I do not have the distribution among local authorities in front of me, but I will be glad to provide it to him in writing.

I will reflect on a theme that came up in a number of members' contributions that I particularly appreciate—flood risk management as a whole-catchment practice. Willie Rennie raised the issue fulsomely in the context of food production and the impacts from flooding that he has seen in his constituency. He mentioned dredging and questioned whether it is "in vogue". Respectfully, I do not think that it is about whether that is the case; it is about close examination, case by case, of whether dredging is appropriate. Of course, experts at SEPA can do that when applications are made. I say that in an entirely neutral way—we just need to assess dredging case by case.

John Swinney contributed by mentioning how important forestry is, with its being a dominant land use in Scotland that has an impact on water-table management. He was absolutely right to do that.

Kevin Stewart and Mercedes Villalba also mentioned peatlands and how vital restored—

Tess White: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Màiri McAllan: I will do so in a second.

Restored peatlands are important in managing the water table and creating equilibrium.

Tess White: In 2018, the SNP minister said that the Government would restore 20,000 hectares of peatland as part of the climate action plan. The latest figure, as of today, is that only 7,000 acres have been restored.

Màiri McAllan: I am not sure that there was a question in that, but I am pleased to make two points in response. First, we have set aside £250 million over a number of years because we recognise the importance of restoring peatlands. Secondly, it is an industry that is in its infancy, so we are all turning our minds to how we can build it from an industry that is in its infancy to one that is the natural thing for landowners to do. We will keep working on that.

Finally on catchment management, Maggie Chapman narrated that issue really well. Christine Grahame was absolutely right to mention the Eddleston Water project, which I have been able to visit. I appreciated Kate Forbes's practical example of how the impacts can be positive for people in their communities.

Another positive contribution came from Karen Adam, who was absolutely right to stress how Scotland's communities are often at their very best in times of difficulty. I want them to be able to avoid the need for that, although there is, from my interaction with them, no doubt in my mind that that has been the case.

I regret the attempts, principally by Conservative members, to politicise the event. I hope that they know—[*Interruption.*] I hope that they know that, as they criticise the response across Scotland, hundreds of workers are listening to their criticisms and are, I imagine, taking them very hard.

I said that we need collaboration—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Màiri McAllan: We do not need politicisation. Liam Kerr used the phrase "found wanting" without going on to substantiate in any meaningful way the extent to which that was the case.

I will not waste time narrating anything of what Stephen Kerr said, because it was so baseless and unhelpful, particularly in the face of a really serious issue that is affecting people up and down the country.

Stephen Kerr: Sanctimony. Sanctimonious.

Màiri McAllan: Mr Swinney was right to point out the irony in the Tories having failed to support action on climate change time and again.

On the point about Montrose, Liam Kerr was right to mention that it is an important adaptation issue. He spoke of his experience in 2019. In my short time in this role, I have continued to seek to develop the Dynamic Coast project, which

assesses movement of our coastline. I have worked to distribute funds from the new £12 million capital grant for coastal adaptation, I have visited Montrose Port Authority and I have been taken up and down the water to see the erosion there for myself. I have offered to chair a meeting with Montrose Port Authority, the local council and others to see whether we can short-cut solutions and make progress in that regard. [*Interruption.*]

Presiding Officer, I am really conscious—

Kevin Stewart: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I do not want to take away from your rulings, but I have been trying to listen carefully to what the cabinet secretary has been saying and all that I can hear is Stephen Kerr shouting “Sanctimonious”. In my humble opinion, there is nobody more sanctimonious than him. I would really like to hear what the cabinet secretary has to say.

The Presiding Officer: Kevin Stewart will be aware that members are required to respect the authority of the chair. The person in the chair is best placed to decide the basis on which to intervene and when to intervene. I have already asked members to ensure that we can hear the cabinet secretary. Any members who have the right to be on their feet should do so one at a time. I suggest that that would be a very good thing for all members to focus on. I also remind all members of the need to treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times.

Continue, cabinet secretary.

Màiri McAllan: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am conscious that time is against me and I do not want to eat into other members’ time.

I want to use what time I have left to stress the fact that, as well as all the immediate operational interventions that we have made, we are undertaking a strategic forward look. That includes working with SEPA to reassess on an on-going basis—and to continually challenge ourselves in this regard—flood risk in the light of climate change, which is exacerbating things and to which, of course, we have to continue to adapt. In our response, I will seek to deal with the recovery phase through the new Scottish Government task force.

I will offer a final thought. John Swinney stressed the devastation and the seriousness of flooding, and the serious approach that is needed to manage it. I close by saying that the Scottish Government stands with our affected communities with all the seriousness and the commitment that are required.

16:57

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): My heart goes out to the people in Brechin and the north-east who have been affected by storm Babet, especially to those families who have lost their homes and their loved ones.

Just before I begin, I say to Kevin Stewart: what a waste of a point of order for a cheap political point—pot, kettle.

I thank those in the gallery who have come from Brechin to hear what the SNP-Green Government is doing to help right here, right now. They want to hear about that, and that is why they have come today.

Last week, many north-east residents listened to Angela Constance in dismay and disbelief. Here was the home affairs secretary hailing the SNP’s forthcoming flood resilience strategy—it has not even been published—which will look ahead to 2045. This crystal-ball approach is more than wearing thin. Communities in Angus, Aberdeenshire and Dundee just want to know what is happening to help them to get back on their feet. I say to John Swinney and Màiri McAllan that, yes, people are listening today. The Brechiners were told by former SNP environment secretary Roseanna Cunningham that the town’s £16.3 million flood prevention scheme would protect them for generations to come.

Màiri McAllan: Will Tess White acknowledge, as others have, that the flood defences were built to withstand a one-in-200-years event? That points to how exceptional the rainfall during storm Babet was and the importance of my latter point about SEPA considering changes. The final point that I wish that the member would acknowledge is that, even though the flood defence was compromised, it provided vital time to allow people to evacuate. I hope that she will thank the workers who were involved in that.

Tess White: Thank you for that question. I will come to Stonehaven and the huge difference between what happened in Stonehaven and what happened in Brechin later in my speech. I also refer to Ms Forbes’s comment; if the water rises 2 feet, the flood defence needs to be 3 feet, so I challenge that intervention.

Seven years later, Brechin was in the eye of storm Babet. Floodwaters raged through River Street and beyond, destroying homes and endangering lives and livelihoods. The farming community, which sustained huge losses, and residents do not want words, rehashed rhetoric and recycled policy pledges from this SNP-Green Government. They want to know what happened, why it happened and how it can be fixed. They want to see leadership, but the SNP-Green Government does not have a coherent plan in

place for how it will help these communities recover.

Council budgets cannot stretch to provide the financial support that is needed. Funds from the Bellwin scheme, once they are mobilised, are welcome but will not touch the sides of what is required. Local authority areas have already had to cut much cloth because of year-on-year cuts to their general revenue budgets by the SNP Government.

In Angus, there were reports of sandbag rationing, with homes and businesses having as few as two per property, as we heard today, to keep out two months' worth of rain. That led to a grey market, with people selling sandbags on social media, which should not be happening if a council is properly prepared and funded. Angus Council pledged £250,000 of its rapidly disappearing general fund to help with the aftermath, but when it is gone, it is gone. That is just a small drop in the ocean of what is needed in the days and weeks ahead.

In Brechin, I was shocked by the widespread damage and devastation. I saw locals distraught as they tried to salvage what they could from their homes. Two elderly people, one with a chest infection, returned to their damp flat with mud still on the floors, and it was not just mud, because we all know what is in the mud. They had a dehumidifier churning away, but it had little impact on the damp, the smell and the decay. A "Home Sweet Home" sign was discarded on the street with other ruined household items for the council to collect. Children's fridge magnets were stuck in the pavement mud, and the pathos was not lost on people walking past.

The heart-wrenching human cost of storm Babet has been considerable. The financial cost will run to tens of millions of pounds. Home owners who have insurance have been speaking to assessors and feeling like they are on a merry-go-round of phone calls and frustration. Others do not have insurance because of the flood risk and the sky-high premiums, because insurers did not account for that £16 million flood defence to protect residents, and they cannot afford to refurbish or rebuild.

One resident whose ground floor was completely flooded told me that she had no contact from Angus Council before or after the storm. Fortunately, her power did not cut out, because if she was not online at the time, she would not have known to evacuate her property. What happened was dangerous, she said.

Other residents have issued desperate pleas for the river to be dredged in targeted areas and have questioned whether measures to protect marine life are having an impact on human life. As

Councillor Gavin Nicol, who is here today, has urged, environmental protection should take a back seat when the human cost is so high.

Some residents also question the water and landscape management further up the glens and the role of SEPA, which has taken a long time to get back to full functioning after the serious cyberattack three years ago. Katy Clark mentioned the huge funding cuts to SEPA. People in the gallery will have questions on peatlands. Peatland management is thousands of years old and is not in its infancy.

I am disappointed—but I am glad that the people of Brechin could see it—that the minister did not take a single intervention from Opposition members but took them from her own party. That is another example of the SNP battering down the hatches, and, Ms Adam, another ministerial task force—really? One hurdle is that, as Stephen Kerr pointed out, there is too much talking and not enough action—and that is a case in point. Does that sound familiar? We have a review, then a consultation, then results are published and then reports gather dust. The process repeats itself. More taxpayers' money is washed away and no nettles are grasped. Màiri McAllan says that she is absolutely committed to learning and asks why we do not believe her. I would say, "Get on with it."

Questions have arisen, too, about why Stonehaven's newer flood defences held when Brechin's were overtopped. I hope that Ms McAllan will listen to this point rather than talking to her colleague, because this goes back to her question earlier. To answer that question, the climate change allowance, which factors in changes in peak river flow and rainfall intensity, is a key consideration. I understand that Stonehaven's allowance is higher than Brechin's, and that that is a result of updates to guidance from SEPA and Stonehaven's newer scheme. As work gets under way to repair Brechin's flood defences, it is vital that they are future proofed. Seven years is a short shelf life for a £16 million project that was designed to provide a once-in-200-years standard of defence. There are lessons here for other flood defence schemes across Scotland. We need innovative thinking.

Our councils are woefully underfunded, while the SNP Government is poorly prepared for adverse weather events such as storm Babet. One of my colleagues said today, "This SNP Government couldn't run a bath." I say to Mr Swinney that this SNP Government is throwing millions at reserved matters, foreign embassies, doomed legal cases, a botched census and failing ferries. Maurice Golden highlighted that storm Babet was one of the costliest weather events in Scottish history, with a repair bill that could hit £0.5 billion.

The farmers and the people of Brechin and the north-east need to know that the SNP Government has not forgotten them. The SNP constituency MSP, Mairi Gougeon, was missing in action, seeming to appear only for photo ops with her boss. The people of Brechin want to feel safe and protected in their homes. We have a long way to go before they do.

Business Motions

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11045, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 November 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Vision for Scotland's Mental Health

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on Education and Skills Reform

followed by Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee Debate: A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 8 November 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Approach to 2023 Coastal State Fisheries Negotiations: Securing Principled, Sustainable Outcomes

followed by Scottish Government Debate: CashBack for Communities

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 9 November 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Fair Work
in a Wellbeing Economy

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 14 November 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 15 November 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 16 November 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Constitution, Europe, External Affairs
and Culture Committee Debate: Culture
in Communities: The Challenges and
Opportunities in Delivering a Place-
based Approach

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-11046, on a stage 1 timetable for a bill, and S6M-11047, on a stage 2 timetable for a bill. I call George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 21 June 2024.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Trusts and Succession (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 24 November 2023.—[*George Adam*]

Motions agreed to.

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 6 November 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*

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-11048, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

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

Motion without Notice

17:09

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

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.09 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:09

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-11036.2, in the name of Màiri McAllan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11036, in the name of Maurice Golden, on supporting communities to mitigate flooding impacts and increase resilience, 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.

17:10

Meeting suspended.

17:12

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-11036.2, in the name of Màiri McAllan. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect to the platform, but I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gibson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Doney, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 67, Against 47, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11036.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11036, in the name of Maurice Golden, on supporting communities to mitigate flooding impacts and increase resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)

Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)

McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 50, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11036, in the name of Maurice Golden, on supporting communities to mitigate flooding impacts and increased resilience, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Somerville. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 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)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Against

Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 113, Against 1, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the severe impact of Storm Babet on communities across Scotland, and is greatly saddened by the resulting loss of life and widespread damage to property and infrastructure; further recognises the serious incidents of flooding across many communities, particularly in the north east across Aberdeenshire, Angus, Dundee and Perth and Kinross, which saw hundreds of people evacuated from their homes; notes the damage that the floods have caused to farming communities, particularly with regard to the loss of crops and livestock; commends the efforts of emergency services, local authorities and others to preserve life, support the most vulnerable and restore services as quickly as possible; expresses concern at reports of limited supplies of anti-flood measures in some areas, and believes that there is a need to review how local government resources are coordinated to support areas most in need; is concerned by the potential for more frequent and more intense extreme weather events fuelled by climate change; acknowledges the need to consider what further adaptation and mitigation options are available to minimise impacts from future extreme weather events; notes that the Scottish Government will continue to engage with and support the already well established and effective local mechanisms bringing together key partners to support communities to recover from such events, and will establish a ministerial taskforce to supplement the activities of local mechanisms, as well as continue to engage on and develop a National Flood Resilience Strategy for Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11048, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

Scottish Games Week 2023

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10453, in the name of Clare Adamson, on Scottish games week 2023. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament marks the second annual Scottish Games Week, which will take place from 30 October to 3 November 2023; understands that Scottish Games Week, organised by the Scottish Games Network, with the Scottish Government's Scottish Tech Ecosystem Review (STER) fund, will focus on video games and position the games sector as, it believes, a crucial part of Scotland's digital future; notes that Scottish Games Week was launched in 2022 as the first-of-its-kind celebration of what it sees as Scotland's booming games industry, and that the 2023 initiative will showcase what it sees as Scotland's innovative and diverse games ecosystem to act as a catalyst for a more connected and collaborative digital society in Scotland, the UK and internationally; understands that Scottish Games Week will bring together game developers, publishers, educators and policymakers, as well as the broader games ecosystem and media, offering the opportunity to attend in-person or online events to put games created in Scotland in front of a global audience; considers that Scotland has played a pioneering role in the evolution of the games sector since the late 1980s, and continues to produce some of the world's most popular games; understands that Scotland-based games development companies invest £141 million in salaries and overheads, employ 6,400 people, contribute £129 million in tax revenue and are worth around £350 million to the Scottish economy; believes that there is extraordinary potential for growth in the games sector, eclipsing that of traditional entertainment media, and the diverse applications that games technology can have in areas such as education, healthcare, social inclusion, culture, and environmental policy; further believes that Scotland can cement its place as a world leader in gaming by looking to countries such as Finland, where the games sector generates over £2.4 billion for the Finnish economy thanks to a focus on startups, investment and new business; welcomes the return of the Scottish Games Awards, which recognise, reward and highlight what it sees as the incredible creativity, technical expertise and business acumen that the pioneering and rapidly evolving games sector in Scotland has, and wishes everyone involved in Scottish Games Week 2023 the very best with the initiative.

17:21

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am thrilled to open the debate as the constituency MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw and—for complete transparency—as a chaotic neutral. I thank my colleagues in the chamber for their participation in supporting the motion.

The inaugural Scottish games week was last year, and I pay tribute to the indomitable Brian Baglow of the Scottish Games Network for drawing it together. His determined advocacy for

the games sector in Scotland has brought gaming into the spotlight, and it was brilliant to see the fruits of his labour in Dynamic Earth for the opening of the conference. There is a plethora of exciting events still to come this week until 7 November, so I ask members to get involved where they can.

Why is the games sector underrepresented in our public policy? Crucially, how are we going to change that? The games industry forms the largest entertainment media in the world by some distance. Global market revenues stand at \$214.2 billion, with a projected annual growth of 8.4 per cent. The sector eclipses traditional entertainment media and is worth more than the music and video industries combined. The headline figures paint a picture of a colossal economic potential, but the games sector is much more than that; it is an ecosystem. If we can support the games ecosystem in Scotland to thrive, it will bring enormous benefits to our society not only economically but socially and culturally.

We all know the big players—we are not far from one of them—but I am interested in looking at the big picture in Scotland. There are innovative small studios across the country, and they need our support to flourish. It takes a lot to make a game and it is a hard slog, but there are opportunities for software developers, coders, engineers, actors, artists, musicians, writers, animators, graphic designers, translators, advertisers, educators, lawyers and event planners. I could go on, but the games industry will touch every aspect of our lives and every sector of the economy, including health and our social contract with the people of Scotland. With a little more collaboration and a drive to a co-ordinated public policy, we can make the most of that ecosystem in Scotland.

Members who are in the chamber might not think that they are gamers, but they have probably used or enjoyed game technology without knowing it. Almost every film that is produced in Hollywood now is reliant on game engines for their effects. Members might play Wordle or Candy Crush. Forget "Snakes on a Plane", members might even be playing snake games on their phone in the chamber as we speak, or they might have done so in the past.

The sector is thriving globally. It can provide employment, build skills and development, foster community and even foster social change. People might remember the story of a virtual library on Minecraft, created by Reporters Without Borders, that has hosted important works that have been censored by states. Articles by, among others, Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist who was killed by Saudi agents in 2018, can be read there. For me, that is a perfect example of games being used in a

way that few of us could have envisaged or imagined.

Have people considered video games as a vehicle for social change? Academia is starting to demonstrate the benefits that games can have through encouraging social inclusion and challenging inequalities through games events and competitions. Research by Harshadha Balasubramanian, from University College London, indicates that investing in inclusion can improve the overall experience for all games users and expand design innovation.

Gaming is changing our social and cultural norms, but the games sector remains somewhat poorly understood. We need to challenge tired perceptions of video games and recognise the gamifying of industries such as forestry, helicopter training and remote surgery—the list goes on. We know that gaming can improve cognition, and there is increasingly promising research on the use of games technology in learning about and managing conditions such as dementia and Parkinson's.

Think about what we could achieve with a co-ordinated approach to our games ecosystem—one that is fit for purpose and that fully recognises, values and supports the creativity of the industry. For example, unlike the situation in Wales and England and in Toronto in Canada, our games system sits outwith Screen Scotland and alongside organisations connected to Creative Scotland such as those relating to crafts, but should it be there? We need to have that conversation with the industry.

In many respects, the sector in Scotland is doing well. Following the inaugural Scottish games week last year, I was pleased to see the launch of Techscaler, which is funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by CodeBase. The tension between creativity and commerce was highlighted in "Scotland's Games Ecosystem: The State of Play: Challenges and Opportunities", a report by the University of Glasgow and the University of Stirling with the Scottish Games Network and InGAME.

Colleges across Scotland offer education courses, and Abertay University is held as the totemic example of an institution that provides games-specific education. However, our school and college curriculums need to keep pace with developments in artificial intelligence. We are only just embedding coding skills at the moment, but ChatGPT can do coding for people, as highlighted by keynote speaker Rob Elsworth, lecturer at Toronto Film School and studio head, at the launch of the Scottish Games Network.

We need to link opportunities with schools and colleges and with apprenticeships. Generally, we

need more collaboration between the games sector and others. We cannot allow opportunities and funding to be taken up in the north of England and in Wales because gamers in Scotland are shut off from funding from film industries.

Previously, people lived or died by their ability to get into the largest magazine publications, but new platforms such as Steam and Discord, as well as streaming on Twitch and YouTube, have changed all that. Many developers do not go into gaming to become entrepreneurs or business leaders. Feedback from Scottish games week suggests that supporting developers on the commercial side is a key challenge for public policy, and we need to model that support to suit the ecosystem in Scotland. Small business start-up models, which have traditionally been supported by local gateways or Scottish Enterprise, simply do not support the industry in the way that is needed for it to grow. Studios such as Team Terrible, with its mega-hit *The Baby in Yellow* are glowing examples of the new success stories, but we could replicate such successes over and over again.

I was dejected to hear that Scottish games week has lost out on its ecosystem funding for next year, but we are building momentum for the sector, and we need public institutions behind it. A healthy and vibrant games ecosystem in Scotland, supported by collaborative and strategic public policy, will bring immense social, cultural and economic benefits, alongside innovations that we cannot yet predict. In short, the games sector is here to play, and that is a world cup that Scotland could win.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Adamson. For the avoidance of doubt, I point out that playing Candy Crush is not in keeping with acceptable chamber behaviour and is strongly discouraged.

17:29

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I had better put my phone down, Presiding Officer.

I congratulate Clare Adamson on securing time for the debate. After the success of the inaugural event last year, it is great to see the return of Scottish games week. Once again, this year's event will give all involved the opportunity to come together, collaborate and celebrate the wonderful success story that is the Scottish gaming sector.

We cannot celebrate that success without talking about the role that Dundee has played in it. I remember when, as a young boy back in the early 1990s, I played *Lemmings*—a simple but compelling strategy game in which players had to instruct little creatures to fulfil a number of roles with the purpose of navigating through puzzles and moving on to the next level. Who knew that

those skills would come in so handy 25 years later, when I was chief whip to the Scottish Conservatives? At the time, I had no idea that Lemmings had been developed in Perth Road in Dundee, just a short distance away from where I was playing it. With 20 million copies sold, that game ultimately transformed DMA Design and put it on the pathway to becoming Rockstar North. Not only did the game transform the company's fortunes; it was the catalyst for transforming Dundee into one of the most globally significant centres for computer game development.

The role of Dundee-based companies in the development of iconic games such as Minecraft and Grand Theft Auto cannot be overstated. Those titles now stand at numbers 1 and 2 in the list of the globally best-selling video games of all time. People who play Grand Theft Auto could be forgiven for thinking that the game has come straight out of silicon valley, given the way in which it captures American culture, at least in part. However, it is perhaps its often comedic and satirical nature that gives away its Scottish roots, as well as the numerous Easter eggs dotted through the series giving a nod to its Dundonian and Scottish origins. Abertay University also needs recognition for the fact that, in 1997, it had the foresight to be the first university to offer gaming-related degrees.

All of that has contributed to Dundee being an incubator for computer game development. The number of computer game companies based in the city is now in double figures, and they employ significant numbers of people in well-paid jobs with excellent career progression opportunities. The culmination of Dundee's history and its presence as a world leader in computer game development is the proposed 4,000-seater e-sports arena for the city, which would see a multipurpose arena at Dundee's waterfront hosting live concerts and events. We can all hope that those plans are fully realised as soon as possible.

I commend all those who have supported the computer games industry in Dundee over the past few decades, from the visionary games developers, the private investors and the universities and colleges to local government and Scotland's two Governments. I call on our public sector partners to keep their focus on Dundee and redouble their efforts. Let us keep Dundee as the epicentre of computer game development in the United Kingdom.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr Golden. I add that Lemmings falls into the same category as Candy Crush when it comes to chamber etiquette.

17:34

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank my colleague Clare Adamson for securing the debate, in which we have heard great speeches so far. It was good to hear Minecraft being mentioned. I was very glad when that went digital, because I had lost track of how much money I had spent on replacing scratched disks.

The world of gaming has undeniably undergone a remarkable evolution. We have witnessed a journey that started with iconic arcade games such as Space Invaders and has now evolved into mind-blowing virtual reality, in which we immerse ourselves in uncharted worlds, confront fresh challenges and conquer epic quests. My mum has a little shot and crashes into the television, too.

Here in Scotland, as we have heard, gaming contributes around £350 million to our economy, and home-grown cutting-edge creativity from companies such as Rockstar North is a source of huge national pride that goes beyond Dundee.

With three teenagers at home, I am no stranger to gaming. Although I nag them about screen time, I have also seen the positive impact of gaming on my kids' personal development, critical life skills and cultural awareness and I will focus on the positives of gaming in my speech. Gaming can be much more than just childhood fun; it can play a fundamental role in enhancing educational experience by improving cognitive function and the learning of facts and by increasing cultural awareness.

The built-in rewards systems of points, levels, progress bars, track advancement and feedback make games especially motivating and stimulating in comparison with other educational interventions. A study by researchers at the University of Vermont, "Association of Video Gaming With Cognitive Performance Among Children", found that children who played video games for three hours a day showed higher levels of brain activity in areas associated with attention and memory than were found in non-players.

I have my own examples of that. During a random dinner table conversation, we were surprised by our teenage son's in-depth knowledge of Egypt's people, geography, history and artefacts. When asked if he had been studying Egypt at school, he said that he had learned from the game Assassin's Creed, explaining how he had used detailed maps for navigation, collected ancient artefacts to move up through the levels and completed quests to earn points that could later be spent on medical aid and advanced equipment, meaning that there was a little bit of maths in there too.

Young gamers are clever problem solvers. They are confronted with challenges and rise to the occasion to solve complex cognitive tasks by using critical thinking and creativity. Repeated failures are steps on the road to success, fostering resilience in the face of setbacks and encouraging gamers to persist in honing their skills and keep pushing their limits. Those are all essential life skills. Believe me: my children do not give up until they achieve an epic win.

Gaming can act as a form of escapism for many, but it is also an experience to be shared with others. Through mutual objectives and achievements, gamers build strong social connections and relationships with children who live on the opposite side of the world.

Online gaming can be especially meaningful for autistic people and others with neurodiversity because communication happens on a level playing field without the challenges of trying to read facial expressions and body language, which can be a daily struggle. Gaming is a more comfortable, autonomous and goal-driven way of making friends. It has been suggested that interest in gaming is higher among autistic people, and it makes sense that having a structure and predictable rules would be appealing to that group. Positive reinforcement can motivate autistic people to keep playing, increasing their ability to engage with others.

Although I acknowledge that gaming can be associated with problematic behaviours, it is really important also to acknowledge the benefits. Parents are used to imparting lessons to their children, but we can learn valuable lessons from them. I have certainly found that gaming is a way to do that and there is something amazing and quite wonderful about learning from our children. I encourage parents to engage with their children's gaming. The next time that they feel the urge to nag a child about screen time, they could instead take time to join in with the play, celebrate their children's achievements and be led by them, on their own terms. Any parent doing so would also be playing their part in Clare Adamson's call for support for Scotland's gaming ecosystem.

17:38

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. As others have said, Scotland has massive potential in the games industry. The industry contributes £129 million to our gross domestic product through direct and indirect tax revenue, and Scotland-based games development companies invest £141 million in jobs and are responsible for employing 6,400 people.

Gaming is part of the economy in the Glasgow region, which I represent. With a higher number of gaming companies operating in Glasgow than in any other region in Scotland, Glasgow has played, and will play, a key part in developing Scotland's contribution to the industry and the economy. From our strong record in the creative industries to the presence of world-class education institutions in this space, such as the Glasgow School of Art, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and many schools, colleges and universities, we have the potential to grow the impact of gaming in Glasgow even more.

The games sector sits at the intersection of the creative, digital, screen and technological industries, and we have to celebrate its role in all those industries if we are to help it to grow. We must recognise that, as well as computing experts and engineers, the sector needs art and artists, design and designers, maths and mathematicians, and many more. For it to flourish, we need to help people to see the potential in gaming for all those interests and to celebrate and support them in education, skills and jobs. The sector's breadth is vast, and its potential is enormous.

Last night, I was proud to hear directly from the industry about that potential at an event in the Parliament hosted by my colleague Michael Marra. It is crucial that we listen when experts tell us that there is more to do. Scotland's chief entrepreneur said that the gaming industry could be a lot bigger. The sector tells us that, although gaming is taught in college and uni, students are not taught to monetise it, sell it or promote it. Therefore, the potential of those involved in the gaming industry is, at best, not maximised or, at worst, lost by a failure to highlight it and give learners the confidence to make a career in the industry and maximise their potential in it. There are also concerns that there is a lack of funding for joint projects involving academia and practical gaming development, so there is a gap between what is taught and what is practised.

Education is really important. We need to build and nourish skills in tech, the arts, computing, science and maths from the early years all the way through to the workplace in order to inspire a passion for the subjects that, together, create this diverse industry. At every opportunity, those skills can and should be developed to give people the confidence to pursue those subjects and then a career in innovating the gaming of the future.

The decisions that we make in the Parliament can do that. They can help us to inspire young people to pursue those skills and gain the tools that they need to excel in the gaming industry. Young people must know that science, technology, engineering, arts and maths—STEAM—matter, that their application is huge

and, crucially, that they are fun and can lead to a vibrant and cutting-edge career.

I welcome the return of the Scottish games awards and, especially, the education symposium that took place in the V&A in Dundee today. Bringing together sectors, businesses and educators is key to unlocking the potential in the industry, so we must ensure that everyone who wants to be part of it can be. There should be no class, glass or step ceiling in the way. Everyone must be able to contribute to, participate in, benefit from and celebrate the gaming sector and all that it has to offer in Scotland, so that it can reach its full potential and that Scotland can reach hers.

As with all STEAM areas—I have added an A for arts to STEM—we need to work particularly hard to open up opportunities to young girls. Colleagues will know that I regularly discuss in the chamber the importance of doing that. That goes for gaming, too.

17:43

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): I am very excited to take part in the debate. I thank Clare Adamson for bringing to the chamber this important motion on the second Scottish games week.

Gaming is, without a doubt, an asset to Scotland, as we have heard from members who have taken part in the debate. Scotland has a long and pivotal history in gaming and has helped to shape the global gaming landscape with iconic titles such as Lemmings and Grand Theft Auto, so I am extremely proud that the Scottish Government has provided funding for Scottish games week, which gives an important platform for the Scottish gaming community to come together, celebrate its successes, learn from its challenges and showcase its talent.

I am really pleased to see the motion because, despite its successes, gaming has historically received a bit of a bad name and there has always been a bit of a mixed reaction to it. Too often, gaming is associated with negative impacts. Ms Adamson said that the industry is massively underrepresented, and how it is viewed has something to do with that.

As a member of the Parliament, I have always aimed to highlight the positive impacts that gaming can have. I have been playing games on a console since I was five years old. My grandpa bought me a Sega Mega Drive for my Christmas, and that was me—I have been playing ever since. In fact, I was pleased to put my skills to the test last year in the Parliament when I topped the Sonic all-stars racing leaderboard among some of my MSP colleagues. That was a proud moment.

In all seriousness, gaming has always been a hugely positive thing for me, and it has always been difficult for me to understand why something that has helped me so much throughout my life attracts so much negativity. It is only in recent years that the possibilities have been truly realised, and I have been very pleased to hear members highlighting those positive impacts.

Gaming can have huge educational benefits, such as those relating to problem solving, concentration, numeracy, memory and literacy. I am not sure whether any members have read the lore throughout games such as Final Fantasy and Assassin's Creed—Stephanie Callaghan might be with me on this one—but that rivals some of the textbooks that I used for my university degree.

Games have emerged as a dynamic tool for learning and development in education. Education games provide an engaging and interactive way to acquire new knowledge and skills. From language learning to complex problem solving, games have the capacity to make education much more enjoyable and effective.

Equally, the immersion and escapism that people experience when playing a game can have really positive impacts when they face difficulties in life. No one looks twice at someone when they pick up a book to help with their mental health or wellbeing. Things should be no different for someone who picks up a game. I believe that the cultural value of games is being more widely recognised as we see more and more games being adapted for film and television.

Gaming has always had a social side. For years, we have had traditional couch co-op, where people can enjoy gaming with their friends, work together as a team or compete against one another. However, especially since the rise in technology and online gaming, gaming has opened up a whole new world to people who might experience isolation. That was especially true during the pandemic, when some people relied on online gaming as their sole interaction with other people.

Inclusivity has been highlighted. That is a focus of games that I have been proud to see increase over the years. When I first started gaming, it was certainly not built for women or young girls, but now women are not just a sidekick. Leading women characters are more common and, best of all, their bodies are finally a little bit more realistic.

However, things go so much further than that. Game developers are looking at ways in which games can ensure that no one is left behind and everyone can benefit. We have already heard about games that have been developed specifically for autistic people and the impact that they have had. In my role as a judge for this year's

games awards, I was pleased to see games that have been built for people who have visual or hearing impairments. With the rise in technology, the possibilities are endless, and the positive impacts stretch way beyond traditional gaming.

Taking all that into account—I have really only scratched the surface—I am keen to show the Government's support for that key industry and, equally, to see it grow further. In "Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation", we set out that we want Scotland to be

"a nation of entrepreneurs and innovators".

Harnessing the power of games will help us to get there.

The impacts of gaming can be transformational, and I believe that they fit well with the wellbeing economy that we all want to see. Gaming has the potential to drive economic growth, nurture creativity and inspire the next generation. Our £42 million national Techscaler programme can play a vital role in supporting games-related businesses—for instance, by providing wraparound expertise and facilities to start-ups to help them to grow sustainably.

Over and above that, the Scottish Government is more determined than ever to engage with and support our gaming sector. Scottish games week is a fine example of that.

The games industry is an example of one of Scotland's many successes. The wealth of expertise and innovation that can be applied in the broader landscape of technological advancement and sustainability could be utilised across many different sectors. I believe that Scotland has a lot to learn from the gaming sector, and I am determined that we do even more to realise that potential, so I can assure members that I will work closely with ministerial colleagues to ensure that we understand the positive impacts of gaming that have been highlighted for individuals and the economy.

I am really pleased that the First Minister will host a round-table discussion tomorrow ahead of the games awards with key figures, developers and games studios to gain industry collaboration, demonstrate commitment and understand the challenges and potential solutions.

Scottish games week is a fantastic opportunity to highlight the many fantastic achievements of the gaming industry so far, and I really want to take the opportunity to do that. The industry should keep creating and innovating, and it should know that its Government stands ready to support it in service of our shared goals.

I thank Clare Adamson once again for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank all those

who have contributed to it and all those who are working in Scotland to grow the sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As a son of the Space Invaders generation, seldom has a debate made me feel quite so old.

That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:49.

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