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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 2 October 2019

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The first item of business is portfolio questions and the first portfolio is rural economy. I remind members that questions 1 and 3 will be grouped together.

Convergence Funding Allocation

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what criteria it is using to determine where the £160 million of convergence funding is allocated. (S5O-03601)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): I welcome the United Kingdom Government's commitment that it will right an historic wrong and repay the £160 million convergence funds to Scotland.

I have already said that those moneys are ring fenced in Scotland for agriculture, and I have made it clear that many of those who are in the greatest need are those who farm in our marginal uplands, our hill farms and our island areas. It is therefore right that they should benefit from the convergence moneys. However, I am still waiting for the UK Government to deliver on the commitment.

Liam Kerr: Does the cabinet secretary agree with *The Scottish Farmer* that the bulk of that money should go to land in regions 2 and 3, or should it be used across all sectors of agriculture?

Fergus Ewing: As I said, the convergence moneys were intended for Scotland and they should have been paid to Scotland between 2014 and 2020. [Interruption.] The Tories are complaining about that, but it was their Tory Government that did not pay that money, so it is a bit off that they are grumbling about it now.

We shall of course consider extremely carefully how best and most appropriately to disburse those funds. I have already met various parties and am listening to views. It is right that we help those who are in greatest need: those who farm on our marginal uplands, our hill farms and our island areas.

Convergence Funding

3. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I agree that the Tory Government needs to hand over the funding as quickly as possible to allow us to get it to the farmers and crofters who need it most.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but you must begin with the question as it is on the *Business Bulletin*. I reprimand you for that.

David Torrance: My apologies. To ask the Scottish Government when it expects to receive the £160 million in convergence funding. (S5O-03603)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): The United Kingdom Government has said that the money will not be paid until the next financial year, and the Scottish Government is therefore writing to the chancellor to state that the money should be paid now. The reason for that is that although most budgetary matters are matters of judgment as to how taxpayers' money is disbursed, this matter is not in that category. This is about righting a wrong—an historic injustice—that the Prime Minister said must be corrected.

There is no excuse for money that has wrongfully been withheld to be withheld for a further six or nine months. The money should be paid over now, and the sooner that it is paid, the sooner we will be able to make plans to disburse it to those who most need it. [Interruption.] I am astonished that the Scottish Tories do not want the money now. That is absolutely shocking, and I invite them to reflect on their position.

David Torrance: I agree that the Tory Government needs to hand over the funding as quickly as possible to allow us to get it to the farmers and crofters who need it most. Will the cabinet secretary advise what else he is doing to make sure that they have as much financial certainty as possible ahead of Scotland being dragged out of the European Union, potentially through a harmful no-deal Brexit on 31 October?

Fergus Ewing: Just yesterday, we initiated loan payments totalling £327 million to those farmers and crofters who returned their acceptance forms by 27 September. Those payments are being made to more than 13,400 farmers and crofters, which represents between 75 per cent and 80 per cent of those who received a loan offer.

As far as I know, that payment of £327 million is the largest single payment to any group of people anywhere in Britain that will effectively mitigate against the potentially catastrophic consequences of a no-deal Brexit. I am truly grateful to the Scottish civil service, which is so efficiently administering that vital aid.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Given that the cabinet secretary has just said that he believes that the UK Government should pay the money right now, when will he set out exactly how he believes the money should be allocated? Farmers are waiting for that answer.

Fergus Ewing: We are working on that now, and we have been working on it in the relatively short period since the chancellor announced in his autumn statement that the money would be paid. Of course, unless it is paid to us, we cannot pay it, and not only is the cheque not in the post, but it is not yet signed. That is why I hope that all members will unite behind the task of obtaining the money now without further delay. After all, the money was wrongfully withheld by successive UK Governments. *[Interruption.]* The Scottish Tories appear to challenge that. Their London counterparts have admitted it, but it appears that the Scottish Tories still cavil at it.

We are working hard to determine how best to issue the funding. I do not believe that a formal consultation should take place, because that would almost certainly delay the decision about how to disburse funds, possibly until next year. Obviously, I will keep the Parliament fully informed of our progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate that the issue is important, but it has taken more than six minutes just to get through two questions, and I would like to get through more.

Farm Payments (Land Parcel Identification System)

2. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many farm holdings will have support payments withheld as a result of unresolved disputes regarding the land parcel identification system mapping process. (S5O-03602)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): We are not aware of any farm holdings that will have support payments withheld as a result of unresolved disputes regarding the land parcel identification system mapping process. However, it should be noted that although we are not aware of any specific unresolved farmer issues regarding the mapping system, we annually review and update thousands of map changes. Therefore, should there be any such case that has not yet been highlighted to us, we would be keen to review it and resolve any issue that any farmer or crofter may have.

Finlay Carson: Huge concerns have been raised with me regarding out-of-date aerial photographs and Ordnance Survey maps being used as the basis of decision making. Errors have been made where parcels of land were removed

and a letter was sent stating that they were ineligible, but the data used was from 2017 and showed pipeline construction on land that is now being farmed. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment that the most up-to-date data will be used to identify land parcels and that timely site visits will be carried out where appropriate?

Fergus Ewing: From extensive visits to the rural payments and inspections division offices throughout the country, and from many lengthy discussions with the people who carry out that work, I can say that we should all respect and admire their professionalism and that we should not challenge or cavil at it. I am not aware of the member writing to me on any of those matters. Members should actually raise individual cases rather than make general smearing accusations. If he has any individual cases, I will of course look into them.

Local Authority Services (Rural Economy)

4. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the impact has been on the rural economy of reductions to local authority services. (S5O-03604)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): The funding of local authority services is the responsibility of individual local authorities. In 2019-20, the Scottish Government is delivering a funding package of £11.2 billion for local authorities, which represents a real-terms increase of £310 million, or 2.9 per cent.

Mary Fee: The passing of cuts to councils by the Government has resulted in severe cuts across all communities. Rural communities need investment in roads, transport and infrastructure to attract new business opportunities and a strong workforce. How does the Scottish Government expect the rural economy to grow and attract inward investment when councils that fund the infrastructure are faced with—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, but members are all drifting into very long questions, and other members are not getting in.

Fergus Ewing: I think that that question is primarily for my colleague with responsibility for local government. However, I can inform the member that the funding available to local authorities has been increased, not reduced, so we do not accept the fundamental premise of her question. Indeed, in the west of Scotland, East Renfrewshire has received an additional £7.6 million, Inverclyde an additional £8.2 million, North Ayrshire an additional £31 million and Renfrewshire an additional £19.9 million. I could go on, but I think that the point has been made.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Will the minister comment on the fact that the loss of people working in key rural sectors in local communities is a real threat to our rural economy and public services? What is the Scottish Government doing to encourage European Union nationals to stay in rural Scotland?

Fergus Ewing: I agree with Gillian Martin. The programme for government sets out a commitment to stem rural depopulation, which includes establishing a cross-portfolio ministerial task force. Of course, uncertainty relating to Brexit continues to be a significant threat to rural Scotland. For example, more than 90 per cent of vets in our abattoirs are EU nationals.

Our stay in Scotland campaign recognises the vital importance of EU nationals to Scotland and the rural economy. The campaign provides essential advice and support to help them to remain here, as they are very welcome.

Food and Drink Sector (Glasgow)

5. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the food and drink sector in Glasgow. (S5O-03605)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): Direct investment and support from the public sector, which helps to promote the food and drink sector in Scotland, equates to about £100 million a year across a range of areas including skills, education, research, industry development, standards and capital investment. The funding is provided on a national basis and would be available to any business based in Glasgow.

In addition, the Government has also made food processing, marketing and co-operation grant awards to projects in Glasgow totalling £2.31 million since 2012.

Bob Doris: I draw the minister's attention to Launch Foods, which is a social enterprise that uses quality produce that otherwise might go to waste to provide free and nutritious meals to primary schools in my constituency. How can the sector do more to reduce food waste? Will the minister come out and see the great work done by Launch Foods?

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to, because it sounds like a fantastic initiative. I very much welcome the work that Launch Foods is carrying out in Bob Doris's constituency, because it is playing its part in our commitment to reduce food waste by 33 per cent by 2025.

We recently announced an additional £1 million investment in the food redistribution charity FareShare, to increase the help that it provides to

organisations that are responding to food insecurity. That investment, which builds on work undertaken in the spring, is in addition to the direct grant funding that we provide to community food initiatives through the fair food fund.

The importance of increasing local food provision in public sector procurement contracts is one of the key reasons that we support the food for life programme with the Soil Association. The programme has made a massive difference to the lives of young people across the country. By signing up to the programme, schools are guaranteeing that our young people access healthy and sustainable food that is grown, sourced and produced in Scotland.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the Government introduce mandatory reporting of food and drink waste?

Mairi Gougeon: I am happy to discuss that matter with the member.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This summer, I spent the day at Easter Grangemuir farm, which is near Pittenweem, picking strawberries, in order to understand the impacts of the shortage of workers on that sector. I am interested to hear from the minister what discussions she has had with the United Kingdom Government about making sure that the sector has sufficient workers to succeed.

Mairi Gougeon: We have monthly meetings with the other Administrations of the UK and that point is continually highlighted. The seasonal agricultural workers scheme has been introduced, but, of the 2,500 workers allowed for the whole of the UK, Scotland's share is only 650 workers. To put that into context, the whole of Angus alone has about 9,500 seasonal workers. The number of workers that we have been allocated through the scheme is shocking. The UK Government has to wake up, recognise how important seasonal workers are to Scotland and take action.

Tree Diseases and Pests

6. **Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what is being done to protect the forestry industry from the threat of tree diseases and pests, such as oak processionary moths and bark beetles. (S5O-03606)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): The Government is working closely with other Administrations across the United Kingdom to safeguard Scotland's forests, which play a vital role in our response to the climate emergency and supporting the rural economy.

We have implemented strengthened protection by introducing emergency statutory measures to restrict the movement of larger oak trees, which have the highest risk of carrying oak processionary moth. We have also undertaken surveillance to monitor tree diseases, including damaging bark beetles and taken action, including statutory measures, to contain any outbreaks.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome that answer. We have seen recent incursions into Scotland of oak processionary moth, which causes allergic reactions in susceptible people and animals. If the closely related pine processionary moth were to be imported, it would have terrible ramifications for Scotland's unique Caledonian pine forest. Ensuring that growers use assurance schemes to make sure that only UK-sourced and grown trees are planted can help to prevent the spread of this disease. Does the Scottish Government support such assurance schemes?

Mairi Gougeon: I do, and I am glad that Joan McAlpine has raised those points, because they show why our plant and tree health surveillance measures are vital. Oak processionary moth carries a public and animal health risk.

Our border control measures are based on risk management, and our modelling suggests that pine processionary moth is not well-suited to current climatic conditions in Scotland. However, the use of UK-sourced and grown plant material will further reduce those risks, which is why we welcome the development of assurance schemes. My officials are engaged in those processes.

Farm Tenancies

7. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the new agricultural tenancy legislation is having on the number of farm tenancies. (S5O-03607)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): Since the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 came into force, there has been a 5 per cent reduction in agricultural tenancies, which is part of a long-term downward trend in the number of secure heritable tenancies.

However, some of the changes have been positive. For example, 30 holdings appear to have purchased their land. Other types of tenancies have also increased during this time. Limited duration tenancies have increased by 18 per cent, and short limited duration tenancies have increased by 10 per cent. The act also introduced modern limited duration tenancies, which came into force on 30 November 2017, and by June 2018, there were 28 of them.

Annie Wells: Will the cabinet secretary outline what measures the Scottish Government has

taken to extend the scheme to new entrant farmers, and whether they have been successful?

Fergus Ewing: Through the Scottish rural development programme, we have already invested £24 million to kick-start more than 250 new agricultural businesses and fund more than 850 new business development projects. Over the same time, we have provided over 90 new business opportunities through access to publicly owned land.

Looking ahead, the new Scottish land matching service, which I launched at a farm near Dunblane last Friday, also offers opportunities to bring new entrants into agriculture.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary advise the chamber what else the Scottish Government has done and is doing?

Fergus Ewing: We work with all stakeholders, including NFU Scotland, which is very active in this area.

We believe that the land matching service offers opportunities to bring together outgoing and potential incoming farmers and crofters, which has much potential.

In addition, the farming opportunities for new entrants initiative—FONE—which is headed up by Henry Graham, has also identified many farm units, most of which are small, on land that is owned by various public sector bodies.

The Government is doing a variety of things, and we will continue to work with all stakeholders on what more can be done.

Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity

Broadband Connectivity (Stirling)

1. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its programme to improve broadband connectivity in the Stirling constituency. (S5O-03609)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): Latest thinkbroadband figures show that superfast broadband access in Stirling has increased by 34 percentage points over the past five years, from 56.5 per cent in January 2014 to 90.5 per cent in September 2019. Latest assured figures show that 14,482 premises are now connected as a direct result of our digital Scotland superfast broadband programme.

Commercial coverage has also played an important role in improving broadband connectivity. I welcome plans by commercial

operators such as CityFibre, which has committed to making Stirling the United Kingdom's first gigabit city—I had the pleasure of seeing the build-out on a recent visit.

Bruce Crawford: Crianlarich will not be part of the main R100 programme and will instead benefit from a bespoke solution to ensure that superfast broadband will be brought to the village, with the result that superfast broadband is likely to be delivered in Crianlarich ahead of the main R100 programme. Can the minister confirm that, given that broadband is the responsibility of the UK Government, it is the height of hypocrisy for Tory politicians to attack that proposal?

Paul Wheelhouse: I agree very much with Bruce Crawford about the hypocrisy of some in this place and in another place who appear to be criticising the Scottish Government at a time when the Prime Minister is already backtracking on his weeks-old commitment around delivering full fibre broadband by 2025.

Bruce Crawford also makes an important point about legislative and regulatory powers over telecommunications being wholly reserved to Westminster. However, despite that, we have made a commitment to ensuring that every home and business across Scotland can access superfast broadband—a commitment that we have backed up with our £600 million R100 programme, 96.5 per cent of whose funding is met by the Scottish Government.

On Bruce Crawford's point about Crianlarich, although we are disappointed that a solution cannot be delivered to Crianlarich through the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme itself, the programme has been hugely successful—as he knows, as I have corresponded with him on that point—and has delivered access to fibre broadband to more than 936,000 premises, which is 100,000 premises more than was originally anticipated.

I reassure Bruce Crawford that we are working with Stirling Council to identify a solution for Crianlarich through R100, which could result in superfast broadband being delivered to the village in advance of the main R100 programme, as he said.

We are committed to ensuring that every home and business in Scotland, including in Stirling, can access superfast broadband, and that is what we intend to deliver.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): In June, the minister confirmed further delays to R100 but said that he anticipated the announcement of a bidder by the end of September. Today is 2 October. Can he assure the Parliament that the R100 programme is still on schedule?

Paul Wheelhouse: I can assure Finlay Carson that we are close to making a significant announcement around the R100 procurement, and I hope that that will happen soon. As he knows, we are going through the evaluation of the tenders. I apologise for the fact that there was no announcement by the end of September, but there should be one soon. I hope that that will be positive news for him and for colleagues across the chamber.

From the outset, we said that the process would be highly complex. Our main objective has been to deliver a competitive procurement process that ensures best value for money. I am confident that we will get good value for Finlay Carson's constituency and other areas of the south of Scotland. However, I hope that he will be patient. We will very soon be able to give him the announcement that he is looking for.

Road Improvements (A92 at Glenrothes)

2. **Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on planned improvements to the A92 in the Glenrothes area. (S5O-03610)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Through Transport Scotland, the Scottish Government will continue to engage with the community on the development of improvements on the A92 at Cadham and Balfarg in the Glenrothes area.

Further to Transport Scotland officials meeting with north Glenrothes community council on 27 August, a meeting will be arranged in March to provide further information on the plans that are being developed for the Balfarg junction. In the meantime, our operating company, BEAR Scotland, is working to deliver the short-term measures at the Balfarg and Cadham junctions, and will undertake any necessary public consultation.

Jenny Gilruth: The news that road improvements are to go ahead on the A92 was warmly welcomed by my constituents, including the Glenrothes Area Futures Group, which has campaigned on the issue for a number of years. Can the cabinet secretary provide a more detailed timeline for when he expects the work that has been approved at Balfarg and Cadham in particular to be completed?

Michael Matheson: I know that officials have discussed a range of short and long-term upgrades to the A92 near Glenrothes. The short-term improvements should be delivered by the end of this year, subject to consultation with and agreement by stakeholders. The most substantial improvements, which relate to major junction

improvements, require further development and will be considered in any future year budget allocations.

Our operating company has programmed the detailed design of the improvements—primarily, the signalisation of the junctions at Balfarg and Freuchie—for completion by the end of this financial year. Following that, Transport Scotland officials will meet the community to provide a further update on the longer-term items.

Queensferry Crossing (Snagging Works)

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made in completing the snagging work on the Queensferry crossing, which is due to be completed by the end of the year, and whether that will lead to road works. (S5O-03611)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): I am pleased to report that good progress has been made on the snagging work on the Queensferry crossing. The tower lifts and tower concrete finishing are nearing completion and underdeck painting is well advanced. As I reported to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee on 11 September, the contractor has advised that snagging work will be completed by the end of this year, weather permitting. Traffic management will continue to be required at times to enable safe access by operatives when they are undertaking those works. All works that require traffic management are undertaken overnight to minimise disruption to road users.

Murdo Fraser: Last night, when I drove across the Queensferry crossing at around 9.30 pm, the northbound carriageway was down to one lane. That is a frequent occurrence, as the cabinet secretary will know, causing a great deal of frustration for my constituents in Fife, particularly when there are traffic delays as a result. I am sure that he will understand the frustration and concern that a bridge that has been open to the public for two years is still facing a large programme of work, which is causing those delays. What guarantees can he give my constituents that the works will not extend past the end of the year? How are the costs of the snagging works being met?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well—

Murdo Fraser: Are they part of the contract, or are they additional costs to the taxpayer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Get a move on with it, Mr Fraser.

Michael Matheson: The costs of the snagging works are met by the contractor. I am sure that Murdo Fraser will recognise the significant benefit that has been gained from the opening of the

Queensferry crossing. Over the two years, there have been at least 34 occasions when the Queensferry crossing was able to continue to operate but the Forth road bridge would have been closed to high-sided vehicles. I am sure that he welcomes the additional resilience factor that has been provided to his constituents and those beyond his region in being able to cross the Forth during adverse weather.

Murdo Fraser will also be aware that the traffic management that is deployed for the work that is undertaken by operatives cannot commence before 8 o'clock in the evening; even then, it can be delayed if the evening peak continues for an extended period. There have been instances when the traffic management system has not been engaged until 10 o'clock at night in order to allow traffic flows to reduce. I am sure that he will recognise that, in big infrastructure projects, there will always be snagging work that should be undertaken after the infrastructure is in use. He will also recognise that we have to appreciate the health and safety needs of those who operate on the bridge and put in place appropriate measures to consider their welfare while that work is being completed. That is why the traffic management system is required.

Bus Usage

4. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to encourage increased use of bus services. (S5O-03612)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): In the programme for government, we committed to a step change in bus investment, with more than half a billion pounds for bus priority to tackle the negative impact of congestion on bus services. Investment in bus priority will make services faster and more reliable, which will in turn encourage more people to take the bus. That unprecedented investment will support the implementation of the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which provides a range of tools for local transport authorities to improve bus services.

Bill Kidd: How will the Scottish Government target residential areas of Glasgow so that people who are outwith the city centre can have access to convenient and sustainable travel options?

Michael Matheson: Bill Kidd may be aware that the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which we will be debating at stage 3 this time next week, will provide a range of tools for local authorities to employ in order to improve bus services in their areas. At its heart is a new statutory bus partnership model—the bus service improvement partnership—that will enable local authorities to work with bus operators and others to improve bus

services in their area. That measure is being provided in the bill to deal with the specific issues that he has raised.

In addition, the investment of more than £500 million in bus priority infrastructure will include a bus partnership fund to support the implementation of the bill so that local authorities can tackle congestion, which can help to leverage improvements in bus services within cities.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): As we head towards stage 3 of the Transport (Scotland) Bill, the Government appears to have accepted Labour's calls to allow local councils to establish and run local bus services directly. I very much welcome that, but does the cabinet secretary accept that, having recognised the value of municipal bus services, making that positive policy work will require financial support from the Government to meet the substantial start-up costs in particular?

Michael Matheson: Colin Smyth will be aware that, at stage 2, the Scottish Government brought forward measures to allow local authorities to provide bus services. I welcome the fact that the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee supported that move, and amendments sought to take that issue further. Next week, we will have the opportunity to look at the new provisions that the Scottish Government is introducing to extend it even further.

Colin Smyth will also recognise that it is for local authorities to determine how they deliver bus services within their local area and that, should they choose to make investments in the provision of buses, that is a matter for them. However, the unprecedented more than half a billion pounds of investment that we are putting into bus prioritisation is a key step change in helping to support local authorities to improve bus services in their area and to improve services to residents.

Congestion (Edinburgh)

5. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what co-ordination discussions it has had with the City of Edinburgh Council, bus companies and businesses regarding congestion during the Edinburgh festivals. (S50-03613)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government, through Transport Scotland, has had discussions with transport providers as part of the Edinburgh international festivals transport forum to improve connectivity to and within Edinburgh during major events. Traffic congestion within Edinburgh is the responsibility of the City of Edinburgh Council, which has a duty under the Roads (Scotland) Act

1984 to manage local roads. The recently announced significant new funding to improve bus priority infrastructure will also support local authorities to tackle the impact of congestion on bus services.

Jeremy Balfour: According to the bosses at Lothian Buses, this year's festivals were their worst ever. It is clear that the Scottish National Party-Labour administration in Edinburgh cannot manage the situation because of its incompetence, so will the Scottish Government commit to leading a joined-up approach to manage such problems and ensure that the people of Edinburgh do not face the same problems next year?

Michael Matheson: To be perfectly frank, given the state of the United Kingdom Government's competence, that is not a strong point for the Conservative Party to major on.

The matter that the member raises would probably be better addressed to the local authority, which is in the region that he represents. He would be better to address his issues directly to the local authority, which has responsibility for such matters.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To help councils to tackle congestion in Edinburgh during peak periods, can the cabinet secretary outline how measures that were announced in the programme for government will support local authorities to prioritise park-and-ride facilities, such as the one at Hermiston in my constituency?

Michael Matheson: I know that Gordon MacDonald has raised that matter previously. As we highlighted in our draft national transport strategy, buses will play a key role in our future sustainable transport offer for the public. The investment of over half a billion pounds to support bus infrastructure through the bus partnership fund, which I have referred to several times, is to support local transport authorities in transforming how they provide bus services in their area, to tackle congestion issues, which have a direct impact on the quality of the services that bus operators are able to provide and, in particular, to tackle the negative issues that can impact on congestion. Park-and-ride facilities are an important contribution to making that work effectively.

Dundee Northern Relief Road (Cost Benefit Analysis)

6. **Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what cost benefit analysis has been undertaken on building the Dundee northern relief road since the fourth

strategic transport projects review was published. (S5O-03614)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The first strategic transport projects review, which was published in December 2008, included as part of the detailed options appraisal the calculation of a scheme cost benefit ratio for a Dundee northern relief road. I can confirm that Transport Scotland has not undertaken any further analysis since the publication of the STPR in 2008. The second STPR, which is now under way, will reappraise the need for any improvements at that location in order to confirm that it remains a priority within the wider strategic transport network in Scotland.

Bill Bowman: I thank the cabinet secretary for that admission and update.

In July, local press reported that a single van toppled over on the southbound stretch of Forfar Road at Claverhouse and caused a closure of all lanes into Dundee for nearly three hours and gridlock on the A90. Does the cabinet secretary agree with me and 75 per cent of readers of one newspaper survey that that situation is unacceptable for a city in the 21st century? Will he look into an urgent upgrade of Dundee's road infrastructure?

Michael Matheson: Any accident on our roads is to be regretted, which is why we have a clear strategy for reducing the number of road traffic accidents on Scottish roads. Through that strategy, we have been successful in doing that over recent years. As I said, any future investment in the trunk road network in the Dundee area will be considered as part of the STPR2 process. However, local roads in Dundee are a matter for the local authority.

ScotRail (Customer Satisfaction Targets)

7. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to ScotRail failing to meet its customer satisfaction targets for the second year running. (S5O-03615)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): It is disappointing that ScotRail failed to attain the overall satisfaction key performance indicator, but it is worth noting that the ScotRail franchise is one of the few franchises in the United Kingdom to have specific key performance indicators linked to the national rail passenger survey.

Transport Scotland holds ScotRail to account through the contractual requirements that are specified in the franchise agreement, as evidenced by the remedial plan notice that was issued on 8 February. The commitments that are

contained in the overall satisfaction remedial plan are specifically aimed at addressing the areas that passengers have identified and at driving up satisfaction levels.

Anas Sarwar: The cabinet secretary fails to understand the facts. The Abellio franchise is a catalogue of failure—delays, cancellations, overcrowded trains and skip-stopping. Since Abellio took over the franchise, there have been 75,000 train cancellations—an average of 47 a day. The figure is 60 per cent higher than it was when Abellio took over. What will it take for the cabinet secretary to take away the contract from failing Abellio?

Michael Matheson: Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would like to hear the answer. The issue is being debated this afternoon.

Michael Matheson: We will use the contract to ensure that we apply the necessary penalties and make the necessary changes to the existing franchise.

The Labour Party calls for the public ownership of our railways, and tonight every single Labour member will have the opportunity to vote for exactly that by voting for the Scottish Government's amendment. However, I suspect that they will vote with the Conservative Party to ensure that the Parliament and the Government do not have the power to run a public railway service in Scotland. As we know, Labour members say one thing outside the chamber, but they never deliver on what they have said when they come to Parliament. At 5 o'clock tonight, we will know where they stand. Will they stand up for their principles, or will they run to vote with the Conservative Party in order to keep the existing rail infrastructure?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that question 8 might be more sedate.

Rail Electrification (Kilmarnock to Glasgow)

8. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will give an indicative timescale for the electrification of the Kilmarnock to Glasgow rail line. (S5O-03616)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): As we committed to in the programme for government, we will publish, in spring 2020, an action plan for decarbonising Scotland's railways by 2035. The primary focus will be the continuation of a rolling programme of efficient electrification, the procurement of battery trains and the development of hydrogen fuel cell

propulsion trains. Further detail on how that might affect specific routes will be set out in the action plan.

In the immediate term, we are working closely with our industry partners to identify opportunities for increasing capacity on the Glasgow to Kilmarnock route to ensure that passenger demand is met.

Willie Coffey: The Scottish National Party's investment in the half-hourly service, which was made some years ago, provided a huge boost to my constituents, but journey times on the line are on a par with those during the steam age, due to a single-track section. Does the cabinet secretary accept that journey times need to improve and that the line needs to be brought into the 21st century in order to meet the needs of a modern travelling public?

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important point. I recognise his concerns, which he has raised directly with me previously.

There has been significant growth in demand on the Kilmarnock route, in particular, and performance on the route has consistently been above the 92.5 per cent overall public performance measure. In addition, by the end of this year, all the trains that are used on the route will have completed their upgrade work to provide modern train facilities such as new seating and flooring, power sockets and wi-fi, which passengers would expect in modern rolling stock. Over and above that, we are also considering developing further support to improve the rolling stock upgrade programme, which also supports important jobs in the member's constituency, at Brodie Engineering and at Wabtec Rail Scotland in Kilmarnock. I assure the member that the Kilmarnock route is one of those that we are looking at to see how they could be fitted into the further improvement programme as we move into control period 6.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. We managed to get all the questions in the *Business Bulletin* asked.

Nursery Funding (Deferred Entry to Primary School)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-19193, in the name of Iain Gray, on the Give Them Time campaign. I will let members take their seats as efficiently as they can—without having a wee bit of a chat with each other.

Before calling on Iain Gray to speak to and move the motion, for which he has six minutes, I should mention that we have now built in time for interventions in these short debates. There are five or six minutes in hand for interventions—members will make their time up.

14:41

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I am very pleased to move the motion in order to correct a legal anomaly that creates real problems for families across Scotland.

I begin by paying tribute to the Give Them Time campaign, whose members have organised a remarkably effective campaign to draw attention to what is an injustice and have gathered considerable evidence of its extent. Through their efforts, we debated the issue during a members' business debate led by Fulton MacGregor, and we have questioned the Minister for Children and Young People on the matter in committee more than once. However, the time has come for Parliament to take a view on the issue and to instruct the Government to fix the matter once and for all.

For more than 30 years, since the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents of children who have not reached the age of five at the start date of the school year have had the right to decide whether their child is ready for primary 1 and, if they believe that they are not, to defer the child's entry to school until the following year. If the child's fifth birthday falls after 31 December, in January or February, they will continue to receive funded hours of early years education for the intervening year.

However, for those children whose birthday falls between August and December, although the deferral decision is one for parents, such funding is at the discretion of the local authority. Most authorities will not automatically agree such funding. The chances of them doing so, and the processes that they apply, vary widely from authority to authority. Families face rigorous demands for evidence, and decisions are taken by panels of experts, who often do not know the child well at all.

If funding is refused in those circumstances, there is a clear inequity, because families with the resources to do so can self-fund their child's nursery hours, while those who cannot afford to do that may be faced with no choice but to send their child into primary 1, even though they, as parents, believe that that is not the best thing for their son or daughter.

Even those families who can pay may find that they have to move their child out of their nursery if a local authority does not allow self-funding within one of its early years settings—as many do not—thus disrupting the child's early education at a critical time.

The numbers are not large: Give Them Time believes that perhaps 1,300 applications for discretionary funding are made in a year, although the impact on the families can be great indeed. The answer is straightforward. Children whose entry is deferred should simply continue to qualify for funded nursery hours at the same rate as three and four-year-olds, which is currently for 600 hours, rising to 1,140 hours next year. It is debatable what additional cost there is, given that the child will be in either nursery or primary 1, but central Government should find whatever resources are required anyway in order to avoid any pressure on cash-strapped councils.

I know that the minister has listened to the campaign and that she met its representatives only last week. She promised them that she will produce improved guidance for local authorities and improve communication to make parents aware of their rights. However, the task is not to better explain this unfair anomaly, but to get rid of it so that all pre-school children have the right to continuous early years education.

The minister told the Education and Skills Committee that her officials are gathering better-quality data on the number of deferrals and on those children's characteristics by birthday, family income, special needs and so on. However, the task is not to count those children, but to show that they count by allowing them to defer with access to the early years education that we all agree is so important.

I know that the minister will say—as both she and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills have said on many occasions—that a deferral decision should be made in the best interest of the child. I agree with that, but the law says that the decision is to be taken by the child's parents, not by an anonymous council official or councillors, nursery staff or a panel of professionals. If parents have the right to decide whether or not their four-year-old is ready for school, as the law says that they do, we must respect that decision and protect those children's rights to early years provision.

The way to do that is to change the law as the Labour motion demands.

The caveats in the Government amendment are unnecessary. Of course local authorities will be consulted, as all such legislative change would require, and of course resources must be found and agreed, but our motion stipulates those requirements. The motion is clear and simple, and it is the right thing to do.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that, under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents have the legal right to defer their child's entry to primary education if they are not five years old by the commencement of the school year; understands that those children who are born in January and February have an automatic entitlement to funded early learning and childcare during the deferred year, while those born between August and December do not have this automatic entitlement; commends the "Give Them Time" campaign for their work in highlighting this issue; calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward legislation in this parliamentary session to automatically entitle young people aged four, who are born between August and December, to funded early learning and childcare in line with statutory government provision for three- and four-year-olds when their parents use their legal right to defer entry to P1, and further calls on the Scottish Government to work with COSLA to ensure the necessary resources are available.

14:47

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): I am glad to have a further opportunity to discuss school deferral, following my recent appearance at the Education and Skills Committee where I made it clear that I am open to considering options in partnership with local government, parents and practitioners. I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to the Give Them Time campaign for its tireless work to highlight the issue. I recognise the campaign's efforts to support parents at what I know can be a challenging time. I met members of the campaign again on Friday, and they updated me on their work, the progress that they have seen in the past year and what they think still needs to be done.

Currently, all children who are still four at the start of the school year can defer and start primary 1 the following year. That flexibility allows parents to assess whether their child is ready for school and make the right choice for their child; it is a strength of the Scottish education system.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am grateful to the minister for giving way. Does she accept that, as things stand, the flexibility that she mentions is flexible only for those parents who can afford it?

Maree Todd: I would not agree with that. *[Interruption.]* I will continue, if the member will allow me to do so. As members know, when parents choose to defer the start of school, only

those children with a birthday in January or February are automatically entitled to another year of funded early learning and childcare.

Before I go on to discuss the Government's amendment, it is important to recognise that children of all ages and abilities should be supported well in the school environment. When I spoke to the Education and Skills committee recently, I repeated my expectation that schools should be child ready, rather than children having to be school ready.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the minister do Daniel Johnson the courtesy of answering his question?

Maree Todd: I just answered it. I will answer it more fully if I am allowed to progress.

It is a real strength of our system that Scotland has a fully integrated three to 18 curriculum that is flexible enough to empower practitioners to use local approaches that suit their learners.

School deferral has had a high profile since the Give Them Time campaign launched almost a year ago. There have been a lot of changes in that year: the information that is available to parents has improved and there have been many more local discussions about deferral policy.

The decision to defer school for their child is not one that parents take easily. It is essential that that decision is based on the wellbeing of the individual child and not based on their access to early learning and childcare. For that reason, we intend to introduce legislation to entitle all children whose school start is deferred to access funded early learning and childcare in their deferred year. However, there is important preparatory work to be undertaken with our local government colleagues first, which our amendment recognises. It is essential that,

"in line with the principles of local democracy",

we take forward our commitment with the

"agreement of local government following proper assessment of the resource implications".

Local authorities are working incredibly hard to prepare for August 2020 and, together, we will need to consider a manageable implementation timetable. We will begin those discussions with our local government colleagues soon, in the spirit of the partnership working that has been vital to the expansion of early learning and childcare.

Iain Gray: Will Maree Todd take an intervention?

Maree Todd: I am in my final minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Time has been built in for interventions, but it is for members to decide whether to take them.

Maree Todd: I will finish.

We will continue to work with parents, practitioners and their representatives to support parents and carers to make an informed decision for their individual children.

I move amendment S5M-19193.1, to insert at end:

“, and agrees that, in line with the principles of local democracy, this should be advanced with the agreement of local government following proper assessment of the resource implications, and in partnership with parents and the sector.”

14:52

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives and confirm our support for the Labour motion.

I thank Iain Gray for providing the Parliament with another opportunity to discuss this important issue. He provided an excellent summary of the problem, which has been around for a while. [*Interruption.*] Members would not be shouting from the Scottish National Party back benches if they had been listening.

I will not repeat the nature of the problem but, let us be clear from the outset, if we believe in empowering parents and respecting their decisions on deferment, we must ensure that action is taken now to address the unacceptable inconsistency that has been created. For a considerable amount of time, campaigners have been asking for equity, transparency and the correct advice and information. That should not be beyond us.

It should not be a case of starting discussions now—the Government has come to it slowly. That the anomaly has not been fixed already speaks to the lack of priority that the SNP Government attaches to deferment. Once again, it is paying lip service to equity and excellence in our education system. The Give Them Time campaign has done a tremendous job, and rightly deserves our gratitude for ensuring that the issue has not been allowed to be forgotten or pushed aside.

That is why I again place on record our disappointment that educational issues that are challenging for the SNP Government are only ever debated in Opposition time. I ask the minister and the Deputy First Minister to reflect on that and ask themselves whether their head-in-the-sand approach inspires the confidence of parents. Anyone who witnessed Maree Todd's recent appearance at the Education and Skills Committee, where she answered questions on deferment, could not with any certainty say that the Government fully grasped the unfairness of it. I, for one, was unconvinced that simply knowing

how many people were affected would solve the practical issues.

That is why, despite Conservative members being sympathetic to the principle of the Government amendment, we will not support it. We do not think that it is necessary. We think that the motion should command unanimous support across the chamber, that the time for passing the buck is over and that the Government needs to take responsibility for its national policies. That means making sure that those policies are rolled out fairly and consistently and that they are properly funded. It also means owning and resolving the unintended consequences. Of course the Scottish Government should be working with local government, but I cannot help but feel that this is another attempt to hide behind local government when the going gets tough.

That said, in the interests of fairness before I close, I pay tribute to and thank those SNP back benchers, particularly Fulton MacGregor, who have worked hard alongside campaigners to ensure that the issue has finally had the proper scrutiny that it deserves.

The Government and the Parliament should be proud of supporting families equally; we should not discriminate against them based on something as arbitrary as a birth month. We should respect their legal rights and make sure that they are supported in accessing the education that their children deserve.

It is quite simple; it is about fairness. The best way to rectify this injustice is simply to bring birthday discrimination to an end and to work together to increase the awareness of parents' legal right to defer. Let us reduce and remove the bureaucracy. The needs of the child must always come first. I hope that the debate can deliver that and I hope that the Government acts quickly following its discussions.

14:56

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank Iain Gray for bringing this issue to Parliament today.

The age at which children in Scotland start school directly impacts on how ready they are to learn and develop. That is not a controversial point; it is something that we all agree on. We know that children engaging in a play-based environment, particularly where they are socialising with other children, is vital to their development; again, there is consensus on that point.

A multitude of studies have shown that play-based activities are crucial for early development, particularly for the parts of the brain that are

responsible for higher functions such as verbal communication. The studies show that play helps to develop children's understanding of their own emotions, their self-control and communication, their relationship with others and their cognitive understanding of the world around them. By contrast, introducing children too early to more formal and instructional education can have a lasting negative impact, resulting in many children developing a dislike of education and experiencing lasting stress.

Across Europe, Scotland ranks among the earlier school starters, with children usually starting school between the ages of four and a half and five and a half. In most European Union countries, the school starting age is six. In some, including Finland, which we often look to as an example to follow, the starting age is seven. Starting school later means more time and opportunity for play-based learning in an appropriate environment. What the Give Them Time campaign calls for would make that a far more viable option for many children who would otherwise be starting school at just four and a half.

In theory, the youngest children in each year group can defer for a year and start when they are just over five and a half but for many children who are still under five, their right to defer is not automatic. That means that children who are not yet five are being forced to start school when their parents believe that they are not ready.

Although play-based learning has certainly expanded in primary 1, the more formal environment of school is not necessarily the best place to learn—certainly not at the age of four and a half. Lots of good work is happening here but, fundamentally, our schooling system is not designed for it. There is more than a bit of square peg, round hole going on with play-based education.

Deferring the school starting year qualifies parents of children who were born in January and February for another year of statutory ELC funding, as has been mentioned—currently for 600 hours and soon for 1,140 hours. However, if a child is born in August to December, there is no automatic entitlement. Instead, it is essentially a lottery system that is largely dependent on individual local authorities. That is entirely unnecessary, unhelpful and avoidable. It impacts the families who are on the lowest incomes the most and leaves them with no real choice at all. Many children who would have benefited from deferred entry and whose parents would have chosen it are unable to benefit in that way and they are disproportionately from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nurseries and pre-schools simply remain expensive and out of reach for many parents.

Often even the delivery of funded hours is not straightforward and requires parents to mix private and subsidised places, if they can afford to do so. As Iain Gray mentioned, some families are forced to move their child to a different nursery for the deferred year. That is a huge disruption.

Even when the 1,140 hours provision is rolled out, that will be the equivalent of only 30 hours per week during school term time. Leaving aside the challenge of holidays, that does not cover full-time hours during term time. If we contrast that with provision in other European nations, it is clear that we still have some way to go on this.

If we are to get it right for every child, we need to ensure that play-based early education is accessible to all, in an appropriate environment, and that it is certainly not dependent on parental income, the month of a child's birth or a combination of the two, as it is at present. I support the Give Them Time campaign because it is a step in the right direction, but we could be doing so much more in the area.

We need to give serious consideration to raising the school starting age for all children and ensuring that appropriate and properly funded pre-school education is available to provide that vital play-based education. That means universal provision on the same basis as for the early years of primary school. However, that is a debate for another day. For now, the Greens are glad to support the Give Them Time campaign and Iain Gray's motion.

15:00

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Labour for the debate and pay tribute to the impressive campaign run by Give Them Time, which has already made a real difference for many of our constituents. We will be supporting the motion.

A few weeks ago, as the minister mentioned, she told the Education and Skills Committee that

"Central Government is very clear that schools should be child ready, rather than children having to be school ready"—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 18 September 2019; c 8.]

but I disagree with that sentiment. What the minister is really saying to parents who are minded to defer children with August to December birthdays is that the Government and local authority professionals know best.

Let me be clear: the Scottish Liberal Democrats want play-based learning to be embedded in the early years and for school leaders to ensure that all children can thrive from their first day in school. However much the learning environment in the early years of school is designed to mirror and be

a continuation of the nursery experience, the fact remains that some children will benefit from another year of nursery education. However, some parents are being forced to risk their entitlement in order to do what they know is best for their child. As one of my constituents, Kay Anderson, explained to me "the thought of having to choose between him going to school, where he'd had such a good experience, or nowhere at all was horrendous."

In many cases, parents who are denied funding for deferral are told that there is no cognitive reason for their child not to go to school, but parents know that the best time for their child to attend school does not depend just on their ability to learn. Parents know how important it is for their child to go through school with their friends, how their child feels before going to, and after coming home from, nursery, how confident their child is and how they adapt to new environments, but that may still be undermined, as another of my constituents said, "all just because of when his birthday is."

Those are crucial factors that can be missed when arm's-length decisions are taken, as seems to be happening too often. Let me remind the chamber that the school starting age was set in 1870 to free up cheap labour in factories. We are much more informed about child development now. What is more, as we have heard, it is misleading to speak as if the parents of children who would defer are receiving an extra free nursery year. Those children may have received a year less of early years education than the others who would be in their peer group at school.

Reform Scotland's briefing "Closing the early years gap", sets out clearly how some children could start school having missed out on more than 1,000 hours of play-based learning. We are in a situation in which some parents have to apply to receive their full funded ELC entitlement, which is at their local authority's discretion. That has created an unacceptable postcode lottery and it is not consistent with the Government's aim of closing the attainment gap. If we must bring economics into decisions that are fundamentally about getting it right for every child, that equation is surely cancelled out by the benefits that will be seen throughout the child's educational career and beyond.

The right to defer is an important one and the Government must introduce the necessary legislation to allow parents to exercise that right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to the open debate and speeches of four minutes. Some members have not pressed their request-to-speak buttons yet, although I suspect that they are ready to speak.

15:04

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I am pleased to speak in the debate in support of the Give Them Time campaign, because the simple reality is this: the moment when they send their five-year-old to school is an anxious one for any parent. They worry about how their child will get on and whether they are ready, and that is especially true if it is not a five-year-old, but a four-year-old, whom they are sending to school.

That is not just an emotional decision for a parent; it is a reasonable decision, because we know that happy, confident and well-socialised children learn better in school. What is more, the science is also clear: as Ross Greer pointed out, study after study has shown that when children start school later their educational outcomes are improved and that older children do better than younger ones in the same class. Therefore it is right that parents are given the option to defer the start date for a child who is not yet five when the school year starts. That is exactly what the law currently does: the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 is clear in recognising that such judgments should be made by parents.

Likewise, the Scottish Government's early years policy is the right one, for the two clear reasons that it espouses. First, it is right that we aim to give every child the best start in their education that we can. It is also important for working families that early years provision is put in place. However, the Government has created an absurd gap, because early years provision stops before school provision has to start. There are two important dates: December for early years provision and September for school. If the policy of extending early years provision is right, surely it should be in place for as long as it is needed. Quite simply, that gap needs to be fixed, because the system needs to be fair for all families.

I turn to the Scottish National Party's amendment. It recognises the issue, which I welcome. However, its focus is on two aspects, which I believe is incorrect. The first of those is funding. The extension of early years provision is a policy of the Scottish Government, which provides the funding for it. It therefore calls the shots and could extend the provision if there were to be a question mark over it. However, I make the small observation that we all know how hard pushed local authorities are to deliver such provision on the basis of the funding. It strikes me that there might be more than a little penny pinching on the part of local authorities—if they are making such decisions at all.

The more fundamental point that is at stake is about standards. Of course, there should be discretion in how education policy is delivered at local level. However, that should not apply to

everything. We set standards at national level. We do not leave it up to schools to set the age at which they start teaching children; that is set out in law. Neither do we leave it up to local authorities to decide whether they will provide early years education; we say that they must do so. The extension of early years provision to children with later birthdays is another standard that I think local authorities should have to uphold.

The second issue with the SNP's amendment is that it acknowledges only two parties in relation to such decisions: central and local government. The reality is that those decisions ought not to be made by either of those parties: they are decisions for parents, who should also have the right to flexibility—

Maree Todd: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just closing.

Daniel Johnson: Parents should be afforded such decisions now—not once the Government has had further discussions.

15:08

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I, too, thank Iain Gray for using his time to discuss the issue, which I have taken up over the past eight to 10 months. However, as other members have said, thanks should go mainly to the Give Them Time campaign, which was launched in Edinburgh at the end of last year and has worked tirelessly on the issue. I also thank my constituents in Coatbridge and Chryston who were involved in the campaign, who invited me along to the launch to hear about its concerns and the research that it has done.

As others have said, the simple principle that underlies the campaign is that a parent should decide whether their four-year-old should start school when the law requires it. No one would argue with that. Likewise, the campaign makes no argument that there should be deferment for all four-year-olds as standard—far from it. Among campaigners there is consensus that the majority will continue to send their children when they are four, if they are eligible to do so; the issue is simply that the individual circumstances of each child should be considered.

As I said in the members' business debate that was held on the same subject in May, until I learned of the campaign I was not aware that school starting dates for children born between September and December could be deferred. The issue does not impact on me as both of my children were or will be over five when starting school. However, the campaign has served to

highlight the issue more broadly, to the extent that this is the second debate on the subject in the Parliament and it has been given time in several council chambers around the country, with varying degrees of success. I will come back to that.

As others have said, the difficulty arises not with the principle of the law, but in councils allowing for an additional year of funding. There are wide variations in how councils approach the issue. It has been brought to my attention and that of many other MSPs that families are often put through rigid, time-consuming and stressful processes that involve collating information from various professionals including nursery staff, speech and language therapists, social workers and many others. That often uses up valuable time and resources and creates expense, only for a panel to refuse the deferral request and an appeal process to start.

As I highlighted during the members' business debate—and as the minister has, I think, recognised—there is a real equality issue at the core of that process and the subsequent appeal process. More affluent families are able to put resources into challenging decisions and, ultimately, they more often get favourable outcomes.

I disagree with some of the members who have spoken today, because I know that the minister and the Government have reflected on the issues since the members' business debate, and I have welcomed the steps that the Scottish Government has taken. Just last week, in a response to me in the chamber, the minister reiterated her desire to refresh the statutory guidance and hold a public consultation. I welcome both Iain Gray's motion and the amendment. We can probably reach a broad consensus, and I would ask that party politics is not played out today.

North Lanarkshire Council and Falkirk Council are leading the way on the issue. In June, a motion that was brought forward in North Lanarkshire by SNP Councillor Allan Stubbs was unanimously agreed to by all parties, making it the policy in North Lanarkshire. I was encouraged by that and I thought that there was a possibility that we could encourage other councils to follow suit so, during the summer recess, and following another meeting with the Give Them Time campaign, I wrote to every council in Scotland. However, the responses were again variable. Most, if not all, agreed with the general principles, but few were keen to enact them in the way that North Lanarkshire and Falkirk have done. Some stressed that they granted all or most placements anyway, and others declared that there was no need for their policies to be altered until the Scottish Government legislated for it. A bit of what Oliver Mundell said about the relationship between

the Scottish Government and local government is reflected in some of the letters from the local authorities to the Scottish Government.

Today is another significant milestone on the journey to equity for all four-year olds, whether they start school in January or February, for which automatic funding is available, or earlier in the school term. I express my heartfelt thanks to the members of the Give Them Time campaign, whose tenacity and determination have brought us to this point.

15:12

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Iain Gray for bringing this debate to the chamber in Labour Party time. I also pay tribute to Fulton MacGregor, not just for his remarks in the debate this afternoon but for his members' business debate and all the work that he has undertaken with the Give Them Time campaign. He has done a wonderful job and we all owe him gratitude for that.

It is important to see this debate in the context of the best educational interests of young children as they approach primary school age. That is, of course, the context of GIRFEC, which has already been mentioned by a couple of speakers. There is also the context of extending parental choice.

The debate comes at a time when there are much wider debates about the best age to start schooling, which Ross Greer mentioned, and about the structure of primary 1 teaching and how the education that is provided to any child in that year articulates with early years provision and then education from P2 onwards. Specifically, though, the debate is about an inherent unfairness in the system, which Fulton MacGregor highlighted, and that is why we have, I think, all been persuaded that the two stated aims of the Give Them Time campaign are absolutely right.

The first aim is for the deferment of a four-year-old child's entry to school to be based on the decision of a parent or guardian. Although many parents choose to send their child to school while the child is still four, others choose to defer entry for all sorts of reasons, and they have a right in law to do so.

The campaigners' second aim is that there should be a level playing field. If parents make the decision to defer entry for their child because he or she has a January or February birthday, as Iain Gray described, they will automatically be entitled to an additional year of pre-school funding, but that is not the same for children who have birthdays later in the year. For such children, instead of there being an automatic entitlement, the decision about funding is at the discretion of the local authority, and it often involves those who

have very little knowledge of the child. It is on that point that the Give Them Time campaign is absolutely right to talk about the unfairness of the situation.

The situation is made worse by the fact that only a fifth of parents are fully aware of what the current law is, which means that four fifths are not as aware of their entitlement and might easily lose out because of that lack of awareness. That is surely a very worrying situation for us. Although it is clear that we should credit the Government with making some progress, there is still an awful lot more to be done to ensure that there is a proper level playing field, in order to weed out any automatic discrimination.

Indeed, given the feedback that the Give Them Time campaign has received, we know that it is the area of public information that perhaps needs the greatest attention. The campaign deserves a huge amount of credit for flagging up exactly where the information gaps lie, and it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we are speaking to the local authorities that we represent to bring about qualitative improvement. However, the fundamental point is that a legislative change is required, which is why we are very keen to support the Labour motion.

The issue is very much related to equality. We all know that better-off parents are often more articulate when it comes to knowing their rights and being prepared to tackle the authorities, and dealing with any appeals process if they feel that there is an injustice. Less well-off parents might struggle a bit more to know what their rights are and, therefore, their children are more at risk of losing out. I am sure that the Scottish Government would not countenance the continuation of a policy that engenders inequality.

The Scottish Government must surely work with local authorities to ensure that they offer parents who have chosen to defer entry fully funded nursery provision for the year of the deferment. The statistical analysis suggests that the costs should be relatively minimal—indeed, there are some who believe that there could be cost savings.

I will finish on a point of considerable principle. There is an inherent difficulty with the policy and it is on that basis that we need to make the legislative change. We should be true to the principle of GIRFEC: it is about the best interests of every child, which is exactly why the 1980 act says what it says. If it is good-quality education that we are all after—and I believe it is absolutely clear that we are—we need to make that change.

15:17

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I pay tribute to my friend and colleague Fulton MacGregor, who first brought the matter of the Give Them Time campaign to the chamber in May this year in a members' business debate. I also thank the members of the campaign for all their tenacious work on the issue, and Iain Gray, for lodging the motion for debate today.

As has been said, the Give Them Time campaign advocates for

“a more transparent, consistent and child-centred approach to”

nursery funding for deferred school starts across Scotland.

GIRFEC, which underpins our education system in Scotland, is rooted in a child-centred approach. Therefore, the aspirations of the Give Them Time campaign are, from the outset, in line with our current educational landscape. The Give Them Time campaign is focused on giving parents, or a legal guardian, the right to defer the start of their four-year-old's school education. As the Labour Party's motion states:

“under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents have the legal right to defer their child's entry to primary education if they are not five years old by the commencement of the school year”.

The year 1980 was a different time, or so I am told. In Scottish classrooms, the belt was still in use. I remember a former boss telling me how, as a young teacher, she was taught how to belt, with the headteacher lining up staff and encouraging them to practise on a desk. It is, therefore, important to reflect on how much has changed in Scotland since the 1980 act. The Give Them Time campaign is rooted in giving parents a greater say about their child's school readiness, and empowering parents is central to the Scottish Government's ambitions around closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Joanna Murphy, who is the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland, said:

“Parents should know their rights so they can decide what is best for their individual child. We believe the same opportunities for extra nursery funding should be available to every family across Scotland and not be dependent on postcode.”

As I said, empowering parents is essential to the Government's ambitions around the poverty-related attainment gap, and as Liz Smith mentioned, only 19 per cent of parents already know that they have a legal right to deferral for children with September to December birthdays, compared to the more than 80 per cent of parents who know about their right to defer entry if their child was born in January or February.

To deal with the knowledge gap that Liz Smith mentioned, local authorities need to communicate effectively with parents and carers about their rights, but there is perhaps a role for central Government to support that work at the national level. Labour's motion demands action from the Scottish Government and, as the minister has confirmed, that action will be taken. I am sure that Labour members will agree that it has to be done in a spirit of co-operation, and as the Government amendment makes clear,

"following proper assessment of the resource implications, and in partnership with parents and the sector."

Therein lies the rub because, as we have heard, although parents can legally choose to defer their child's school entry if they are not five at the start of the school year, they will not automatically qualify for funded early learning and childcare. That is a matter for each individual local authority, as it rightly should be if we are to adhere to the spirit of localism.

It was reported this morning that, thanks to the Scottish Government, more than 46,000 children across Scotland are already benefiting from extra hours of high-quality early learning and childcare. The main aims of the expansion are threefold: first, to improve children's outcomes and help close the poverty-related attainment gap; secondly, to increase family resilience through improved health and wellbeing of children and parents; and, thirdly, to support parents into work, study or training. Quality early learning and childcare is crucial for all children.

Ross Greer mentioned play-based learning. A couple of weeks ago, I was in Warout primary school in Glenrothes and met the primary 1 class, who were learning all about being in the police. On opening the door, I was surrounded by tiny four and five-year-olds. Lots of them wanted to hug me and some took me by the hand, which was a surreal experience for a former secondary teacher. The entire classroom is set up to enable play-based learning. The rows of desks that I would have learned at in 1989 are gone and the blackboard is a distant memory. The headteacher explained to me the importance of giving structured time to play and said that it is integral to the development of her pupils, many of whom might not get the opportunity to play at home.

Our education system has moved on from the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. We now have a national curriculum that puts the learner at its heart. In supporting the Give Them Time campaign today, we are acknowledging the importance of parents' knowledge of when their child is ready to begin school.

15:21

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

This is not the first time that the Parliament has debated the aims of the Give Them Time campaign, but it is the first time that we will have a vote on the proposal. I fully support the right of parents or carers to defer the start of school until their child is five and I will vote tonight for automatic entitlement to a nursery place for a deferred year.

In May, I took part in Fulton MacGregor's member's business debate on the issue. It is clear that there is support across the political parties for the campaign, which is about addressing an inconsistency in the law. That law gives parents a clear right to make a decision to defer but too often has negative consequences, as it does not always provide continuing education. The inconsistent approach across Scotland leaves too many families feeling disempowered, under investigation and disadvantaged. This afternoon, we can commit to ending that situation and supporting parents' decisions on when their child is emotionally, socially and intellectually ready for school.

On the one hand, the legislation is clear that a child does not have to start school until they are five but, on the other, children are expected to start school at age four if their birthday is between school commencement and December. Parents whose child is four in December or January have the same choice to defer the child's entry, but some parents who exercise the right to defer are not provided with an additional year's nursery place, because that policy is not consistently applied by local authorities.

I have an issue with some of the language and, in particular, the terms "defer" and "additional". The legislation says that a child does not need to register with a school prior to their fifth birthday, so why is not starting school at four seen as a delay when it is true to the legislation? We talk about an "additional" year at nursery, but the reality is that the children who start school at four typically have the least time at nursery. They start nursery in the January following their third birthday, so they have only one and a half years there rather than two. They are the youngest in the school year, but they have had the least pre-school education.

In the debate in May and today, we have talked a lot about awareness raising and parents' lack of knowledge of the right to defer. That is important, but it does not resolve the issue of children not being awarded a nursery place. A parent can decide that they want to defer and go through what some describe as a bureaucratic and difficult assessment, but then the education authority might decide that it will not support deferral. Although the child can legally still wait a year, the

education authority does not have to provide what it sees as an additional year's nursery provision.

We should not forget that a child who starts school at four will start high school at 11 and will be almost a whole year younger than others at a challenging time in their education, when they are entering a period of exams and increased stress and are going through adolescence. For many parents, the consideration of their child's high school starting age is as relevant as their child's primary school starting age.

In the previous debate, I asked the minister to consider whether discussions could take place with parents at an earlier stage. There could be an initial discussion about options at the point when a child turns three and a parent is offered a January nursery place. Perhaps a parent of a younger child could be offered the opportunity to delay the start of nursery until the August intake. The child would then receive two full years of nursery, as the majority of other children do, and start school at five. If the barrier is financial, that approach would result in no child receiving additional months in education.

However, the simpler solution—this is the one that I fully support—would be to change the necessary legislation so that there is an automatic right to a further year of nursery education every time that a parent chooses to defer the school start.

Our motion today calls for “the necessary resources” for the policy of automatic nursery provision. I welcome the Government's announcement that it intends to legislate, but if it actually supports the content of the motion, its amendment is unnecessary—unless it is an attempt to avoid or delay making that legislative change. When I wrote to the local authorities in my region, they did not say that the decisions that they are making about deferrals are governed by funding. The number of families involved is quite small and in many cases there is available space in a local nursery to enable nursery provision to continue. The Give Them Time campaign also makes the fair point that the savings made from all the children who have only one and a half years of nursery education could offset any additional costs.

We cannot support the growth of self-financing by parents—it must not be the only option open to parents who want their child to benefit from a continued nursery placement. I hope that members can agree to the calls of the Give Them Time campaign and support legislative change in this Parliament.

15:26

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Iain Gray for giving us the opportunity to debate this crucial issue in the chamber once again. Under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, as we have heard, parents have a legal right to defer the entry to school of a child who is not yet aged five on the school commencement date. For a variety of reasons, many parents choose to exercise that right, but it ultimately comes down to the feeling that their child is not yet ready to begin primary school. As I am sure that we can all appreciate, a child's development is never predictable.

Although many local authorities are sympathetic to parents who wish to defer their child's entry to school, I am sad to say that that is not always the case. Many councils do not offer another funded year to parents, forcing them to make a difficult choice—which is often limited by financial constraints—about their child's future.

The Government often says that it wants to get it right for every child. Parental choice is an important aspect of early years education, particularly given that the ultimate decision to defer entry remains in the hands of parents. Today, we have the opportunity to ensure that parental choice is respected.

Sometimes, parental choice seems to be viewed as an inconvenience. However, parents know what is best for their child and their decision should not be undermined by budget considerations, regional inconsistencies or inaccurate information on the right to defer. They certainly should not be forced to endure a harsh, inflexible and, frankly, flawed process, as Claire Baker has said, that involves professionals analysing, scrutinising, and, most important, making decisions for a child most of them will have never met.

As we have heard, the solution is simple. We have repeatedly called for an end to the unfair loophole of birthday discrimination. More has to be done to ensure that the information on deferral rights is accurate and accessible, and that local authority education professionals are fully aware of the legal deferral rights of children. That would ensure some level of fairness in an otherwise unfair system. The Government must work with local authorities to ensure that all councils offer the parents of children born between August and December the opportunity to defer their child's schooling and remain in fully funded nursery care.

Given that there has been no shortage of problems with the 1,140 hours scheme, we must ensure that all early learning providers are properly funded, so that children can receive the high level of care and education that we expect.

Too many of Scotland's early learning providers have had to shut their doors for good. Last week, a nursery provider told me that since last October, they have lost 50 employees to public providers. Those are 50 valued employees with developed relationships with children. So far, the minister's response has been to stick her head in the sand and stubbornly deny that there is an issue.

It is remarkable that we have a general policy that is universally accepted as the right direction by all members in this chamber but whose implementation methodology has been universally rejected by every member, bar the SNP MSPs. If the minister continues to ignore the partnership nursery pleas, the problem will soon become insurmountable—with all the devastating consequences for nursery provision that would follow.

The Scottish Government must respect the principles of parental choice, so that equity and fairness are at the heart of any legislation.

I want to close my speech by praising the Give Them Time campaign. As others have said, it has had remarkable success in raising awareness of this gap in parents' knowledge, and it deserves the utmost praise. Today's debate is about ensuring that we all work together in the best interests of children and that local authorities do the same. Surely getting it right for every child should mean getting it right for every child.

15:30

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I, too, commend my colleague Fulton McGregor. I attended but did not speak in the debate in May. That was when I first really understood the scope and scale of the issues that are being raised by the Give Them Time campaign, which I also commend for its persistence and tenacity in pursuing the issue and highlighting it to members.

Many members, including Brian Whittle and my colleague Jenny Gilruth, have mentioned the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. However, it is also worth considering that in July 2000, a deferrals working group was set up by the then Scottish Executive to report on education provision for children who were born between September and February. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland produced guidelines that were drawn from the working group.

Nicol Stephen, the Deputy Minister for Education at the time, announced his intention to extend entitlement to publicly funded pre-school education for the very youngest children—those with January and February birthdays. I am sure that, at that time, the Executive did not mean to

create any inconsistency or anomaly, down the line.

However, 2001 is a long time ago, and families are facing problems in deciding what is in the best interests of their child when they are making a decision about deferral. The guidance at that time said that the decision should be centred on the best interests of the individual child. I am sure that everyone in the chamber agrees that that remains the critical issue. The decision needs to be informed, and the information that is given to parents should be consistent in all areas.

I was appalled to read in the original briefing from Give Them Time of the differences and anomalies in terms of informing parents across local authorities. Rather than name and shame particular local authorities, I will commend Clackmannanshire Council, which the campaign has highlighted for giving clear and unambiguous advice to inform parents about that very important decision about their child's future.

Access to a paid place varies among local authorities. Parents who are unable to fund additional nursery costs as a result of a deferment are obviously at a disadvantage, because the right to deferral cannot be matched by their family finances. That cannot continue. I was therefore delighted to hear the minister accept the principles of the Labour motion and say that she will work constructively with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that changes can be implemented in a timely fashion, and with the co-operation of our partners.

As we have seen, the intention of the decisions that were made by the Liberal-Labour Administration in 2001 was always to do what is in the best interests of the child, but the very nature of introducing something can change decisions that are made. We have to be very careful that the right to entitlement, as well as the right to deferral, do not completely skew the numbers that come forward. We also need to understand any unintended consequences, so that when we implement rights it is done in a timely and organised manner that does not put additional pressures on local authorities, and is done in the best interests of our young people.

15:35

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Iain Gray for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I pay tribute to Fulton MacGregor. I also want to commend speeches by members from across the chamber—too many to mention individually in my short allocation of time.

Today's debate has focused on the Give Them Time campaign's ambition to end the unfairness that faces many families whose children are born

between mid-August and the end of December. As we have heard, parents have a legal right to defer those children's entry to P1 for a year if they decide that the child is not yet ready to begin school. However, as things currently stand, those children are not legally entitled to automatic funded childcare throughout that deferment year: rather, that funding decision is left to each local authority.

In contrast, children who are born in January and February are automatically entitled to funded childcare if their entry is deferred, which means that the picture for a child who is born in December might be totally different from that for a child who is born in January.

As a result of my curiosity about that varying picture, I recently submitted a freedom of information request to every local authority in Scotland. For the year 2018-19, only three of the 28 local authorities that responded said that they automatically grant that year of funded childcare to children who are born between mid-August and December. On top of that, just 15 said that they grant more than 90 per cent of requests for the funded year. The result of that variance in policies among councils is that many parents who wish to defer their child's entry to P1 are unable to do so. That evidence and the speeches that we have heard today confirm the inconsistency of the situation across Scotland.

Should it not, therefore, follow that the Scottish Government would make every effort to correct that? The Government's amendment today surprises me only a little, because in an Education and Skills Committee meeting in May, the Minister for Children and Young People told the committee that she was confident that local authorities

"make decisions on the basis of the best interests of the child and in conjunction with the parents."—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 22 May 2019; c 8.*]

In fact, the minister responded to several different questions from the committee with exactly the same response. However, if the minister had been confident that that was the case, there would not now be a commitment to introduce legislation to fix the anomaly.

As matters stand, two children who live in two different local authority areas who are at similar stages of development and might even share the same birthday could end up at opposite ends of the choice just because their local authorities have different policies on funding the extra year of childcare. It appears from the minister's words in committee that the Scottish Government's position was, until today, that every child who was denied that year of childcare received their best possible outcome.

Let us be clear: today's motion does not seek to restrict local democracy. That being the case, the Government's amendment is not pertinent. The motion is about correcting the anomaly that we all agree exists. There should be no anomaly; there should be a clear route from nursery to primary school, regardless of where the child lives. The decision on when a child goes to school should be based on the parents' opinion of whether their child is ready for that step.

Starting school is one of the most important days in a child's life—not to mention the parents' lives. It is essential that we get that day right for every child.

15:38

Maree Todd: I thank everyone who has spoken in this debate. I know that many members will be familiar with issues relating to the policy that we are discussing, and might be directly supporting families with related issues in their constituencies.

I have been listening to concerns from parents and practitioners. I commend the people who are involved in the Give Them Time campaign for their work on the issue. I have enjoyed working with them over the past year, and look forward to working with them over the next.

Parents are the primary educators of their children and they know their children best. The law already makes it clear that school deferral is a matter of parental choice. I agree that we can take further action to support parents and carers to make that decision based entirely on the wellbeing and needs of their child, supported by the professionals and practitioners who work closely with the child.

We will now have, with our local government partners, the discussions that are required in order properly to assess the resource implications and agree a reasonable implementation timetable. I will update Parliament on that, in due course.

Iain Gray: The motion is explicit that the legislation should change in this parliamentary session. Will the minister give that commitment?

Maree Todd: As I have said, I will talk to local government partners and will update Parliament on that in due course.

We all agree that parents and carers should be supported to make informed choices about school start—choices that are focused entirely on the needs and wellbeing of the individual child. We will continue to work with parents, carers, practitioners and their representatives across the ELC and school sectors to ensure that parents and carers have access to information and resources to help them to make the right choices for their families.

Oliver Mundell: If the minister is not able to commit to legislation in this parliamentary session, will she commit today to putting interim arrangements in place to make sure that no more children are affected by the issue in the next school year?

Maree Todd: I believe that we have made great progress over the past year. I am more than comfortable to work with local authority partners, parents and educators to make progress.

It is particularly important that parents and carers understand the support that children will receive at school. That is all the more important for children with additional support needs. The increase in the statutory entitlement to 1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare will further help to support a child's journey through the early phase of curriculum for excellence and beyond. We are already hearing fantastic stories from families about the positive impact of the extra hours for their child's development and their family's wellbeing. Today, we have published our latest progress report, which shows that more than 46,000 children in Scotland are already benefiting from extra hours, almost a year ahead of the full roll-out of 1,140 hours.

A number of colleagues have referenced play-based learning, which educators are already utilising. I have visited lots of schools in which I was not able to tell the difference between a nursery class and a primary 1 class. Ultimately, we should trust our educators to deliver education in the way that best suits individual learners. As I have said, that is a real strength of our system in Scotland.

I reiterate that it is right for us to recognise parents' views, as the primary educators of their child, and it is also right that we support them and give them the information that they need to make informed choices that have the wellbeing of the child at their centre. I record my thanks to the Give Them Time campaign group and to Fulton MacGregor MSP for their incredible commitment to ensuring that Scotland's children get the very best start in life.

15:43

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be closing today's debate for Scottish Labour on a crucial motion that could help to tackle the attainment gap in education, tackle poverty and improve the rights of children and families.

The debate has been constructive and mostly consensual, and has shown clear understanding of the benefits of the Give Them Time campaign. In the short time that I have available, it would be difficult for me to reflect on all of the many

contributions that have been made, but I welcome and support remarks that were made by Iain Gray, Oliver Mundell, Daniel Johnson, Fulton MacGregor, Liz Smith, Claire Baker and Jenny Gilruth.

Any parent who uses their legal right to defer their child's entry to school should do so with the knowledge that their child will be given the same rights as other children, regardless of their age or where they live. I wholly support the aims of the Give Them Time campaign, and pay tribute to those who have worked hard to promote the issue.

Parents have led the campaign with the best interests of their children at the core of their ambition. That is why the Scottish Government must listen and must act on the wishes of MSPs who vote in favour of our motion today and the parents on whose behalf we speak.

It is clear that the Scottish Government wants to be ambitious with early learning and childcare—that has been demonstrated with the expansion of childcare. Why does it not further demonstrate that ambition and do what is right for children who were born between August and December?

Placing the burden on local government alone will not end the inequity. That is why we cannot support the Government's amendment. If it were passed, it would allow the Government to not act and instead simply to place the responsibility on local government. Our motion addresses funding and legislation at national level. Once again, the Government is avoiding the issue with an unnecessary amendment.

I welcome the Government's commitment to making progress, but it has been asked twice in interventions for a timetable for implementation. It is simply not good enough to say that the Government will consult and take the matter forward.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Will Mary Fee reflect on the fact that the purpose of the Government's amendment is to enable us to provide for Parliament exactly the detail that she has just said has not been provided in this debate?

Mary Fee: No. The motion contains an explicit timetable. That cannot be contradicted.

Local government cannot be left to fix the situation alone. Some 138 requests for an additional year of funded nursery provision have been denied, out of a total of 1,188. That represents more than one in 10 of those families having to make the difficult choice either to send their child to primary school, even though the child might not be ready, or to pay for a service which for other children is funded.

Children who were born between September and December and who attend school before their fifth birthday receive a total of 18 months' entitlement, which is six months less than those who were born between March and August get. That has been labelled "birthday discrimination". If we add that to the clear postcode lottery that operates across local authorities, it is evident that hundreds of children are being let down each year.

Does the minister agree that, although those are small numbers, many more children are missing out on funding for an additional year because of lack of information? Does she wish to see that so-called discrimination end?

Parents have provided quotations to the Give Them Time campaign. If the Government will not listen to Opposition MSPs, I ask it to consider the reality that many parents face. Parents have said:

"I was continuously told I was putting my child at a disadvantage. That we would not get funding. That it was not in my child's best interest",

and that

"The nursery staff appear to be actively encouraged by the local authority to discourage parents from the deferral option."

Another said:

"My frustrations relate to being told that my view was not required as part of the deferral process, being told I may require legal representation, being told by someone that I have never met what my son's strengths are and why he should go to school when my views were the complete opposite. My list could go on and on! No communication for 4 months!"

Those are the frustrated words of parents. They highlight a lack of transparency and consistency, and a failure to be child centred.

By voting for the motion, Parliament can collectively play our part in helping to tackle the attainment gap, especially for children from the poorest backgrounds who could benefit more from an additional year of nursery before going to school.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Give Them Time campaign.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It is my understanding that our standing orders and our code of conduct include being respectful to one another in the chamber. Does that apply to Scottish Government front-bench members, who chatted all the way through Mary Fee's closing speech?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I hear what Ms Smith said. She knows that that is for me to decide. It is not unusual for members on all the front benches to chatter and mutter away, and to have interchanges that do not go through the

chair. I am quite happy to remind every member that they should respect their fellow MSPs.

ScotRail Franchise

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-19190, in the name of Colin Smyth, on “Don’t Extend the ScotRail Franchise”.

15:50

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): It is decision time for the Scottish Government. It is time for the Government to decide whether to reward failure by extending the current Abellio ScotRail franchise until 2025, or whether to put passengers and rail workers first for once by serving notice that it will end the failing franchise at the first expiry date, in March 2022.

Parliament previously discussed the ScotRail franchise in a Scottish Labour debate, because the Scottish National Party does not have the guts to hold a debate in Government time to defend its record. In Labour’s debate, I highlighted the fact that, on every single measure of performance—including punctuality, the number of cancellations and capacity—it was a case of fail, fail, fail, despite the SNP Government having gone to every length to bail out Abellio through backroom deals to move targets and give Abellio a licence to fail.

Little did we know that that was just the start. Since that debate, the low performance record has been broken over and over again—so much so that Abellio has now breached the franchise not once, not twice but three times. The franchise has been breached on punctuality, on the number of cancellations and, unsurprisingly, on passenger satisfaction. Abellio does not even expect to hit the passenger satisfaction target for another two years, and it expects to do so then only because Transport Scotland has lowered the target. Missing the passenger satisfaction target once is a breach of the franchise. Missing it for two consecutive years is an event of default and is supposed to be ground for Abellio to be stripped of the franchise altogether. However, had Transport Scotland not lowered the target, ScotRail would be on track to miss its passenger satisfaction target a shocking five years in a row.

The record on punctuality is equally abysmal. Abellio has failed to hit its target since 2015. I give the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity this challenge: will he stand up and tell the chamber and—more important—Scotland’s hard-pressed rail passengers whether he believes that Abellio ScotRail will ever meet its punctuality target and, if so, when? I see that he is refusing to do so because, frankly, no one seriously believes that Abellio will hit the target in the lifetime of the franchise. What is the point of

performance targets and a franchise agreement if the Government and the transport secretary are not prepared to enforce them?

The truth is that, despite two improvement plans and a remedial plan to improve punctuality, performance has got worse, not better, since the franchise began. Since the SNP handed Abellio the franchise in what it described as a “world-leading” deal, a shocking 75,000 trains have been cancelled—that is an average of 47 each and every day. In 2018-19, the number of cancellations increased by more than 60 per cent to an average of 74 a day.

Despite the arrival of the long-awaited new rolling stock, ScotRail’s performance under the service quality incentive regime is not much better. The scheme monitors the state of trains and stations across a range of measures including cleanliness, safety, accessibility and staffing. Abellio consistently misses two thirds of the targets that are set under SQUIRE, and it has not hit more than half since 2016, having racked up £13 million in fines.

To make matters worse, rail fares have rocketed under the Government. The price of season tickets has increased by an eye-watering 54 per cent since the SNP came to power, with the Government set to impose another rail fare hike in January. No wonder rail passenger figures failed to increase last year for the first time in decades.

The Parliament has the opportunity to deliver change. Agreement to Labour’s motion would mean that the Government would need to serve notice on Abellio and bring the failing franchise to an end in 2022, instead of extending it to 2025. Extending the franchise would reward failure and send a signal to private rail operators that, no matter how poor their performance, they will never have to deliver on their franchise targets. Ending the franchise in 2022, however, would give the Government two years to put in place a public sector operator bid.

I hope that, in that time, we will see a change of United Kingdom Government. A Labour Government would end the wasteful and inefficient franchising system altogether, repealing the Tories’ Railways Act 1993 so that we can have proper public ownership of our railways. We should bring train and track together under a single publicly owned company, with all decisions on Scottish routes being made here in Scotland.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Could the member explain how there can be one Great Britain-wide company that would be controlled in Scotland?

Colin Smyth: Mr Mason clearly does not understand how rail services actually work. The services that are delivered on the ScotRail

network would continue to be devolved to this Parliament. The decisions would be made by this Parliament on what services the company provides here in Scotland. That is how things work at the moment. Obviously Mr Mason has not noticed that rail services actually cross borders and do not stop at Gretna. That is why we believe in public ownership across the whole of the UK, not a continuation of private firms in England.

Even members who do not support public ownership must see that the current franchise is just not working. When it comes to the vote later today, members will have a clear choice between putting passengers first and continuing to put the profits of the privatised utilities first by allowing this failed franchise to continue.

My motion makes clear whose side Labour is on. We are on the side of the staff and their trade unions: the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, ASLEF; the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the RMT; and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, the TSSA. They all back Labour's motion today because they have had enough of Abellio's mismanagement and the Government's inaction. We are on the side of Scotland's hard-pressed commuters as they face the misery of delays, cancellations, overcrowding and fare hikes. Labour is on the side of passengers, not the private profiteers fleecing those passengers.

I call on Parliament to back the motion when we come to vote.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the Scottish Government should not extend the current ScotRail franchise beyond its first expiry date in 2022.

15:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Rail plays an essential role in the daily fabric of Scottish life, connecting communities, enabling opportunities and supporting economic prosperity.

The Government has invested a record £8 billion to improve our railways, with more services and more trains than ever before. Alongside that investment, we have set high performance standards for the rail industry—in fact, they are the highest that have been set for any franchise in the UK.

However, I recognise that elements of ScotRail's operations have not performed to the levels that are specified and required by the Government and the franchise. That is why we have taken robust action through the contractual measures that are available to us in the ScotRail

franchise to demand that improvements are delivered via the remedial plans. ScotRail is in no doubt that performance must improve in line with the forecasts that are contained in the performance remedial plans. That is a necessary step towards meeting the Government's challenging but achievable public performance measure target of 92.5 per cent, which was set for both ScotRail and Network Rail in Scotland.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I have a very particular question to ask the cabinet secretary. Is the cabinet secretary 100 per cent confident that Abellio will meet its commitment to pay staff salaries every month until the scheduled end of its contract?

Michael Matheson: As part of the franchise, the company must be financially able to achieve that; otherwise, it will be in breach of the whole contract.

It would be wrong for us to ignore some of the wider systemic problems in our rail system. The existing franchise system is costly and complex. In my view, as I have stated before, it is no longer fit for purpose. The Rail Delivery Group has called for change to the system. Keith Williams, who is leading the current review of UK railways, has said:

“franchising cannot continue the way it is today.”

Alongside that, we have Network Rail managing our rail infrastructure and, despite receiving the majority of its funding for its operations in Scotland from the Scottish Government, it is accountable to UK ministers. That leaves us with a rail industry in Scotland that is full of dedicated people who are trying to do the right thing but who are operating in an industry that is unnecessarily complicated in its structure and which does not serve the travelling public.

The Williams review has the potential to fundamentally change our rail system for the better, and any approach that we take forward here in Scotland needs to take account of the potential changes that the review could introduce. I believe that a better system can be achieved through a public sector-controlled railway network in Scotland, ending the ritual of franchising and the uncertainty that is created for staff every time a franchise is challenged or has to be renewed. Operating in the public sector would bring a consistency of approach and ensure that rail infrastructure is aligned with passenger services. Under the current UK legislation, we have the power only to procure a franchise for the running of rail services in Scotland. Although we have secured the ability for a public sector body to compete for a franchise, it does not change the broken franchise system and it still leaves us with the complicated rail system that we currently have.

Let me be clear: the decision on the future of the ScotRail franchise will be based on a rigorous, detailed evaluation of the right thing to do for passengers, communities and the taxpayer. Simply ending the contract today would not wave a magic wand to fix the challenges that we have in our rail network. Rushing into a decision to end a franchise early, without correct due diligence, would not be in the interests of passengers or the Scottish taxpayer.

The Williams review has the potential to reform the structures of Scotland's railways in a positive way, ensuring that passengers and communities are at its heart. I believe that that can be delivered through a public sector railway. I call on every member—including the leader of the Labour Party, who says that he wants a public sector railway service in Scotland—to vote for the Government amendment today to allow us to ensure that we can deliver that service for the travelling public. I ask the Labour leader to stand up and show some leadership—I know that that is something that he often struggles with.

I move amendment S5M-19190.2, to leave out from “believes” to end and insert:

“notes that the Scottish Government has already started the careful and necessary assessment specified in the franchise contract to determine the ScotRail contract end date; welcomes the opportunity offered by the Williams Rail Review, which was established by the UK Government, to create a sensible rail industry structure for Scotland; notes that the Scottish Government does not consider rail franchising fit for purpose, as the Review has already concluded, and calls on the Parliament to support the overdue and necessary change to full Scottish public sector control of the structure, governance and operation of the Scottish railway system.”

16:01

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The debate is already getting lively—I am quite enjoying it. I will get straight to the point, as I have only a few minutes. The Conservatives will not be supporting Labour's motion today, and I will explain why—if Labour members will chirp down for just a second and listen, please.

No member in the chamber can say that the current franchise is working perfectly for everyone in every part of Scotland, nor do I think that there is any long-term strategy for our country's railways. However, let us look objectively at why pulling the rug from under the feet of the current operator would do more harm than good. First, we must consider the message that it would send. It would send the message that, if a company signs up to and invests billions of pounds in a franchise, the political wind can change and the contract can be terminated early. Anybody who knows anything about how rail franchises work knows that it is in

the last crucial few years when you start to see the fruit of your investment.

Members should understand that this debate is not about early termination. As we have heard, the mask has dropped today. The debate is about calling for nationalisation, but the motion pretends that it is not. We know that it is about nationalisation because that is the media headline that Labour has been putting out, and because there are unions demonstrating outside the Parliament. I understand and respect that Labour want to make a political point, but nationalisation is an unfunded ideology that members on the Conservative side of the chamber are not willing to sign up to.

Let us look at what Labour is asking for. We must ensure that our terminology is accurate. The debate is not about unduly extending a franchise, nor is it about rewarding poor performance. Labour is calling for early termination of a 10-year agreement. Under the existing franchise, the taxpayer is paying 20 per cent less than under the previous franchise, but there has been a 30 per cent increase in the number of carriages, a 10 per cent increase in the number of weekday services and a 13 per cent increase in the number of railway jobs in Scotland. I would have thought that Labour members would have been grateful for that.

I am not saying that the current franchise is perfect—we would be the first to stand up and hold Michael Matheson to account when it fails. I am simply saying that we should not spend the next two years wasting time and money—up to £10 million—on a public sector bid when we should be focusing on delivering on the infrastructure that we have. ScotRail is currently under two very serious remedial notices; those are legal contractual agreements between the Government and the operator. The deadline for meeting those requirements comes after the date by which the early termination decision has to be made. To call for it now and pre-empt future performance would be short-sighted. Let us give ScotRail a go to succeed.

Some members will know—others might not—that one of the largest ever reviews of rail infrastructure in this country is going on right now: the Williams review. If it is published any time soon, we will find out whether the current franchise model will exist in the rail landscape of the future. The Scottish Government's amendment alludes to that and contains sensible language in that regard.

However, the Scottish Government also contractually reserves the right to issue a default notice if it deems it appropriate. [*Interruption.*] Will Labour members stop arguing among themselves and listen? Let us be clear that an immediate termination would require the Government to step

in as the operator of last resort, but the Government is not ready to do that, in my view.

Labour wants to strip ScotRail of the franchise for no other reason than to grab a headline, but that is all about nationalisation and nothing to do with delivering Scotland's railway. We have not heard a single word in the debate, and nor will we, about how much it would cost to nationalise our railway.

We will hold Abellio and the SNP to account, but we will do that in a measured and sensible way. I want to hear the Government's vision—a vision that meets its objectives on delivering a railway that is fit for purpose. That is the challenge that we should be discussing today. I hope that the Government will rise to that challenge.

I move amendment S5M-19190.1, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"notes that the Scottish Government has issued two remedial notices to ScotRail with a delivery deadline of 30 May 2020; understands that a no-rebasing notice to early terminate the franchise would have to be issued by the end of the calendar year; believes that the operator should be given the contractual ability to fulfil its obligations in the remedial plan; notes that the Williams Rail Review is due to report by the end of 2019; recognises that the Scottish Government reserves the right to issue a default notice and termination of the franchise at any point, and calls on the Scottish Government to propose a long-term, sustainable vision for the future of Scotland's railways that looks beyond 2025."

16:06

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I have a number of declarations to make. I am a member of the RMT parliamentary group, a vice-president of the Friends of the Far North Line and a regular rail user; I want Scotland's railway to be a success; and I do not support the franchising system—as we know from the east coast railway, significant profits of £800 million have gone to the UK Exchequer.

The Scottish Greens will support the Labour motion at decision time, and we support rail unions.

As a regular rail user, I have experienced the frustrations that others have experienced, but I want to introduce some balance to the debate. As elected politicians, our job is to scrutinise, but also to promote, and I would not want any of what is said today to be viewed as discourteous or as not recognising the valuable contribution of rail staff at all levels.

In the past, much of the debate has been fairly ill informed. I was part of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee delegation that visited the Network Rail and ScotRail control centre in Glasgow recently, where we sat in a room with the rail network displayed on a screen behind us. It

was significant to see and have explained to us the implications of three delays and the effects that they had. One was on the east coast—with an impact on the Fife circle line in particular, given its different train speeds; another was a delayed departure from Edinburgh; and another was in the west. The significant factor, which my REC Committee colleagues will confirm, is that each of the trains involved was a cross-border train rather than a ScotRail train. However, ScotRail passengers will have felt the effects regardless.

Things such as the landslide on the west Highland line—great work has gone on there—are about monitoring. If we remove the franchise, those things will not change.

We have a briefing from Abellio—Mr Greene loyally read it out, so I will not repeat it—that talks about meeting the demand for better public transport. I do not know whether Abellio has met that demand, but the public are not interested in performance figures; they want to know that their train will turn up on time and that it will be clean.

Abellio talks about reducing carbon at the same time as passenger numbers have doubled, but 40-year-old diesel trains that deposit human excrement on the track do not set a good example.

Abellio also talks about the biggest investment since the Victorian era, but the journey times between Inverness and the central belt are the same as they were during the Victorian era.

Further, I am told that Abellio has had 42 directors and seven human resources directors and that it requires staff to work on their rest days.

The Scottish Government's amendment says:

"the Scottish Government has already started the careful and necessary assessment specified in the franchise contract to determine the ScotRail contract end date".

As a member of the public sector bidder stakeholder reference group—perhaps the cabinet secretary remembers it—I might have known that already. However, I did not know that, because the group has not met this year and we have not had an update. Where are we with CalMac Ferries, for instance?

Michael Matheson: As I made clear, that group will meet again when we know the outcome of the Williams review and its implications for future structures. John Finnie should recognise that the remit of the group is not to evaluate the franchise, but to look at a public sector bid for a franchise.

John Finnie: I had hoped to get an update on where we are with CalMac Ferries. The group was launched with great gusto by the cabinet secretary's predecessor, Humza Yousaf. The last meeting was a damp squib—I said that to the

cabinet secretary afterwards. I get the impression that, at any time of crisis, the Scottish Government wheels out questions about public ownership and nationalisation that get kicked into the long grass. The Williams review is not long grass; it is a long and convenient siding.

My colleague Colin Smyth talked about timing. Timing is crucial, and I fear that the windows of opportunity will be lost.

The Government's amendment calls on the Parliament to

"support the overdue and necessary change".

Of course, the Scottish Greens support the full devolution of Network Rail, but that is for another day. This is about timing in relation to the franchise and responding to a specific and not unreasonable request from the Labour Party. It is about whose interests are being served.

Rather than being the operator of last resort, for vital public services, the Government should be the operator of first and only resort.

16:10

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Since Abellio started running our trains, cancellations have increased year by year, skip-stopping has become part of everyday expectations, the punctuality of our trains has declined and—according to the consumer magazine *Which?*—passenger complaints have risen to record levels.

Under the SQUIRE regime, which is designed to fine the company for poor standards of service at our stations and on our trains, fines doled out to Abellio have averaged at more than £1 million for each of the last nine quarters.

Earlier this year, I lodged a parliamentary question to ask how much was paid out to complaining passengers. The cabinet secretary confirmed that, in the last financial year, Abellio paid £1,119,818 in compensation to passengers, up from £647,670 the year before.

In March this year, at one of his regular appearances at the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, Alex Hynes, the managing director of Abellio, concentrated on the positive aspects of Abellio. Jamie Greene mentioned some of them—and, yes, there are some. Abellio has increased the number of train services and the number of seats available on its journeys, and—this is perhaps more important to the Scottish Government—it has received less of a subsidy than the previous operator. That last point might explain why the Scottish Government seems so reluctant to take Abellio properly to task for its poor performance.

Under two transport secretaries, we have had three improvement or remedial plans for Abellio. They contained 249 action points and 20 improvement measures; now, we have the current remedial plan, which has nine initiatives.

Abellio's performance last year was the worst on our railways in 10 years; passenger compensation rose to £1.1 million; and Alex Hynes admitted in the committee that his company will not hit the targets that he agreed to by the end of the current franchise. Instead of penalising Abellio for some of the worst performances on record, why did the Scottish Government waive performance penalties and make advance payments of more than £20 million to the company?

Rather than endless initiatives and little improvement, the public want a railway that delivers the agreed level of service.

Jamie Greene: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: Unfortunately, I do not have time.

The Liberal Democrats cannot support the Government's amendment, because it seems, yet again, to say what the Government says about everything: "If only we had all the powers delivered to us, we would do so much better." We do not believe that and nor should anyone else. For the cabinet secretary to say that he will not rush into making decisions makes me almost speechless.

I turn to Jamie Greene's disappointing Conservative amendment. Jamie Greene and I sit on the same committee but members would not think it. Month after month, the committee has heard about Abellio's repeated failings and excuses. I cannot believe that the Conservatives want to let Abellio off the hook. In their amendment, they forget that Abellio is on not its second remedial plan but its third, and it still cannot reach its agreed targets.

The Conservatives say that we need to give Abellio another chance, but that is pathetic. They will not be thanked by long-suffering rail passengers for their inaction on the matter. We believe that the Labour motion needs to be supported, which is what we will do. If it is not agreed to, we will be letting down long-suffering passengers throughout Scotland. We believe that, as the motion says, the franchise given to Abellio should not be extended

"beyond its first expiry date in 2022."

If that is to happen, the Scottish Government needs to give Abellio due notice to that effect by April next year. The cabinet secretary needs to warn Abellio that, considering that its managing director said that the company will not reach the required performance targets during the lifetime of

the franchise, it should expect such a notice to be given.

I am disappointed in the approach taken by Jamie Greene on behalf of the Conservative Party. I do not mean to be disrespectful to him, but it is a naive approach. We should all take the opportunity tonight to support the Labour Party's motion.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We now move to the open part of the debate.

16:15

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I point out to the chamber that I have a registered interest as a member of Unite the union and that I am contributing to the debate as the convener of the RMT parliamentary group. I welcome members of the RMT to the gallery.

I am also contributing to the debate because, along with many other MSPs and parliamentary staff, I want to be able to rely on our rail services. We all know that the travelling public are scunnered with our train services and the ever-increasing and more unaffordable costs. They cannot rely on trains to come on time, if at all; they do not know when they might see their stop rushing by as the train skips past it; and when they do manage to get on a train they can be jammed in like sardines.

The situation during the Edinburgh festival was simply shocking; not only were passengers uncomfortable, but the situation was dangerous. I was in Bangladesh last year and saw packed trains with passengers riding on top, which is a terrifying sight in a developing country. However, it was also terrifying to hear the first-hand accounts of friends and constituents of the crush to get on the trains during the weekend of Saturday 24 August. Frankly, it is a miracle that no one was seriously injured. That highlights the need for guards on our trains and staff on the platforms. Driver-only operated trains can become not only uncomfortable but dangerously overcrowded.

I emphasise that ScotRail's failings are not the fault of its hard-working staff, whether they are administrative staff, drivers, ticket sellers, ticket collectors or guards. They, too, are suffering from Abellio's failure, and they know it. No amount of spin by Abellio, telling its staff today that this debate is negative, changes that fact.

The RMT has advised ScotRail that it is in dispute over a wide range of issues, including the closure of ticket-sale windows in many travel centres, concerns raised by conductors about a reduction in safety briefings and ticket examiners being issued with machines that are not fit for purpose, causing work-related stress. At the same time, the highest-paid company director received

an increase of £20,000, bringing their total salary to £305,000.

There is concern among Abellio's staff that the company is running itself into the ground. The last available figures show that the company has been posting a loss while receiving increased grant subsidy from Transport Scotland. However, it makes sure that the Dutch state railway company is paid the interest that it is owed. In Scotland, our travelling public suffer and our taxpayers pay out while the Dutch state railway gains.

When will this farce finish? That is entirely up to the SNP Government. It could finish in 2022 with the break clause, which is in the contract for precisely this reason: when an operator is not performing, it is a chance to get rid of it and find a better option. We know that Abellio is not performing, because the First Minister said earlier this year that it is in the "last chance saloon".

The question then arises as to which operator should replace Abellio. The Scottish Government used to be committed to a public sector bid but, as we have heard, the public sector bidder stakeholder reference group, which includes the trade unions, has not met at all this year. It should be meeting; it met under the previous cabinet secretary, and there should be no excuses.

Let us also look at the timescale for giving notice to end the franchise. Humza Yousaf said that the expiry date would be 30 September this year, but in July Michael Matheson told us that it would be in March 2020. However, that begs the question why the remedial period should end in May 2020, which makes no sense at all—unless the Scottish Government is simply going to allow the failing Abellio franchise to continue and the travelling public to continue to suffer from overcrowded trains and late, cancelled and costly services. Earlier this month, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity said that on-going plans were in place for the provision of an operator of last resort. I ask him to say what those plans are and when they will be actioned.

Thankfully, our citizens do not have to travel on top of trains, but in a rich, developed country such as Scotland surely train travel should be cost effective, reliable and safe. The Scottish Government should remove Abellio, put people before profit and bring our rail services back into public ownership. I urge members to support Labour's motion and reject the Scottish Government's spin.

16:20

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate on rail. As members will know, I am enthusiastic about train

travel and, with Pauline McNeill, convene the cross-party group on rail.

We have a very good rail system in Scotland, but there is always room for improvement. In the past eight or nine days, I have used the railway nine times and have spent about 12 hours on ScotRail trains. That has included travelling here on the Airdrie to Bathgate line, going to watch my favourite football team play at Dumbarton—where, happily, it beat Jackie Baillie's favourite team—and, on Monday's Glasgow holiday, having a day out to Fort William. All nine trains ran as close to time as made no difference.

In particular, we should be really proud of the west Highland line, where the quality of trains is so much better than it used to be—complete with wi-fi and charging points, and with tea, coffee and beer all on sale. Also, as a member for Glasgow, I have to say that the city has an excellent rail system.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: No, thank you.

In recent years, I have visited a number of European cities, where I have always used the local trains and metro networks. I would argue that Glasgow has a much better system than those in Rome, Lisbon, St Petersburg or Marseille, to mention just a few.

That is not to say that ScotRail has not had problems. However, I would argue that some of those are teething problems, including those with the electrification and provision of new rolling stock on the Glasgow to Edinburgh lines via Falkirk and via Shotts and on the Dunblane line, and with the improvements to intercity services with the provision of upgraded rolling stock.

Recently, Queen Street station's tunnel has been closed and the station itself is being rebuilt, with two platforms currently being extended and so out of action. The fact that most trains have continued running during this period is, I think, highly commendable, and the staff, who often have to work at night to minimise disruption, deserve our gratitude.

One of Labour's big criticisms has been that 47 trains per day have been cancelled. That sounds like a lot, but we should remember that ScotRail runs 2,400 trains per day, so barely 2 per cent of trains have not run, while 98 per cent have.

I accept that the Scottish National Party sits somewhere in the middle, as we support a mixed economy—in contrast with the somewhat extreme positions of the Conservatives, who would prefer to privatise almost everything, and Labour members, who would nationalise every loss-making business in the land. I am sympathetic to Scotland having a publicly owned and operated

railway but, frankly, it would still face problems and challenges. I remember the publicly owned British Rail, which was not a total success. It still needed a lot of public money; some felt that it was run not for the benefit of passengers but more for that of railway staff themselves; and, of course, the poor-quality food on BR was a standing joke.

We need to achieve a balance whereby the railway is first a public service, secondly a good employer and thirdly efficient and not wasting public money. We should not forget the evidence from the publicly owned Lothian Buses that we heard at the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. Being publicly owned is not a factor in how it successfully operates its well-regarded bus service.

John Finnie: Does John Mason recognise that that publicly operated bus service turned around a failing commercial operation in East Lothian?

John Mason: Yes, I am happy to recognise that.

We must also consider cost. We currently subsidise the railway to the tune of some two thirds, so if I buy a ticket for £20, the actual cost is more like £60. As far as I can see, Abellio is not making a profit out of ScotRail, so if we were to bring it into public ownership, we might need to increase the subsidy just to maintain the present service. Should we be increasing spending on rail? The Greens have a clear policy of building fewer roads and investing more in public transport and active travel, which is a credible position. What is Labour's position, though? Would it cut expenditure on roads or on health and education in order to put more funding into trains?

There have also been suggestions from the RMT and others that train fares are too high and there should be no more increases. However, if there are no fare increases, presumably there can be no pay increase for the staff. Surely that is not acceptable.

Let us aim to improve our railways, but let us also be proud of the system that we have and grateful to those who make it work.

16:25

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Like a stopped clock, even Colin Smyth is right occasionally, and his highlighting of the huge frustration that commuters, tourists and businesses feel when another train is cancelled, a train is delayed because it is following a stopping service through Fife or a train's air conditioning has decided to pack in, is absolutely justified. Serious problems require serious solutions. However, like a broken record, the member comes

back to the chamber six months after the previous time, offering no practical solutions whatsoever.

Let us look at the delays since 2015, which Colin Smyth referenced. Statistically, more than half of them were the responsibility of Network Rail, which is, incidentally, a publicly owned company. They were to do with the track, the signalling and the infrastructure. Over the past year, just over 40 per cent of cancellations were caused by track or signalling issues. Changing the franchisee would fail to address that. A further 10 per cent of delays or cancellations in Scotland were caused by non-ScotRail operators. Again, changing the franchisee would fail to address that.

Then there is the weather. If I recall correctly, an underlying cause of two thirds of delays in 2018 was storm Ali, and this summer, more than 60 per cent of average August rainfall fell in three hours, significantly impacting on the west Highland line, which John Mason eulogised, and the main Edinburgh to Glasgow line at Winchburgh. Changing the franchisee would fail to address that.

According to the latest performance statistics, what were the incidents that caused the most disruption to services last month? They were a passenger pulling the emergency alarm on a service leaving Glasgow central, an incident on the Forth rail bridge and an incident that required the emergency services at Falkirk Grahamston. Changing the franchisee would fail to address such incidents.

Of course, trains sometimes break down, but we must remember that the franchisee does not own the stock. It is all leased from the rolling stock leasing companies Porterbrook, Angel Trains or Eversholt, with the exception of the class 385s, which are owned by Caledonian Rail Leasing. Any new franchisee would be working with the same kit.

Admittedly, the current franchisee does its own maintenance on its 225 diesel multiple units and electric multiple units, but the same people would do the maintenance before and after any retendering. I am certain that Labour does not question the professionalism or dedication of those who do a very difficult job on increasingly aged stock. I certainly do not.

What of that stock? The current franchisee has tried to upgrade it. Twenty six refurbished high-speed trains were ordered from Angel Trains, but the ROSCO subcontracted the refurbishment to Wabtec, which failed to deliver on the contract, leading to the unrefurbished sets that John Finnie mentioned. Changing the franchisee would fail to address that.

Would changing the franchisee solve the overcrowding that Elaine Smith mentioned? It would not. To do that, we need track capacity and

more trains to be available. As Labour knows well from my speech in February, in which I also showed why its plans could not reduce ticket prices, the infrastructure is pretty much at capacity. We would not change that with a knee-jerk expulsion of a franchisee.

I accept that our railway is not up to scratch, and I will not stand here and cheerlead for any of the agents that I have mentioned—especially a Government that refuses to lead or invest outside the central belt.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: I will not, as I am in my last 30 seconds.

Instead of wasting time debating break clauses and models of franchise ownership, let us focus on the positive interventions and solutions that would make a difference to Scotland's railway. The motion is short-sighted and naive and it betrays a fundamental ignorance about Scotland's railways, much like Labour's transport policy in general.

16:29

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The current rail service delivery model is flawed, like a great many matters that are still under Westminster control. As we have heard, Network Rail is responsible for a majority of rail delays, yet it is unaccountable to the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Government has limited scope in relation to its operations. Now we hear that Colin Smyth and the Labour Party want to replicate that dysfunctional arrangement with Network Rail and apply it to the ScotRail franchise.

Having a Great Britain-wide nationalised company would mean that the Parliament would have no control over rail services and investment in Scotland. I support public ownership but not if it is centralised and regulated from London, which Labour claims that it wants. Labour members should speak to people in the industry who remember British Rail, because those people have told me that, back then, Scotland was often starved of investment and palmed off with second-hand rolling stock.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that the private franchise system that was put in place by Mrs Thatcher, and retained for many years by the Labour Governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, was certainly not satisfactory. However, having some control here in Scotland has been beneficial—the number of staff has grown from 4,779 to 5,272 and we have new services and new stations. Even under Abellio, there has been a 115,000 increase in seat numbers and 60 per cent of the fleet is electric,

compared with 48 per cent at the start of the franchise. That proves why control by this Parliament and this Government can be beneficial.

However, the ScotRail franchise is not operating in the way that we would all wish it to. Again, that is a problem because of the legislation that we have inherited. Until 2016, the ScotRail franchise could attract only private company bids because public bids were specifically forbidden under UK statute, despite what Labour has argued in the past. The Labour Party would like to keep that quiet, along with the fact that the Labour-led Welsh Government has contracted the rail service of Wales to private French and Spanish-owned firms.

The Railways Act 2005 that was passed by Labour extended devolved powers to include management and monitoring of ScotRail services, and the power to secure future ScotRail franchises. However, there was no power to include public sector bids until 23 May 2016, when the Scotland Act 2016 came into force. That was 19 months after Abellio won the bid in October 2014.

Unlike Labour, the SNP has fought for the inclusion of public sector bids in the Scottish rail franchise for years. Our 2015 general election manifesto included a commitment that

“public sector organisations should be able to bid to operate rail services, as allowed in EU law but currently prevented by UK legislation.”

The 2016 Scottish Parliament election manifesto said the same thing.

The UK Williams review is on-going and there is a real opportunity and solid reasoning to change the structure of rail service delivery in Scotland. That rail service delivery must be devolved in its entirety, so that Scottish ministers can take a joined-up approach to delivering it with full control and full responsibility. Anything less will not meet the expectations of the 100 million passengers in Scotland who use the service annually.

The Scottish Government’s £18 million investment, independent oversight, the performance remedial plan and associated Donovan review stand to improve resilience. The fact is that more drivers, better timetables and a fleet of modern trains are contributing to a service that is improving after a period of, admittedly, unacceptable disruption in 2018.

Of course, we must scrutinise Abellio’s performance. Financial penalties and a break clause can be implemented should Abellio fail to remain on track in delivering the 19 remedial plan targets by June 2021.

I call on members across the chamber to allow remedial plan performance outcomes and the

Donovan and Williams reviews to take their course, and I ask that, prior to 31 March 2020, the Scottish Government update members on those matters at that juncture. To Labour, I say get on board with the common-sense approach of handing over full control of the rail infrastructure to Scotland, to help ensure that we deliver for all our passengers.

16:34

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): It is customary at the outset of speeches for us to thank those who have taken the time to supply briefings to members ahead of debates. I thank the rail unions for their briefings. However, it was remiss of the minister, Joan McAlpine and the Tories not to thank Abellio for its briefing, given that they have so faithfully adhered to it this afternoon.

Today, Parliament has an opportunity to stand up for Scotland’s hard-pressed passengers, after years of a failing ScotRail franchise and misery for commuters. We can decide today that enough is enough—that the Abellio ScotRail franchise will reach the end of the line in 2022, that it will not be renewed or extended for another three years, that the interests of passengers must come first, and that our rail services must be returned to the public sector at the earliest opportunity.

We face a simple choice between public transport that is run as a public service in the public interest, or continuation of the ScotRail shambles and the Government’s failing deal with Abellio. Abellio has had four and half years to deliver what it promised at the outset of the deal, but it has not done so, even though the SNP said that the deal would be “world leading”.

Contractual targets have been missed. As Mike Rumbles said, there have been three improvement plans since the franchise began, but improvements have not been sustained. Because passenger satisfaction has fallen so far short of the remedial plan target, the target has been reduced. As has been said, 75,000 trains have been cancelled since Abellio took over the franchise, which is an average of 47 every day, and industrial relations have worsened.

I know that the SNP and the Tories are opposed to our motion, but let us listen to the people who work on our railways. The RMT, which has been demonstrating outside Parliament today, says that Abellio is “not fit” to run the ScotRail franchise and that

“mismanagement has led to a serious deterioration in working conditions”.

The TSSA says that the franchise is a “shambles” that has

“gone from bad to worse”.

The general secretary of ASLEF has said that the Abellio deal has

“been a failure by nearly every measure”

and went on to say that

“ScotRail receives the second highest share of net government funding of any franchise in the UK. It is impossible to see the franchise as offering anything other than terrible value for money for the Scottish taxpayer and passenger.”

The Abellio deal is not working for passengers, does not carry the confidence of workers and does not represent value for money for taxpayers. In fact, the travelling public are paying twice for the SNP’s dysfunctional deal with Abellio, because as well as paying some of the highest rail subsidies in the UK, they are paying for rising fares. People are paying more for a service that is not consistent enough and is just not good enough.

Scotland’s passengers deserve better: they deserve rail services that are democratically controlled and run in their interests. The cabinet secretary and other SNP members have said that their amendment is about Scottish public sector control of the railways, but it is not: it is about Dutch public sector control of the railways continuing for three more years. If the Governments of Germany, France and Italy, to name just a few, can run their national railways, and if the Dutch Government can run our railway, we can and must do the same in our country.

Scottish Labour believes, as a matter of principle, that the railways should be brought into public ownership at the earliest opportunity. Even those who do not accept that principle surely cannot believe that Abellio has earned the right to have the deal extended, and certainly not until 2025. If they believe that, either they cannot be among those of us who actually travel by train regularly or they are totally out of touch with Scotland’s passengers.

It is time to bring the Abellio deal to an end. It is time for a publicly owned people’s ScotRail that is under democratic control, is fully integrated with our public transport system and puts passengers before profit. That is the future that Labour chooses for our railways, and that is why I will vote for the motion.

16:38

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): We all know that the performance of the service on Scotland’s railways is far from satisfactory. Delays, cancellations and mismanagement have led to commuter misery and economic damage. It is estimated that train delays cost the Scottish economy up to £230,000 a day.

In my constituency, poor performance is hindering efficient commuting, and is damaging the local economy as a result. On the Borders railway line, which many of my constituents use daily to commute to and from Edinburgh, we have seen some of the worst delays and cancellations. Just last week, we learned that ScotRail’s punctuality for August and September was at its worst since Abellio took over the franchise in 2015. That was unsurprising and all too familiar news.

The Scottish Conservatives have made it clear in the past and today that we do not want renationalisation of Scotland’s railways; that is not the solution that we seek. Labour has called for renationalisation on numerous occasions. That move would not benefit taxpayers in the slightest. It would waste time and money, it would not get people to work on time and it would not stop ordinary people being fined for picking up their children late from nursery. The idea of renationalising our railways is a mere sticking plaster.

Michael Matheson said that the Government is taking “robust action”, but I must question that. We need better accountability, and the SNP must stand up for commuters, rather than give ScotRail a continuing licence to fail. The Government must stick to its promises and hold ScotRail to account properly. Remedial plans will be effective only if the transport secretary ensures that ScotRail is committed to the improvements, and that it is questioned if it does not improve. There can be no more ministerial waivers. We need better accountability, because commuters deserve better.

We have known that driver recruitment has been a significant issue for months, but action has been taken only recently. To have a sustainable rail service, we need to ensure that Abellio ScotRail continues to assess workforce levels.

We have come to the chamber and have repeatedly been promised improvements, but little changes for the better. In relation to the Borders railway line, I was promised that once the driver training backlog was cleared we would see improvements in punctuality and to the service. There was a short-term improvement, but the service has gone back to the same old.

The Conservatives call on the Government to propose a long-term sustainable vision for Scotland’s railways beyond 2025, which would include improving the rolling stock. We need a long-term plan, so that whatever the operator, there is a clear direction in practice, and passengers can be confident that long-term improvement is on the way.

Commuters and passengers want greater transparency and accountability. Let us be clear—a public sector operator taking control of the ScotRail franchise would shift huge risks and potentially millions of pounds of spending on to the Scottish taxpayer. That increased risk would come without any guarantee of improvement in the quality of the service.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: Very quickly.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Neil Findlay should be very brief, because Rachael Hamilton is in her last minute.

Neil Findlay: Does Rachael Hamilton not realise that, when the east coast main line came back into public service, we got a better service, better industrial relations and £1 billion delivered to the Treasury as a result? Is not that why we should bring the railways back under national control?

Rachael Hamilton: I completely disagree. That happened in unique circumstances. We are at the point of taking action as set out in the remedial plan. There is also positivity on the horizon as a result of the Williams rail review that Neil Findlay is overlooking. Incidentally, that review provides clarity on where this Government needs to focus attention and where to make improvements, including by delivering value for money and clear accountability, and by putting customers at the heart of rail services. Customers are not mentioned in the chamber often, but today it is all about customers. They need to be at heart of the improvements.

The Conservative amendment aims to give ScotRail the chance to try to fully implement the action that is set out in the remedial plan, rather than terminate the franchise early.

16:43

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Nobody can argue that ScotRail has performed perfectly since it has had the contract. It has problems and issues, but that was the case with the services long before Abellio got the contract.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): That is okay then.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): That is all right then.

Stuart McMillan: No, it is not—I am not saying that it is all right. In any type of organisation, there will always be issues and problems. The issue here is how one works to rectify them. Given the situation that passengers face day in, day out, I

understand why they can be and are angry and frustrated. I was talking to Claire Baker only a couple weeks ago about rail issues, and she highlighted some of her concerns about train services in Fife. I genuinely appreciate that there are challenges, but every organisation has challenges. What matters is how they work to address them and make their service delivery better.

Labour's motion today calls for one thing: not extending the franchise beyond 2022. Unfortunately, Colin Smyth is leaving the chamber, but he indicated in his speech that he is against fare increases. Does that mean that Labour is announcing that if it were ever to be in power in this Parliament, it would never institute a fare increase on ScotRail ticket prices? It sounded like that to me. I would be genuinely grateful if Labour could deal with that point when it closes.

I do not know whether any Labour Party politician will refer to this, but the party has acknowledged that the average increase in prices in Scotland has been lower than it has been in England and in Labour-run Wales. Can any Labour member explain why their colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government chose to mirror the English fare rises of 2.8 per cent, despite having the power to apply a cap for Wales-only journeys?

I want a commonsense approach to bring infrastructure and services together under public control. It is essential that responsibility for our railways rests with the Scottish Parliament, and that all the railways are brought under Scotland's full control. As every member knows, Network Rail is currently unaccountable to this Parliament. More than 50 per cent of ScotRail's delays were attributable to the UK Government's shambolic operation of Network Rail.

The cabinet secretary's amendment indicates that the Scottish Government has already started the careful and necessary assessment that is specified in the franchise contract. In its closing comments, can Labour clarify whether it just wants this due process to be ripped up? I genuinely could not be sure from what was said earlier.

I agree with the Scottish Government that franchising is not fit for purpose, and I would like to see our rail system under full public control. I welcome former Labour minister Tom Harris urging that

"all lines, signals, stations and infrastructure under the control of Network Rail should be transferred to a new body, answerable to the Scottish Government."

That highlights the challenge that exists for us all, but also the opportunity: to bring control over all aspects of the rail service to this Parliament.

Elaine Smith talked about nationalisation, but it is clear that we do not have the power to

nationalise the railways. Under current UK law, those powers still reside in Westminster, and the Scottish Government is obliged to competitively tender for delivery of rail services.

Labour continually pretends that we can nationalise rail services, but we cannot. If Labour stops misleading the population about that point, I am sure that we can all have a conversation that is based on facts, not Labour's fiction.

16:47

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Let me try to start on a consensual note. It is clear that we all agree that ScotRail is underperforming and could do a lot better. The fact that the Scottish Government has issued two remedial notices to ScotRail is a clear indication that it is not delivering for rail passengers.

Unlike the Labour Party, we believe that ScotRail must be given the opportunity to fulfil the terms of those remedial notices. As we heard from Liam Kerr, Labour's continuing calls to end the franchise will not solve the problem. I believe that the motion is rather cynical. It does not say what the Labour Party will do to solve the problem, and that is not helpful. However, its members articulated that today when they said that they believe that nationalisation would be the solution. Labour did not mention that in the motion, so that it could get the Liberal Democrats to support the cause.

Nationalisation is the wrong way to go. We all know that it does not work. It has been tried before and it failed. I say to Mr Leonard that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is, at best, unwise.

As my colleague Rachael Hamilton said, we also know that a public sector operator taking control of ScotRail would shift on to the Scottish taxpayer a huge risk that would be based on civil servants running a business without the knowledge or expertise to do so. Let me be clear: civil servants cannot make rented rolling stock more reliable, nor can they magic more stock from a finite pool held by rental companies, as we heard from Mr Kerr. Further, civil servants cannot generate more investment from the Government that they report to.

Also, it is not blindingly right to call on Network Rail in Scotland to be devolved to the Government. That will not solve the problems. Network Rail is not the sole issue.

The Government often takes the opportunity to quote the Office of Rail and Road's findings that Network Rail was the overall cause of 58 per cent of ScotRail delays last year. That is the figure that it gives us, but let us dig a little deeper. If we take

out delays due severe weather and track incursions, which no one controls, we see that delays attributable to Network Rail fall to around 42 per cent. That is still too much, but it is a huge shift in the balance.

We accept that ScotRail is at fault for some delays. In the past year, delays caused by problems with its fleet have increased by more than 30 per cent and delays caused by problems with its train crew have increased by 50 per cent. Those are ScotRail's problems and ScotRail must solve them, as it has been asked to do under the remedial plan. However, blaming everything on Network Rail or ScotRail is disingenuous.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention?

Edward Mountain: I am afraid that I am in my last minute.

I believe that everyone—Network Rail, ScotRail and politicians—needs to step up to the plate. Now is not the time for more threats to ScotRail and Abellio. Now is the time for the Scottish Government to continue to work with ScotRail and Abellio to improve their performance, and it is time to begin work on a long-term sustainable plan for Scotland's railways beyond 2025.

The Scottish Conservatives want to look at the long-term future of our railways, which is not furthered by the Labour motion. We need that long-term vision, which the Government has not articulated. We also need effective management—something that has been missing in the past few years.

This party will not be supporting the Labour motion or the Government amendment, because they are about politics, not what is best for our railways, which is what we are interested in.

16:52

Michael Matheson: Like many members, I will begin by recognising the outstanding work of staff in the rail network in Scotland. I was struck by the point that was made by John Finnie about the challenges that have been faced in recent months, including the problems on the west Highland line following the significant damage that was caused to the line just south of Crianlarich. When I visited the site, I met the Network Rail employee who walked the line that night on his own because he suspected that damage had been caused—I know that Mr Finnie has met him, too. His action resulted in a potentially serious incident being averted. In itself, that demonstrates the dedication of the excellent staff that we have throughout the network in Scotland.

John Finnie: I agree that that work was commendable, as is the work of the people who

man the ticket offices and provide support there. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern about the stated intention to close a number of those offices?

Michael Matheson: Yes, I do, because it is important that we have the right staff in place at stations to support the public, whether they are travelling by rail or any other means. The dedication of the staff has helped to deliver the electrification of our lines, the building of the new stations, the manufacturing of our new trains and the provision of passenger services, and I acknowledge the sometimes challenging work that they undertake on our rail system.

Listening to the comments in this debate, I suspect that there are few people who believe that the franchising system that we have at the moment is the optimal one and should be continued. I certainly do not believe that it is. I think that it has to go. Just to lodge a bid—not to secure a bid—costs in the region of £10 million. Even though we have secured the power for a public sector body to be able to bid for a franchise, the process will cost that body £10 million. That, in itself, suggests that the existing system is not fit for purpose.

In my engagements with Keith Williams, I have been struck by his genuine commitment to look at how he can improve the rail system not just in the UK but, specifically, here in Scotland. The UK Government needs to genuinely recognise that there is an opportunity to run the network in Scotland in a different way that will reflect the needs and aspirations of the people of Scotland.

Rachael Hamilton called for a long-term plan to be put in place, but part of the challenge in delivering such a plan is the very franchising structure that we have in place at present. The 10-year period in which the franchises operate creates a fracture in our ability to get the long-term plan that will be absolutely critical to delivering the changes that are necessary in the future.

I turn to the issue that was raised by Elaine Smith, who said that events on 24 August were unacceptable. She is absolutely correct—they were completely unacceptable, which is why a full review was undertaken to address why the events took place. Our rail network has managed major events before and done so very well. Network Rail staff worked extremely hard to get the two platforms at Queen Street extended in time for the festival so that they could increase train capacity by some 20 per cent over that period. We should recognise the work that they undertook to deliver that.

Elaine Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Matheson: No—I apologise, but I do not have time. I more than happy to engage with Elaine Smith at some other point on that issue.

Tonight is an opportunity for the Labour Party to put its rhetoric aside and to step up to the plate and support the possibility of creating a public sector rail service here in Scotland. It should not seek to create a UK-based body that would run all the UK's rail network, run trains and take powers away from this Parliament, but seek powers for the Scottish Parliament to run a public service railway.

Tonight at 5 o'clock, we will find out what the leadership of Richard Leonard is really about. Will he support the Tories in voting against the ability to run a public service railway in Scotland or back the Scottish National Party, which wants this Parliament to have the ability to do so? Given his record as a leader, I know that he will back the Tories and walk away from having a public service railway here in Scotland. We will stand up for it. We will deliver it. Give us the powers to do it and we will make a difference to Scotland's travelling public.

16:57

Colin Smyth: This afternoon's debate has made clear the utter failure at the heart of Scotland's railways and, in particular, the complete lack of any answers from the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary as speaker after speaker exposed the extent to which the Abellio ScotRail franchise is letting down Scotland's rail passengers.

Elaine Smith described the "dangerous" chaos that we saw on the trains during the last day of the Edinburgh festival. Neil Bibby highlighted the need for the Government to start to listen to the people who work on our railways and deliver the service to customers. To be fair to Liam Kerr, he provided a scathing assessment of the utter failure of the railways under privatisation.

It is clear from the debate that passengers across the country are being let down, not just by the franchise but by a Government that is more concerned with making excuses for Abellio than delivering better services for passengers.

We have certainly had our fair share of excuses today. The cabinet secretary told us—with the full support of every Tory speaker—that we should forget the last four years of the franchise because the remedial plan will improve punctuality and reduce cancellations, delivering where not one but two improvement plans have failed.

It is ScotRail's "last chance saloon", according to the First Minister. However, punctuality is now lower than it was when the cabinet secretary agreed the plan in February, and the latest

cancellation figures are the worst for that period since records began. What about the second remedial plan on passenger satisfaction, which the cabinet secretary talked about? The Government accepts that it will not deliver the franchise target, so it has just decided to reduce the targets instead.

Passengers deserve better, but it is clear from today's debate that the SNP wants to extend the franchise to 2025, something that, to be fair, the transport secretary admitted when he wrote to me and said that he

"fully expects the current franchise to continue"

until then. It seems that the SNP has an ally in the Tories when it comes to giving Abellio another licence to fail. The Tory amendment fundamentally misunderstands what we are voting on today.

Of course Abellio ScotRail will have a chance to complete its remedial plan if Labour's motion is agreed to, because that plan runs to May 2020, but the first exit date in the franchise is not until March 2022. I hope that the remedial plan gets Abellio ScotRail out of breach of the franchise, but we know that it will not deliver the franchise targets that it has been set and, frankly, that is not good enough. Tory MSPs must never come to the chamber again and shed crocodile tears for Scotland's rail passengers because, today, every single one of them has had the opportunity to do something about it, but every one of them bottled it. Faced with a choice between the big rail firms and their constituents, Tory MSPs—true to form—backed the rail bosses, put their profits ahead of passengers, and sided with the SNP to extend the failed franchise until 2025.

The SNP has tried to pretend that it supports public ownership—at least, it did for five minutes, until John Mason got to his feet and rubbished that. If the SNP were committed to public ownership, it would end the ScotRail franchise at the earliest opportunity and get serious about a public sector bid. It would recognise that, ultimately, we need an end to the wasteful and inefficient franchising system altogether, and it would back Labour's calls for the repeal of the Railways Act 1993 so that we can have proper public ownership of our railways and bring track and train together, with services delivered by a publicly owned company. Crucially—the cabinet secretary continues to mislead people on this—decisions on all Scottish routes would be made by the Scottish Parliament and the Government would have a seat at the table when it came to cross-border services. It is clear that the cabinet secretary does not want that.

That is Labour's vision for our railways. It is a vision that starts to put passengers first, not the profits of the privatised companies, and a vision in

which the workforce is the manager of change, not its casualty, and in which our public services start to serve the people, not the profiteers.

It is time for the Parliament to get on board with that vision, to stop acting as a cheerleader for privatisation, and to unite to fight for a railway that is fit for purpose.

Business Motion

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-19209, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 8 October 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Proposed National Plan for Scotland's Islands

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Supporting Innovation

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 9 October 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Government Business and Constitutional Relations; Culture, Tourism and External Affairs

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Transport (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 10 October 2019

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 Stage 1 Debate: Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 29 October 2019

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 30 October 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Health and Sport; Communities and Local Government

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 31 October 2019

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 Security and Older People

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 7 October 2019, 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.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motions S5M-19210 and S5M-19211, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Carer's Assistance (Young Carer Grants) (Scotland) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Tribunals (Listed Tribunals) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.—
[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-19193.1, in the name of Maree Todd, which seeks to amend motion S5M-19193, in the name of Iain Gray, on the Give Them Time campaign, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-19193, in the name of Iain Gray, on the Give Them Time campaign, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises that, under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, parents have the legal right to defer their child's entry to primary education if they are not five years old by the commencement of the school year; understands that those children who are born in January and February have an automatic entitlement to funded early learning and childcare during the deferred year, while those born between August and December do not have this automatic entitlement; commends the "Give Them Time" campaign for their work in highlighting this issue; calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward legislation in this parliamentary session to automatically entitle young people aged four, who are born between August and December, to funded early learning and childcare in line with statutory government provision for three- and four-year-olds when their parents use their legal right to defer entry to P1, and further calls on the Scottish Government to work with COSLA to ensure the necessary resources are available.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is on an amendment in the name of Michael Matheson. I highlight that there is a pre-emption, so if the amendment is agreed to, amendment S5M-19190.1, in the name of Jamie Greene, will fall.

The question is, that amendment S5M-19190.2, in the name of Michael Matheson, which seeks to amend motion S5M-19190, in the name of Colin Smyth, on "Don't Extend the ScotRail Franchise", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinrossshire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)

Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-19190.1, in the name of Jamie Greene, which seeks to amend motion S5M-19190, in the name of Colin Smyth, on “Don’t Extend the ScotRail Franchise”, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 28, Against 89, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-19190, in the name of Colin Smyth, on "Don't Extend the ScotRail Franchise", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 32, Against 85, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the two Parliamentary Bureau motions. The question is, that motions S5M-19210 and S5M-19211, in the name of Graeme Dey, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Carer's Assistance (Young Carer Grants) (Scotland) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Tribunals (Listed Tribunals) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-18943, in the name of Emma Harper, on Scottish women and girls in sport week.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Week, which takes place from 28 September to 4 October 2019; notes that the theme for 2019 is "Leaders Behind the Leaders"; understands that leaders in sport and physical activity help provide a legacy of confident, knowledgeable and experienced people, who throughout their life in sport and physical activity, will help build and strengthen the world-class sporting system for everyone in Scotland; believes that leaders in sport are crucial role models who motivate, promote and inspire others to participate in sport and physical activity in schools, local sports clubs and in the local community; recognises those who work behind the scenes in sport and physical activity and their role in supporting and inspiring female leaders in sport; welcomes the opportunity provided by Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Week to showcase and promote women and girls' participation in sport and physical activity, and celebrates the role models who support and inspire female leaders in sport to be the best they can be.

17:10

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to have this debate on Scottish women and girls in sport week. As deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee, I start by thanking everyone from across the chamber who added their support to my motion. I am a wee bit disappointed, though, that nobody from the Conservative Party has supported it—although I gently remind them that there is still time.

I also thank the organisations and individuals who have provided briefings ahead of the debate. Briefings really help to guide us, as decision makers, by giving us insight into what is going well and what can be changed.

I greatly enjoyed sportscotland's briefing. Its vision is of an active Scotland where everyone benefits from sport. Sportscotland recognises that more needs to be done to achieve gender equality in sport, but a lot of great work is being delivered throughout the sporting system to support progress.

The theme of this year's week is "Leaders behind the leaders". Behind every woman in sport is at least one leader. Those leaders in sport impart their wisdom, technical expertise, confidence and skills to other women in sport, who then go on to lead, shape and strengthen our world-class sporting system. I mean inspiring

women leaders such as Judy Murray, who not only helped to shape her sons into world champions but is now spending much of her time helping to develop the next generation of female coaches, players and volunteers.

The Scottish Government's women and girls in sport advisory board consists of accomplished and inspiring women leaders. It was established to provide independent advice on female participation in, and to raise female awareness of, all areas of sport and physical activity. The board ensures that we are driving participation by, and marketing and awareness of, Scottish women and girls in sport, and that every woman and girl in Scotland is given the best opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity.

The board is made up of a guid when o braw inspiring women. I will take a moment to give each of them a wee shout out. The chair, Amanda Jones, has been practising employment law for more than 20 years and has a particular interest in discrimination and sports law. Gemma Lumsdaine is an athlete who plays wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby. She sits on both the Scottish Disability Sport and Basketball Scotland young people's panels. Claire Nelson is the chief executive officer of Netball Scotland. Claire is on a mission to change the landscape of women's sport, having recently launched the #ChangingTheGame campaign to challenge the many disparities that currently face women and girls in Scotland.

Vivienne McLaren is the chair of Scottish Women's Football and is an award-winning marketing and communications strategist. Maggie Cunningham is the chair of MG Alba, or Gaelic Media Service. Maggie has worked in a number of senior positions in the BBC. Hala Ousta is the diversity and inclusion manager for the Scottish Football Association, and is an established campaigner for equality, diversity and inclusion in sport.

Emma Mahon is a young ambassador and also acts as an active schools vice-captain. Kirsty Ewen volunteers for Scottish Swimming as the domestic open-water events co-ordinator. Sheila Begbie MBE is the director of domestic rugby at the Scottish Rugby Union and has been key in supporting all aspects of the development of rugby—and look how well our women's team are doing right now. Dee Bradbury is president of the Scottish Rugby Union and is Scottish rugby's representative at Rugby Europe.

Yvonne Greeves is a national women in business manager and is responsible for designing and implementing the women in business strategy, both internally and externally across the United Kingdom. There is one more: Maureen McGonigle is the founder and chief

executive officer of Scottish Women in Sport. Its vision is of a Scotland where females of all ages, abilities, ethnicities and walks of life are participating in sport or physical activity.

Those women are just some of the leaders behind the leaders in sport in Scotland, and we need to celebrate them all. We know that leaders in sport are crucial role models, who motivate, promote and inspire others to participate in sport and physical activity.

In 2019 Scotland hosted six European and international sporting events, kicking off with the UEFA women's under-19 European championship and culminating in the biggest event in women's golf—the 2019 Solheim cup.

I must also mention sport in my South Scotland region. This year, the International Ice Hockey Federation women's ice hockey world championships took place in Dumfries, at the outstanding Dumfries ice bowl. I attended a few of the matches, and the atmosphere was absolutely electric.

The Scottish women's volleyball championships and the Scottish club swimming tournaments were both held at the Citadel leisure centre in Ayr. The SkiffieWorlds world championship coastal rowing event was held at Stranraer and Loch Ryan in July, with a record entry of 693 crews from 57 clubs worldwide, including women's teams and other teams from as far away as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Tasmania. The whole week was a fantastic way to promote water sports. Loch Ryan can be a complete launch pad for waters sports in the future.

We know that women and girls are more likely to play sport if there is more coverage of female athletes in the media. Our women and girls in sport advisory board found that 95 per cent of media coverage is dedicated to men's sport, and that increased levels of coverage for women's sport have a positive impact on women's physical activity. I fully support the board's call for a media summit to review existing coverage of female sport, and I look forward to hearing tonight from the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing and other members about what must be done to further encourage women into sport—not just during Scottish women and girls in sport week, but in the future.

17:16

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Emma Harper for bringing the debate to the chamber. I am always very happy to talk about sport, and I assure her that I have signed her motion.

I have a vested interest in the debate, as I have three daughters. I coached the eldest two in sport to international level, and now have the pleasure of coaching my youngest, as well. She has reached the heady heights of being Lanarkshire under-13 javelin bronze medallist, and I am having great fun coaching her. In passing, I reiterate the importance of Maureen McGonigle's work on furthering women's sport.

I have mentioned Maricica Puică in the chamber before. Why is her name important? She won the 3,000m in the 1984 Olympic games—the famous race in which Zola Budd and Mary Decker had their infamous clash. The reason why I mention the 3,000m is that it was, at that time, the longest race that women could run on the track at an Olympic games.

Spinning forward to 1988, I had the real pleasure of sitting in the stadium to watch Liz McColgan take a silver medal in the 10,000m. I was in the stadium in 1991 too, when she ran what is probably one of the greatest distance races I have ever seen, when she demolished a world-class field in 90°C heat at the world championships. There is now a full complement of women's races matching the races of the men at the Olympics, which shows that women's sport has come a long way.

I should also mention how women's rugby and women's football have come on, along with women's cricket and women's golf. They are starting to make inroads in terms of getting more media coverage, although there is a lot more to be done in that respect. A lot has happened even in my lifetime.

I want to talk about a controversial issue for the development of women's sport that is fast coming down the track, if members will pardon the pun. It is the difficult and complex issue of transsexual athletes—specifically, biological males who self-identify as females competing against biological females. The discussion about sex versus gender is currently being played out in a court in the US of A, in a case whose outcome will have profound consequences for women's sport.

What worries me most is that sportswomen such as Dame Kelly Holmes, Sharron Davies and Paula Radcliffe have been attacked and vilified for raising that issue. To be clear, what we are talking about here is an attack on women for speaking up on women's rights issues.

Since 2017, in collegiate sport, two biological males have won 15 women's track championship titles against biologically female track athletes—titles that were previously held by females. Women will really struggle to match their performances. There is now a biological male competing as a female power lifter who, after

undergoing 11 months of hormone therapy, has set multiple world records in a women's category.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Does Brian Whittle acknowledge that sports governing bodies are well placed to adjudicate when it comes to such matters, that work is being undertaken on the issue, that everyone has a right to take part in sport, and that we all hope that it is an enjoyable and welcoming experience?

Brian Whittle: I agree with a lot of what Alison Johnstone says, and I will come on to that. I disagree, however, that governing bodies are "well placed" to deal with the issues. They have not dealt with them particularly well. I am not offering an opinion; I am telling members what is happening in world sport. I have been talking about individual sports, but the biggest issue is in respect of contact sports, in which a real danger is already evident.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you come to a close, please?

Brian Whittle: I hope that the athletes will be treated with more compassion and respect than people such as Caster Semenya and other intersex athletes. Equality of access and opportunity, irrespective of background and personal circumstances, should be the goal. Let us make sure that the subject is tackled properly. More important, let us treat everybody with the compassion and respect that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gently remind members that they should always stick with relevance to the motion. I know that it is sometimes a difficult line to walk, but please always bear that in mind, particularly in members' business debates.

17:22

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): Like Brian Whittle, I have a vested interest in the debate. I do not have a daughter, but I have an 11-year-old boy. It is equally important that he be exposed to all the great things that women achieve in sport. Although, at 11, he is not yet known for his feminism, it is encouraging that without batting an eye he happily enjoys going to watch women's football, rugby and other sports.

I express my appreciation to my colleague Emma Harper for securing the debate during Scottish women and girls in sport week, because it provides me with the perfect opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of some of the sportswomen who hail from my constituency in West Lothian.

I have no doubt that many members are well aware of the achievements of the inspirational Shelley Kerr MBE, who is the manager of

Scotland's women's football team. Like me, Shelley was a pupil of West Calder high school, but when I was skipping physical education class because I did not want to wear shorts, Shelley was starting her football career at a time when it was difficult to find a junior team for girls.

Shelley Kerr has a long list of achievements, but I want to highlight the fact that she returned to football as a mother, after a break of nine years, and fought hard to win back her place in the Scotland team. She holds the Scottish record for being the oldest player in the national team, having played international football for Scotland at the grand old age of 39. That, in addition to her sporting prowess, speaks volumes about the role model that she is to women and girls of all ages.

Another local legend is Elise Christie, who was originally a figure skater before specialising in short-track speed skating in her teens. She is a 10 times European gold medallist and was a world champion in Rotterdam in 2017. Elise has been very open about her mental health issues, and she uses her social media platforms to good effect in helping to destigmatise mental ill health. The relationship between good physical health and good mental health is well known.

I cannot fail to mention 14-year-old Ellie Fergusson, who won the TV show competition "The Greatest Dancer". Ellie gave half her winnings to the Edinburgh Dance Academy, which helped her to achieve her dream. She is a special young woman.

I could mention so many more young West Lothian women, but that is not possible in the time that I have available. However, I could not participate in the debate without mentioning a young woman who instils a lot of pride in West Lothian—Christina McSherry from Stoneyburn. Christina is a special Olympian and British power lifting champion, who now plays bowls. I have a special attachment to the weightlifters, because in the 1980s and 1990s my dad was part of a successful weightlifting club in Stoneyburn. I was always proud that that working class men's club supported special Olympians and that, even at that time, had the odd woman training alongside the men.

Although the West Lothian women that I have mentioned all participate in different sports and physical activities, the thing that they have in common is that they started young. Some of them changed sports and some had a career break and returned to their sporting passion. That demonstrates the importance of the right opportunities for physical activity for young people within and outwith schools, because the benefits are lifelong.

The facts speak for themselves; there is more to be done to increase the participation of women and girls in sport. Gender equality is important in all walks of life. The good thing is that we know what the issues are, and we are all determined to address them.

17:26

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on Scottish women and girls in sport week. I thank Emma Harper for bringing the motion to the chamber.

Sport brings so much benefit and enjoyment to all of us. It is nice for me, as Scottish Labour spokesperson for health and sport, to have the opportunity to celebrate the amazing achievements of women and girls who participate in sport in Scotland. As we have already heard, it has been another phenomenal year for women in sport. With Scotland's women taking part in high-profile events such as the women's football world cup, we have a lot to be proud of.

We all know the benefits that keeping active brings, not just to physical health but to mental health. It often plays a huge role in reducing stress and anxiety. Therefore, I am pleased that we can take the opportunity to celebrate women and girls in sport this week.

We must recognise individual achievements but also recognise where there are still barriers to women's full participation and to address what can be done to remove those barriers. Because my colleague Brian Whittle raised the issue, I say gently to the chamber that trans women are women, and non-binary people exist. Perhaps there is an on-going debate on wider issues but, for tonight, when we talk about the achievements of women and girls in sport, I want everyone to feel included and valued.

When I read the "Girlguiding's Girls' Attitudes Survey" report from last year, I was struck by the fact that girls' participation in sport tends to drop off dramatically around the age of 13. I have a daughter of that age. Between the ages of seven and 11, more than 40 per cent of girls said that they played sport or exercised every day but, between the ages of 12 and 17, that figure drops to just 21 per cent. Despite the progress that we have made towards women and men's equality, that is a telling statistic and we need to get better at addressing it. Sport is or should be for everyone at every age. More girls and young women need encouragement to keep up with the sports that they have taken part in at primary and secondary school.

Despite the progress, the report from the Scottish women and girls in sport advisory board

this week was also disappointing to read. It is sad that women are still so underrepresented in sports media coverage. It is even more troubling that the content from online news outlets on women's sporting achievements could be interpreted as oversexualised. It is not rocket science that a major factor in participation in anything, whether it be sport or politics, is the lack or otherwise of role models. If young girls do not see themselves reflected in national media coverage of sports, it is no wonder that we see that all-too-familiar cliff-edge drop-off in participation as they reach their teenage years.

Talking of barriers to women in sport, I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the phenomenal on the ball campaign, which has become such an important mechanism for ensuring that female fans of football are heard. I give a shout out to Erin, Orlaith and Mikaela, who should be proud of what they have achieved. More than 100 clubs have now pledged to become, or already are, period positive and provide free period products at their football grounds. That is certainly something to celebrate.

I have talked about younger women and girls, but I will briefly shout out to Age Scotland. It is promoting sport to tackle loneliness and isolation and, through its work with Netball Scotland, it has established more than 30 walking netball groups across Scotland. There are massive health benefits to come from that.

I look forward to the Scottish Government organising the summit that has been recommended by the advisory board in its report this week, and I will continue to work with all MSPs across the chamber to ensure that we are doing all we can to remove barriers to women in sport.

17:31

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): First, I apologise for having to leave after my speech. I am pleased to speak in the debate and thank my colleague Emma Harper for bringing it to the chamber. It is timely because, aside from this being Scottish women and girls in sport week, we are seeing a sea change in attitudes towards women and girls participating in sport.

As we have heard, the Solheim cup, women's football and the netball world cup have dominated the sports headlines this year and they are gathering new fans by the million. I think that levelling the playing field for women and girls begins in school, so I am heartened to learn that my granddaughters are being encouraged to take part in any sport they fancy—nothing is off limits. These are changed days from when I was at school, when sport was almost optional for girls. I

played netball, which I loved, but that was the extent of it.

Now, a new report says that women and girls will be more likely to take up a sport or exercise if there is increased reporting of top athletes and events in the media. Promoting positive role models who can inspire girls is a key motivator, in the same way as boys have been inspired by footballers since time immemorial. In Scotland, girls have plenty of models to choose from including the very impressive list that Emma Harper read out. They also have Laura Muir, Eve Muirhead, Julie Fleeting and Carly Booth, and that is just a fraction of the top sporting women in Scotland.

Age Scotland tells us of the benefits of exercise for more mature people, which include lower blood pressure and heart rate, and weight loss, not to mention the huge benefits to mental health. I discovered the joys of walking during summer recess, discovering our fantastic canal pathways, and I now know how true the expression “walking your way to better health” is.

An expert group has recommended in its report that there should be a summit on increasing media coverage of women in sport in order to encourage girls to be more active. The group, which is made up of leaders from sport, business and media, has recommended that a Scottish sport media summit should be set up to review and challenge the nature and extent of existing media coverage in Scotland, as Emma Harper outlined. Having worked in newspapers in a previous life, and knowing how much male-dominated sport dominates the media, I think that that would be a very welcome move.

The report also highlights the need for greater gender balance in leadership and management roles across Scotland. Active schools, which is a sportscotland initiative in conjunction with local authorities, provides young people with quality opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity before school, at lunch time and after school. Its independent research found that 92 per cent of girls and young women at school say that taking part in sport and physical activity makes them feel happy or very happy. That figure is just as high as the figure for male respondents. That positivity towards sport and physical activity is reflected in the latest active schools female participation figures for 2018-19, which show a massive rise in participation.

The future is bright for women and girls in sport. We know that we can excel in any sport and I look forward to watching us take on the world competitively, sweeping the medals board and reaping the benefits of focusing on sport-based leisure.

17:34

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

I thank Emma Harper for allowing us to celebrate the participation of women and girls in sport and to insist that we see more of them and learn more about their many achievements. We have discussed the topic in the chamber several times, but it seems that, in too many cases, the barriers that we have previously addressed remain. It is important that we encourage everyone to take part in sport, but we know for a fact that there is still a divide: we know that, in many sports, women and girls are less likely to be involved and their participation is not at the same level as that of their male counterparts.

Of course, there are exceptions to that rule. I spent Saturday morning in Glasgow at the annual general meeting of Scottish Athletics, at which it was noted that participation levels for girls in some age groups are higher than those for boys. Athletics has always been a sport that has been especially well balanced in that regard—we see as many women athletes taking part as we do men—which is one of its great strengths.

When the Health and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into barriers to physical activity and sport, it met many women and communities from across Scotland and heard their concerns. Those were often about cost, but time was also a huge issue. For someone who is juggling childcare and work, sometimes it is just too much to get out and do a class at the end of the day. Therefore there is something to be said for building in opportunities during the day, such as lunchtime sports activities. I know that small steps in that regard are being taken in this building, and some of us do things informally, but such an approach could be made more formal and built into the way we do things. For example, in Sweden the number of people who are members of sports clubs is phenomenal. We need to look at that, because such community cohesion is well worth investing in.

I want to mention the success of the jogscotland programme in encouraging women and young girls to participate in sport. Its membership is 81 per cent female, and a huge proportion of those members are aged 40-plus, which is notable. That tells us that when affordable and accessible opportunities are available in our communities, they are warmly welcomed. It is also no surprise that those members have also experienced the positive impacts on mental health that being physically active can bring.

I, too, cannot thank Maureen McGonigle of Scottish Women in Sport enough. It is heartening

that, this year, we have seen coverage of the world cup in women's football being boosted exponentially, and the Solheim cup has done the same for golf. Other members have made the point that the coverage of women's sport and physical activity is not good: actually, I think that it is a national disgrace. Most mornings, if I come to the Parliament on the bus—that is, when I am not on my bike—I look through the papers. As I have previously said in the chamber, I make a point of going to the back pages to see whether I can find coverage of a woman doing sport. On some days, I cannot find one—or, if I can, she is in there because she is someone's other half. We must ask who is writing for those papers and who is commissioning such work. Why are editors not insisting on representing all people who take part in Scotland? We have superstars such as Laura Muir, but we still seem to have patchy regard for the achievements of women in sport. It is time that we started to debate that more seriously.

I realise that I am running out of time, so I will close by thanking everyone who is making strides in that regard. The work that Shelley Kerr has done is notable, and Judy Murray has recently visited the Parliament. We need more of that, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to my having been quite lax with speakers' times, and because we still have two speakers to go in the open debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Emma Harper*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Liz Smith, to be followed by Kenneth Gibson. [*Interruption.*]

The clerk has pointed out to me that I have missed out Willie Coffey. How could I have done that? I am terribly sorry. We still have three speakers to go. I call Willie Coffey, to be followed by Liz Smith.

17:39

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I congratulate my colleague Emma Harper on bringing the debate to the chamber.

We have some incredible female sporting legends to be proud of in my part of Ayrshire—Rhona Martin in curling and Rose Reilly in football to name but two. In our modern era, we now have award-winning and inspiring acro gymnastic coaches Gemma Thomson and Tracy Wilson, and

we have Destany Robertson, who is a current Scottish and British boxing champion.

However, I want to share a few words about a local hero and a personal friend of mine—Rose Reilly from Stewarton. Rose featured in a recent documentary about her life, which illustrated the many obstacles that she had to overcome to achieve her stunning success as a footballer. She was kicking a ball from a very early age and she frequently got into trouble at primary school for playing football with the boys.

While Rose was at St Joseph's academy, her coach and mentor John Roy recognised her talent and coaxed her to cut her hair very short so that she could sneak into the team as "Ross Reilly". She was so good that Celtic tried to sign her before realising that she was a lassie. For many years, the SFA banned women from playing football. From 1921, women were banned from playing the beautiful game. That ban was made formal in 1949 and it lasted till 1974, when the SFA was forced to lift it. That was not exactly an age of enlightenment for our national body.

At school, Rose trained with the boys and played in unofficial and unrecognised women's football matches and competitions. When she was 17, she scored for Scotland in a match with England, but she had to wait a ridiculous 47 years to get her cap from the SFA. She received it from the First Minister only this year, along with some of the other women from that time—Margaret McAulay, Linda Kidd, Jean Stewart and Jane Legget.

Soon after that match, Rose's life changed forever. She and her friend Edna Neillis got the chance of a football trial in France with Stade de Reims, then she went on to a glittering career with AC Milan. It is the story of one of Scotland's greatest-ever footballers. She played 10 games for Scotland despite being banned by the SFA for daring to challenge its medieval leadership. She went on to play 24 times for Italy, but she always made sure that she had a saltire under her Italian top, and she won the unofficial world cup with Italy in 1984 in front of 90,000 fans. She won eight league titles, four cups and the golden boot for the most goals in one season. She is a Scotland legend indeed, and she is recognised in our hall of fame at Hampden.

Rose Reilly had to fight for her right to play football, and that is why she is such a role model and an inspiration, not just to female footballers but to all athletes. Her role as a trailblazer is now widely recognised. She also gives back to the footballing community as an ambassador for Walking Football Scotland, and she will soon be honoured—rightly—in her home town of Stewarton.

In the modern era, our talented athletes support programme in East Ayrshire has gone from strength to strength since its introduction in 2009, nurturing and supporting athletes to achieve their dreams, with some 47 per cent of them being women. The East Ayrshire Sports Council has played its part, too, funding and supporting young athletes across East Ayrshire and spurring them on to a bright future.

For women such as Rose Reilly and the many talented female athletes then, participation and success in sport was a battle simply because they were women. That should not have been the case. The wrongs of a short-sighted and gender-biased football association were ultimately overcome by Rose—at a considerable cost to her and her family—but she has always remained patriotic and is the first to shout out for Scotland.

I again congratulate Emma Harper on bringing the subject to the Parliament's attention. I look forward to hearing other members' speeches and the response from the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am back on track. I call Liz Smith, to be followed by Kenneth Gibson.

17:43

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I warmly congratulate Emma Harper on lodging her motion. I offer my contribution to the debate as somebody who has—dare I say it?—40 years of experience in coaching girls' sport, but also as co-convenor with Alison Johnstone of the cross-party group on sport. We owe a lot to our predecessor convenor, Margo MacDonald, who did a lot to promote women in sport. The subject is perhaps something that the cross-party group can return to, so we will have a conversation about what else we can do.

Scottish women and girls in sport week is an excellent opportunity to highlight not just the importance of sport, physical activity and personal fitness, but the life skills that sport—especially competitive sport—teaches us. Good-quality and regular participation in sport are, in my view, necessary for a strong, healthy and successful society, and everybody should have the right and the opportunity to take part, compete and pursue their sporting ambitions, whatever they might be.

Sport offers a unique experience because the rules that govern it are usually those that adopt the principle of a level playing field. People can practise and decide their own self-determination based on their ability, will and experience. That can be anything from individual self-improvement, to feats of accomplishment that come with teamwork or elite performance.

We must remember that some individuals, including many girls, sometimes feel that they can accomplish more together than they can apart. That is where we have an issue to deal with. Our country has borne witness to the invention and growth of many great sports, from golf to shinty, football and rugby, but not always on an equal basis. Monica Lennon raised an important point about the work that we still need to do to ensure that such equality is provided.

It was interesting to read an article in *The Scotsman* yesterday about media coverage, or the lack of it in some cases, of women's sport. Alison Johnstone referred to that issue in her speech and it is a real worry. However, I think that it is newspaper coverage more than radio and television coverage that is falling short. There has been a marked improvement in what is on television, for example the women's football world cup.

I thought that the Solheim cup was extremely well presented, and not just because it was on in Gleneagles, which is in my constituency. I attended the Solheim cup on two days and I thought that the coverage, as well as the golf, was excellent. We can perhaps take that forward in the future, because it matters from the perspective of the people who are competing, and it also matters because it gives the wider world an impression of what the media are saying about women in sport. We need more of that coverage and perhaps we could debate the subject a bit more in Parliament.

Brian Whittle was right to raise some of the difficult issues—whether he was expressing an opinion or not is not the important point. There are difficult issues in sport for women, as well as for men. The issues are very sensitive, but we have to ensure that we are taking on board the concerns of people who are involved in that process.

Many members have spoken about some of our female sporting heroes, and rightly so. I will add a little bit, from personal interest, about women's cricket, which I have been involved with for 40 years. Women's cricket has come a very long way, not only because of the extraordinary efforts that Cricket Scotland has put in to the extra coaching that it has provided. Who would have thought, just a few years ago, that Scotland would be hosting the world cup qualifiers, which I had the pleasure of attending at Forfarshire Cricket Club at the end of last month. Women cricketers have come a long way, particularly as they had to fight barriers because cricket was seen very much as a gentlemen's sport, rightly or wrongly. Women's cricket has come a long way, and I think that it deserves great credit.

I thank all the people across Scotland who get involved in women's sport, whether they are coaches, administrators or supporters. We need

them, and we need them badly, because women's sport will not function without the efforts that they put in.

17:48

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Emma Harper on securing today's debate to mark Scottish women and girls in sport week.

In June of this year, a report on "Sports participation in Scotland: trends and prospects", recorded that, over a five-year period between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of men meeting the physical activity for health guidelines was 71 per cent, compared with 60 per cent of women. The report clearly illustrates that a gender gap in sports participation exists in Scotland, which starts at a young age. Between the ages of eight and 10, more girls participate in sport than boys, with rates of 79 and 76 per cent respectively, but after the age of 10 and into the teenage years female participation drops significantly. Accordingly, by the age of 13 to 15, fewer girls participate in sport than boys.

The Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation states that barriers exist that prevent women and girls from participating in sports and physical activity, including practical barriers. The report states:

"Women tend to have less leisure time than men as they take on the greater burden of responsibility for housework, childcare and care of elderly ... relatives."

Female participation is also inhibited by a lack of access to facilities, because "sports halls prioritise male" participation. The foundation also records that women and girls have a higher rate of body image dissatisfaction and suffer from a relative lack of self-confidence in relation to sports. As a result, many rate their performance or ability negatively.

Women also have fewer female sporting role models, although I have been delighted to hear colleagues from across the chamber name many excellent women in sport whom young women and girls can emulate.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Mr Gibson mentioned role models, which gives me the opportunity to refer to Chelsea Raymond, who is at the University of Stirling in my constituency and who recently got an award from the SFA for girls and women's football. She takes the university teams and teams of girls in the Stirling area. That kind of role model, as well as those who we see on our TV screens, is important for young women and girls.

Kenneth Gibson: I am particularly pleased to hear about that, given the connection to my alma mater, the University of Stirling.

Scottish women and girls in sport week encourages more women into sport and physical activity, raises awareness of those who regularly take part at all levels and addresses the barriers that lead to lower activity rates among women. This week, the Scottish women and girls in sport advisory board published its report "Levelling the Playing Field—2019 Report and Recommendations", which focuses on this year's theme of leaders behind the leaders. The theme is designed to develop

"a legacy of confident, knowledgeable and experienced people, who throughout their life in sport and physical activity, will help build and strengthen the world-class sporting system for everyone in Scotland."

The report also notes the importance of female role models who

"motivate, promote and inspire others to participate in sports and physical activity in schools, local sports clubs and in the local community."

Scotland has a proud story of female sports participation. We heard from Willie Coffey about Rose Reilly. Participation of women in football can be traced to 21 August 1628, when the Rev John Lindsay, the minister for Carstairs, noted in the local kirk records of Lanark presbytery registers that men and women had engaged in "insolent behaviour" by playing football on the sabbath. The first women's international football match took place between Scotland and England at Easter Road, Edinburgh, on 7 May 1881, with around 1,000 spectators. *The Glasgow Herald* described the Scottish team as looking

"smart in blue jerseys, white knickerbockers, red belts and high heeled boots".

The match concluded with a well-deserved 3-0 victory for Scotland.

During the first world war, as women replaced men in munitions factories, women began playing football in their breaks to improve their general fitness for work in heavy manual labour. From that, several munitionette teams competed against each other across Scotland. The first such match was in August 1917 at Celtic park in Glasgow. Unfortunately, despite the rapid growth and success of women's football, the Football Association withdrew all support from it in 1921 and the Scottish Football Association formally banned women from competing in 1949. It was not until 1974 that the SFA lifted the ban and at last formally recognised female participation.

Those of us who watched the women's world cup in France were impressed by our team even though, as so often happens with the men, elimination was snatched from the jaws of

qualification. However, despite recent progress, much more can be done, and Scottish women and girls in sport week provides the essential platform for that aspiration.

17:52

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I, too, thank Emma Harper for securing the debate, and I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions. As Alison Johnstone mentioned, the Health and Sport Committee did some work in the area a number of years ago, so the Parliament has been working on the issue for some time and there has been general consensus around it. It is worth noting that you, Presiding Officer, chaired the young women lead committee, which looked at the leadership programme for young women and covered themes such as socioeconomic status, how sport and physical activity are provided in schools, societal pressures and external influences. It is important to point out that the Parliament has been working on the area for some time.

When I was appointed Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing, I said that I would do everything that I could to continue to improve opportunities for women and girls in sport and physical activity in Scotland. I take that commitment seriously, and it is what the Government has tried to do. We have taken a range of measures to challenge gender stereotypes, to help women's voices to be heard and to increase opportunities.

Willie Coffey reminded us just how far we have come. Earlier this year, I was pleased to be at Hampden to witness some of the women who Mr Coffey talked about receiving their caps, which they should have received many years ago. That shows just how far we have come.

As we celebrate Scottish women and girls in sport week, we acknowledge the continued gender gap in the participation rates for sport and physical activity. The stubbornness of the gap shows that we need to find new ways to retain women and girls in sport and to support more inactive women and girls to become more physically active.

With that in mind, during last year's women and girls in sport week, I announced £300,000 funding to support the development of new projects and partnerships. I am pleased to report to Parliament that nine sports governing bodies have successfully used the funding to lead partnership projects. Whether in boxing, basketball, squash or triathlon, I am hopeful that those projects will not only get more women and girls active for the period of the projects but provide them with learning that can be applied in and beyond those

sports in order to increase female participation and close the sports gender gap.

As part of women and girls in sport week, ministers go on visits to see women and girls involved in sports across the country. This year, I think that 14 ministers are involved. Last night, I was very pleased to visit East Kilbride Gymnastics Club, where I saw fantastic enthusiasm from the leadership who are coaching and training the girls and from the participants. The club is clearly determined to look at how it can tackle the drop-off rate in the early teens that Monica Lennon and others mentioned. It looks as though the club is going some way to tackle that, so I know that there is good practice from which we can learn.

If anyone gets a chance to visit the East Kilbride Gymnastics Club, they will see real talent. Some of its members are going to Mexico later this year. Watch out for their amazing gymnastics display.

We know that much more needs to be done to eradicate the inequalities that many women and girls still face in participating in sport and physical activity. Kenneth Gibson in particular made that point. The Government took the decision to establish the Scottish women and girls in sport advisory board. I thank Emma Harper for outlining the breadth and strength of leadership on the board. Earlier this week, I was delighted to receive the board's report, "Levelling the Playing Field 2019 Report and Recommendations". That bold report with huge ambition is the result of a lot of hard work. I warmly welcome it and all its recommendations to Government, which are bold and challenging—exactly what I hoped they would be.

When I went to my first meeting of the advisory board, we talked about the board members being experts in their fields and about the importance of not simply being content to tinker around the edges but being prepared to be bold, to challenge and to really push the envelope. I am delighted that the board has done that in its first report. The Government will take some time to consider all the recommendations carefully and will publish a full and considered response in due course. However, I am sure that members expect me to give them my initial thoughts on the key recommendations tonight.

One thing that I found very encouraging is that all the recommendations align not only with the board's four key focus areas—intervention, prevention, reconnection and continuation—but, more impressively, with the work of the First Minister's national advisory council on women and girls. The recommendations complement that work and will help us advance and accelerate it, so that we have a more gender-equal Scottish society.

The report also builds on the momentum from a year in which we saw high-profile sporting events such as those mentioned by Rona Mackay—the FIFA women’s world cup, the Solheim cup and the Vitality netball world cup—being watched, enjoyed and experienced by huge audiences.

The increased visibility has not only shone a light on the inspirational role models as outlined by Kenneth Gibson; we have also seen participation across a number of those sports spiking. Angela Constance made a very strong point about how such visibility can have wider impacts in shaping perceptions across society, and not just in relation to girls.

There is much to be proud of in the report, which contains a set of strong recommendations aimed at growing and improving participation and audiences. One of the major proposals is to create and deliver a Scottish sport media summit, and I am pleased to hear that there is cross-party support for that.

I look forward to working with gender equal media Scotland to help us to achieve that. In working with the media, I want to see real commitment to improve gender balance and increase the visibility of women’s sport, athletes and social participants through improved content and increased coverage across all media platforms.

Alison Johnstone should not have to search for female athletes in a newspaper or on TV; they should receive equal coverage. Liz Smith made a very strong point about why it is not only in society’s interest but in the media’s interest to ensure that that is the case. She was right that the Solheim cup was the perfect stage for Scotland, but it was also good golf and there was good coverage of it. My goodness, what a thrilling end it was! It was obviously fantastic that we won—that always helps. However, even if we had lost by that one hole, it would still have been thrilling. Like Liz Smith, I managed to spend some time at the competition and heard the enthusiasm of the audience, which got bigger and bigger as the week went on.

I attended the start of the junior Solheim cup earlier in the week when crowds were better than expected, and they just continued to get better as the week went on, and then there was that thrilling end. The idea that women’s sport is something that people would not want to watch has been totally thrown out. The media—whether TV, written media or radio—need to realise that it is in their interests to give women’s sport the coverage that it deserves.

In accepting the board’s recommendations, we will work towards a levelling of the playing field

whereby everyone is treated fairly and can achieve their full potential.

I take this opportunity to thank the advisory board once again for its work and input and for the boldness of its report and recommendations.

Members have my personal commitment to take those recommendations forward in a positive spirit, and to work together to ensure that we deliver the change that we want to see, making sure that, ultimately, they improve the lives of women and girls across Scotland, while helping us to create a truly equal society.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447
Fax: 0131 348 5423

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