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Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 24 January 2017

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 24 January 2017

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leaders are Jessica Reid and Callum Docherty, who are pupils at Braes high school, Reddingmuirhead in Falkirk.

Callum Docherty (Braes High School, Falkirk): My name is Callum and this is Jess. We attend Braes high school in Falkirk.

In November, we participated in the lessons from Auschwitz project. It was one of the most significant experiences of my life. We heard the testimony of Holocaust survivor Eva Clarke, who was born, against all odds, on the steps of Mauthausen concentration camp. It was such a personal story. I learned a great deal from Eva about the impact of the Holocaust on real people—a type of understanding you cannot get from a textbook.

Our visit began in the town of Oświęcim, which had a majority Jewish population before the Holocaust. Christians and Jews lived together in peace. Now not a single Jew lives there. A whole community was destroyed for ever.

What I saw at Auschwitz will stay with me for ever. I saw 2,000kg of human hair that had been taken from victims for use in the manufacture of clothing and bedding. I could not believe it. Jews had been persecuted to the point where they were not even viewed as human.

To see the horrors that mankind is capable of is often incomprehensible, but we must always remember what happened in the past, so that we can learn from it.

Jessica Reid (Braes High School, Falkirk): We have discussed at length the individuals who were affected by, and the perpetrators of, the Holocaust. They were people like us with families, dreams and worries. So why did it happen? What made people think that it was acceptable? We must learn from history to ensure that it never happens again.

The importance of fighting prejudice is never more evident than when we consider those people who did nothing to speak out. In a world where racism and prejudice are still rising, it is vital to educate others to recognise the consequences of not fighting anti-Semitism, racism and hatred.

When I think about Holocaust memorial day's theme, "How can life go on?", I think about my generation. It is we who must tell people what happened 77 years ago. When survivors can no longer tell their stories, it is we who must ensure that they live on. We must spread the message of acceptance of all cultures, religions and races.

My generation can defy expectations and improve the world. I am an optimist; I am passionate. I do not want history to repeat itself. I hope that today members of the Scottish Parliament and people across Scotland will join us in remembering those murdered in Auschwitz. Together, let us ensure that the world never forgets the past and strives for a more positive future.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-03602, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revised business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 24 January 2017—

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Developing Forestry in Scotland

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on
ScotRail Performance Improvement Plan

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) Wednesday 25 January 2017—

after

followed by Portfolio Questions
Health and Sport

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: UK Supreme
Court Judgement on Triggering of Article 50

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[Joe FitzPatrick.]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Concessionary Travel Scheme (Eligibility Age)

1. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to increase the eligibility age for the concessionary travel scheme. (S5T-00336)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): As previously mentioned in the chamber, we will undertake a consultation with key stakeholders about ways to ensure that the sustainability of the concessionary travel scheme is maintained for our older and disabled people. People are, of course, living longer, staying healthy for longer and staying in work later in life. We want to ensure that our successful concessionary bus travel scheme continues to benefit those who have the greatest reliance on free bus travel.

We want to extend concessionary travel to young modern apprentices and, later on, to young recipients of job grants, so we need to look at the longer-term sustainability of the scheme. We must not prejudge the outcome of the consultation, and we will, of course, listen to the range of views that are put forward across Scotland.

Let me be unequivocally clear that anyone with a bus pass will keep it, will be unaffected, and will remain eligible for the benefits of the scheme.

Mike Rumbles: The national concessionary travel scheme, which was guided through Parliament by my colleague Tavish Scott, has been a great success. It promotes social inclusion, helps older people to lead more active lives, encourages people to leave their cars at home, and is good for the environment. That is a win-win situation. The scheme gives freedom and, for some, a lifeline.

People will not be impressed by the Scottish National Party's attempts to sweep changes under the carpet until after the council elections in May, as noted in an article in the Sunday papers. What is preventing the Scottish Government from coming clean now so that people know exactly where it stands on this?

Humza Yousaf: On a consensual note, let me first agree with Mike Rumbles on the scheme's benefits. I remind him that the Government has funded the scheme for almost a decade, and we are very proud to do so, despite the various pressures on our budget. I agree with him on the benefits that he has highlighted. He should not believe everything that he reads in every Sunday newspaper.

It would be very illiberal and undemocratic if we did not go out to consultation, listen to people and take their views. We will go through a methodical process. Pre-engagement with stakeholders is important to form our views on any consultation. We will then let the public have their say on the scheme.

Mike Rumbles will understand that our aims to extend the scheme to modern apprentices and young people on job grants are very noble. We have to look at the scheme's long-term sustainability, but we will do that very much bearing in mind what the public have to say and the scheme's benefits, which Mike Rumbles articulated very well.

Mike Rumbles: We know that the Scottish Government's starting point is free bus travel for everyone over 60 and that its desired end point is entitlement for young apprentices, which has just been mentioned. The question is whether there are any options on the table other than raising the age of eligibility. Is means testing on or off the table? Will there be a universal benefit? Will there be a fee for the national entitlement card? It would be helpful if the minister could rule that out right now. Do people not deserve to know what the SNP has in store for them?

Humza Yousaf: Of course people will know. Mike Rumbles talked about sweeping things under the carpet. We have talked about a consultation on the long-term sustainability of the scheme. The First Minister talked about that when she made her speech on the programme for government, and Derek Mackay mentioned it in his speech on the draft budget. The director of finance at Transport Scotland, Mike Baxter, mentioned it in front of a parliamentary committee. The consultation is not a surprise that we have somehow sprung on the Parliament; we have mentioned and discussed it.

We are going through a methodical process, and the first part of that process is having a conversation with stakeholders about some of the things that Mike Rumbles has talked about. Transport Scotland and I will do that. We will talk about the options and what we can look at, examine and explore in relation to the scheme's long-term sustainability. We will then have a wide and very public consultation. We will hear views and, of course, come to a view. I am sure that Parliament, including Opposition members, will have its say. The process will be very public and transparent.

As I said, I think that most people around the country understand that extending the scheme to modern apprentices and young people on job grants is a very noble thing to do, but we have to consider its long-term sustainability, and we will do that in consultation.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In the draft budget document, the Scottish Government says that it will look to

"constrain payments under the concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people".

Does the minister seriously plan to reduce concessions for disabled passengers, many of whom rely on buses as their only means of transport? Will he rule that out?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I will rule that out. Let me give some absolute certainties. Those who have a bus pass will keep that bus pass; they will still be eligible for the scheme. There will be no change to the scheme for those with a disability. The other guarantee is that we will fulfil our manifesto commitment to extend the scheme to modern apprentices and, in time, young people who are on a back-to-work jobs grant.

Of course, for a number of years, the Conservatives have been pushing us to make changes to the concessionary travel scheme. We are certainly not going to make the changes that they have mentioned in the past. However, they will welcome the fact that we are looking to extend the scheme. As a consequence of that extension, we are consulting transparently on how we increase the scheme's sustainability.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): At last year's election, the SNP manifesto made no mention of cutting the free bus pass, yet now it is proposing to cut nearly £10 million from the concessionary travel scheme budget and will consult on restricting eligibility.

The free bus pass, which was introduced by the previous Labour-Lib Dem Government, is a lifeline to many older people. They deserve to know what changes the SNP plans before May's council elections. Will the minister confirm whether the Government is, in principle, committed to maintaining the current eligibility criteria? Will he ensure that all pensioners, forums and seniors groups are fully consulted in writing about the future of the bus pass? He says that he does not have a firm view and that the consultation is genuine. If a majority respond in favour of keeping the criteria the same, will he respect those views?

Humza Yousaf: Speaking about the concessionary travel scheme, Elaine Murray, Labour's former transport spokesperson, said:

"we will be looking at the most effective way to provide support, including whether to raise the age to 65."

Indeed, all political parties in the chamber, including the Labour Party, have discussed the topic.

The point that the member raises well is about consultation. We are in the pre-engagement phase. He makes a good point about the

consultation. We should not just rely on online methods. It is important that we look at how we engage with various seniors groups and forums, including in face to face meetings. I will take away that point and reflect with my officials on how we will do that.

The member mentioned principles. Our principles are that those who have a free bus pass will remain eligible for the scheme and keep that pass; there will be no change for those with a disability; and we will extend the scheme to modern apprentices and to young people on a jobs grant. Within those parameters, we will at look at the sustainability of the scheme.

The member asks us to be open about the matter. That is the entire point of the consultation, which will be public and transparent.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I make it clear that the Scottish Green Party does not see any need to consult on the proposal. The scheme is a good one. The Government is happy to fund a massive cut to air passenger duty. If the Government goes ahead with this, I suggest that it thinks about transferring some of that funding. The fact that we are looking at cuts of that scale while cutting £9.5 million from a concessionary travel scheme to people who really depend on buses tells me a lot about this Government's priority. It is investing in unsustainable, polluting transport methods and hitting hardest those in the lowest budgets. Will the minister not scrap the consultation now?

Humza Yousaf: The attitude is that, somehow, the cut in APD or air departure tax—ADT—as we are going to be calling it, will affect only a certain class of people. It is completely unacceptable that, somehow, people from across Scotland do not go on holiday. That is a crass argument.

I thought that the Green Party would have welcomed the fact that we want to extend the scheme to modern apprentices and to young people on a jobs grant. We will do that. The consultation will be public and open, and I will welcome political parties' involvement in it. It will go ahead, as we have said in the programme for government and the draft budget process. As I say, we will welcome the views from across not only the chamber but—perhaps more important—Scotland.

Rape Victims (Support)

2. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to help victims of rape. (S5T-00340)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): This Government is determined to ensure that a tough approach is taken to those who commit sexual crimes as well as helping to

ensure access to appropriate and sensitive help and support for the victims of such crimes.

In March 2015, the First Minister announced an additional £20 million of funding over three years to help to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls, including putting in place better support for victims. From this budget, we awarded an additional £1.85 million to Rape Crisis Scotland to enhance existing specialist support services offered to victims of sexual offences and to establish two new services in Orkney and Shetland. Later this year, new statutory jury directions will be introduced to assist our courts in considering rape and other sexual offence cases.

We have also dedicated resources to NHS Scotland to accelerate the pace of work in implementing minimum standards for forensic examinations for victims of sexual crimes. We are aware of the challenges in implementing the standards uniformly across Scotland and understand the particular difficulties that rural and island locations have experienced in developing and maintaining the expertise required to deliver the services to victims. This is an area that we are committed to improving, and we will continue to support actions to bring to justice the perpetrators of sexual offences and to improve the support available to victims.

Claire Baker: Although I do not doubt the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting victims of rape, research last year from Glasgow Caledonian University showed the weaknesses in some police responses and "A Woman's Story" from Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre has shown that much more needs to be done.

The cabinet secretary alluded to yesterday's report that rape victims in Orkney and Shetland face arduous journeys to Aberdeen for forensic examinations as there are no facilities on the islands. When I raised the issue of medical examinations last year, the First Minister responded by saying that

"Victims should be offered an examination by someone of ... their choice at an appropriate location"—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2016; c 17.]

but yesterday's report highlighted that that is still not taking place. What support will the Scottish Government provide for Shetland and Orkney to urgently address the lack of provision, and when can we expect rape victims across Scotland to be offered the choice of a female doctor in forensic examinations?

Michael Matheson: The member has raised a number of important points about how we provide appropriate and sensitive support to victims of crimes such as rape. In that respect, we have taken forward a range of actions, including the right to choose the gender of the person who

conducts the medical examination, as part of the provisions in the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 that we took through the Parliament.

There have been challenges in implementing in the national health service the minimum standards for forensic medical examinations for women who have been subject to sexual violence. Those challenges have been driven by a number of factors, and one of the principal factors that are posing real difficulty is the number of clinicians who have the necessary training and expertise to conduct these examinations. As the member will appreciate, there are very strict legal criteria for the way in which these examinations are undertaken, and there have been challenges in recruiting additional clinicians to undertake NHS Education for Scotland's training programme for medical examiners. We are now undertaking further work, part of which will be taken forward by NES within the NHS in a survey of female doctors who might be interested in undertaking this form of examination. That work will be taken forward over the coming weeks with a view to recruiting more clinicians to conduct these examinations.

The other challenge, particularly for our island communities and some of our rural communities, is the limited number of incidents in which sexual violence might take place. The issue is ensuring that the staff who have received this training have the skills required to conduct these examinations on a regular basis, and as I have said, that has proven to be a challenge in some of our rural and island communities.

To ensure that we get greater consistency of approach in the application of the minimum standards, I have provided additional resource to NHS National Services Scotland for a dedicated co-ordinator's post over the next two years. That person will be responsible for looking at the actions that all boards have taken to meet these standards, to identify gaps and to set out what action needs to be taken to address them.

Claire Baker: I appreciate the challenges that the cabinet secretary has outlined, but some timescales or targets for the resolution of the problems would be appreciated by victims.

Last week, we had the conclusion of the civil rape case that was brought by Denise Clair. Given the outcome and the evidence that was presented, many people will ask why the case was not taken forward as a criminal matter. The fact that only 12 per cent of reported rapes and attempted rapes make it to court means that victims are often left without justice. It is recognised that rape is a complex crime to prosecute, but Parliament passed the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, which explicitly states that agreement cannot be given freely if the person is under the influence of alcohol. An increasing number of calls have been

made for the Crown Office to revisit its original decision and for an inquiry to be held into why the case never proceeded to trial.

Will the Scottish Government support the undertaking of an appropriate inquiry into the Crown Office's decision not to prosecute? Will it review the application of the 2009 act so that victims of rape can be confident that they will receive the utmost care—and, ultimately, justice—from the point of reporting this heinous crime to the verdict?

Michael Matheson: The member made two specific points. As regards the timeframe for the work that is being done to support health boards such as NHS Shetland and NHS Orkney that are experiencing challenges, some of that work is being progressed at the moment. The co-ordinator for working with health boards is already in post and the survey is about to commence; it is going through a pilot process, after which it will be sent out to all health board areas, as well as the different clinical groups that could participate in supporting this area of work.

As part of the domestic abuse and sexual violence strategy, work is also being done with NHS Shetland and the local police, in partnership with Rape Crisis Shetland, to look at what measures can be taken at local level to provide a better response to women who have been subjected to sexual violence.

Some of the work that Claire Baker asked about is being done, but I accept that the standard of service that is presently provided is not uniformly of the level that I and every other member would expect for women who have experienced such crimes. We are determined to do everything that we can to get greater consistency across the country, notwithstanding the challenges that are faced in our rural and island communities.

With regard to the civil case that was considered last week, as the member will recognise, prosecution of such matters is an issue for our independent prosecution services and it would not be appropriate for ministers to engage in those issues. However, the member will also recognise that the criminal proceedings statistics that were published last week demonstrated an increase in the number of sexual offence convictions that have been secured. There has been a consistent increase in the reporting of such crimes.

The member will also recognise that the burden of proof in a criminal case is markedly different from the burden of proof in a civil case. Anything to do with the decision on whether to prosecute a case is a matter for our independent Lord Advocate and the Crown Office.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The minister might like to know that four members

wanted to ask supplementaries. I am afraid that there is no time today, as we have two statements and a debate to come, and there is no time in hand. The members who unsuccessfully requested a supplementary might want to press their request-to-speak buttons on other occasions later in the week, and I will bear that in mind.

Draft Scottish Energy Strategy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a statement by Paul Wheelhouse on the draft Scottish energy strategy. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:24

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy (Paul Wheelhouse): The success and wellbeing of Scotland's people, communities, businesses and public services are underpinned by the supply of reliable energy. Affordable energy provision is a prerequisite for our quality of life and good health, and for ensuring that we have a productive and competitive economy.

Our energy sector already provides high-quality jobs and a vibrant climate for innovation in established sectors such as the oil and gas industry, where the skills and expertise that have been gained through more than 40 years of operating in the North Sea will prove to be invaluable to the engineering and innovation challenges in creating the energy system of the future, and in new renewable energy sectors such as offshore wind, wave and tidal energy, alongside grid-scale battery storage and pumped hydroelectric storage.

I announce to members that the Scottish Government has now published a consultation on our draft Scottish energy strategy, which sets out a vision for the future of energy between now and 2050. Our climate change ambitions underpin all the choices that are laid out in the draft strategy and have, in turn, been determined by our commitments under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. The strategy has been developed in concert with, and as a companion to, the draft climate change plan that was laid before Parliament and presented to members in the chamber by the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform last week.

As it stands, the task to decarbonise our electricity production has been largely achieved; the equivalent of 59.4 per cent of Scotland's gross electricity consumption is now met by renewable energy and we are well on our way to meeting the 2020 target of 100 per cent—albeit that United Kingdom Government policy changes have made our progress more challenging.

Our options in terms of the scale of supply of energy have substantially broadened in recent years. Consumers can now generate energy for their own needs from solar panels or a wind turbine, for example. Scotland has been at the

forefront of the drive for community and locally owned renewables—there are more than 15,000 locally and community-owned renewable energy sites in Scotland, and there is installed capacity of 595MW, which has surpassed our target of 500MW five years early. By the end of 2015, we had seen the largest annual increase in renewable heat output since measurement began: it went up by more than 1,100 gigawatt hours in a single year. In 2015, Scotland produced enough heat from renewable sources to meet between 5.3 and 5.6 per cent of non-electrical heat demand.

We can all take pride in such successes, but it is clear that more progress will be required, in particular in the supply of low-carbon heat and transport, if we are to remain on track to meet our ambitious climate change goals. To maintain momentum, a new 2030 all-energy renewables target is proposed in our energy strategy, which sets an ambitious challenge to deliver the equivalent of half of Scotland's energy requirements for heat, transport and electricity from renewable energy sources. I hope that members will welcome that landmark proposal, given the support that was shown for such an ambition last month in the chamber, during a debate on support for Scotland's renewables sector.

Our renewables sector is facing an uncertain future. Unwelcome cuts to UK Government support schemes are jeopardising a very strong investment pipeline and strong Scottish supply chain across a range of renewables technologies. Onshore wind, for example, is now a mature technology in which a number of issues need to be addressed, including the approach to repowering existing wind farms that are coming to the end of their planning consent, or extending the life of sites where it is appropriate to do so. In our accompanying onshore wind policy statement, we set out in more detail our approach to those important matters.

Our draft energy strategy calls on UK ministers to do more to restore confidence in the sector, in the light of the UK's slide down the investment-attractiveness league table, and it calls on the industry itself to continue to deliver the cost reductions that are required to ensure that low-carbon energy is affordable. Our strategy sets a challenge to the industry to make Scotland the first area in the UK to host subsidy-free onshore wind. There are real cost reductions, such as those that have been announced today by the offshore wind programme board, which show that offshore wind energy costs have fallen by 32 per cent since 2012. That is proof that offshore wind is rising to the challenge to reduce its costs.

Scotland can be proud of how we are playing our part and leading the way in marine energy and

in development of floating offshore wind projects off our coastline—a technology that is well suited to our deeper waters.

The strategy reiterates our commitment to delivering a stable and managed transition to a low-carbon economy, and highlights a range of technologies and fuels that will supply our energy needs over the coming decades. The strategy makes clear our commitment to the oil and gas industry as a key contributor to the security and stability of energy supplies throughout our transition, with around three quarters of total energy consumption in Scotland currently being supplied by oil and gas. Production of oil and gas in the North Sea and west of Shetland is highly regulated, with some of the most advanced and, comparatively, least-carbon-intensive production methods of their kind anywhere in the world. Our oil and gas sector will continue to make a positive contribution as the engineering and technical bedrock of our wider energy transition.

Advances in technology mean that new and innovative ways of using hydrocarbons are emerging, and they will continue to emerge in the decades ahead. Energy sources such as hydrogen—a zero-carbon fuel at the point of use—have the potential to reduce substantially the total system cost of decarbonisation, to provide a range of services to our energy system and to provide integrated low-carbon solutions across the heat, power and transport sectors. Such innovations are already here. For example, Aberdeen hosts the largest fleet of hydrogen-powered buses in Europe, supported by two hydrogen refuelling stations, and in the Levenmouth community energy project, renewable wind power is being used to run a fleet of hydrogen vehicles, including Fife Council vans and refuse-collection vehicles.

The strategy makes it clear that the Scottish Government is committed to examining the evidence and to engaging with the citizens of Scotland to gather their views and to understand their needs and perspectives. Our approach to evaluating the impacts of unconventional oil and gas is an example of that evidence-based and measured approach. As I outlined in my statement on 8 November 2016, we will shortly launch our full public consultation on unconventional oil and gas, so that the people of Scotland can express their views on that important and contentious issue. The results of that consultation will be a key consideration when we finalise our energy strategy later this year. Our draft energy strategy confirms our proposal that underground coal gasification will play no part in our energy mix.

Our energy strategy is not just about energy supplies. Consumers of energy are at the heart of our whole-system approach, and our patterns of energy use are changing, too. We are more

efficient than ever in using energy, but major shifts lie ahead. How consumers engage with those energy choices will be informed by smart technologies that provide better information on energy use and a better platform for informed decisions on consumption of energy.

Scotland will need a more flexible energy system that can accommodate the many choices that consumers and generators will make in the future. That energy challenge represents an exciting opportunity to capture the economic benefits of pioneering approaches here in Scotland. Smart and controlled charging of an ever-growing number of electric vehicles in Scotland will, in itself, grow demand for electricity, while providing energy storage capacity, capacity to absorb intermittent loads from renewables generation and, potentially, a source of grid power input, when required.

Most important, we recognise that energy remains unaffordable for too many people in Scotland. That is driven by high energy prices, but another key driver is our housing and non-domestic building stock, which is all too often profoundly wasteful of energy, despite our very significant investment in improving the energy efficiency of Scotland's homes. The draft energy strategy seeks to address the needs of those who are least able to pay for their energy, by supporting energy solutions that provide warmer homes and better outcomes for consumers.

Scotland's energy efficiency programme—SEEP—is a long-term programme to improve energy efficiency in both domestic and non-domestic buildings with the ultimate aim of decarbonising Scotland's heat supply, which will make energy more affordable and reduce carbon emissions from our built environment. We have committed more than £500 million to SEEP up to 2020-21. SEEP is currently in its design phase. Today, we are also publishing two key accompanying consultations in support of the draft Scottish energy strategy. The first focuses on options for the programme and policy design of SEEP and the second consults more specifically on the role that regulation could play in supporting the development of district heating, as well as on a framework for planning at local level of heat decarbonisation and energy efficiency programmes.

Scotland is now a pioneer in the development of innovative local energy systems. Heat, electricity and storage technologies, combined with demand management and energy efficiency measures on an area-by-area basis, could realise substantial local economic, environmental and social benefits. Scotland's communities and island populations are increasingly playing an active and important part in the delivery of innovative local low-carbon, smart-

energy systems, in partnership with the private and public sectors. Those projects benefit from funding support from the Scottish Government, including the local energy challenge fund, which has to date allocated £31 million to a wide range of innovative projects.

In addition, under the low-carbon infrastructure transition programme, we have already supported more than 40 low-carbon projects, and today I can announce that around £50 million will soon be awarded to 13 low-carbon demonstrator projects at sites across Scotland. Those projects are at the cutting edge of innovation and will provide a solid basis for our learning as we mainstream the local energy approach.

I am proud to present our draft Scottish energy strategy to Parliament and to launch a consultation exploring the choices that we face about our future energy system. I invite members throughout the chamber and all our constituents to have their say on key decisions that will determine the shape of Scotland's energy future.

I hope that, in the months ahead, as we finalise our strategy, the document will stimulate well-informed debate on the energy challenges in Scotland and the policies that are needed to meet our aspirations to deliver a secure and sustainable energy future for all—an outcome that will, I have no doubt, be in the best interests of our communities, our economy and our environment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow 20 minutes for questions, after which we must move on to the next item of business. As always, my mantra is that members should try to make their questions brief and the minister, if he can, should be brief and succinct as well.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Before I start, I note my registered interests regarding renewable energy.

I welcome the new targets to push our renewables ambitions even further. Since the inception of the UK Government's contract for difference programme, Scotland has received 40 per cent of its funding for projects from the UK Government, which is a fact that is acknowledged by the Scottish Government.

It is right that we should be at the forefront of the renewable energy sector, but the minister will know that the low-hanging fruit has been picked. We now need significant investment in renewable heat and we must not waste heat from our homes. That policy is handled here in Holyrood, but the current homes insulation budget is already £1 million behind where we were two years ago, which is not good enough. The Scottish Conservatives have called for all homes to be

rated energy performance certificate C or above by 2030 and for £400 million a year of investment by the end of this parliamentary session in order to reach renewables targets. That policy is supported by stakeholders such as WWF, so why does the minister think that his budget of £114 million is sufficient when stakeholders are telling him that it is not?

Paul Wheelhouse: I recognise the importance of tackling fuel poverty and of improving the energy efficiency of our buildings. I hope that we have common ground on that, although we clearly have a difference of opinion about the Scottish Government's approach.

From my previous tenure as Minister for Environment and Climate Change, I know that there has been much chopping and changing of policy on the green deal and other measures to support energy efficiency in recent years. Obviously, the green deal has been cancelled, and that had a direct impact on the Scottish Government's budget. We have tried to replace the loss of green deal funding and we have put in substantial investment.

The fact that £500 million is being invested by the Scottish Government over the period up to 2021 is not a minor matter, but I reassure the member that it is just part of a longer-term programme that goes well beyond 2021. We are launching the consultation on Scotland's energy efficiency programme to elicit views on how best to implement it. It is a national infrastructure priority and a very high priority for the Government and, I hope, the whole Parliament.

I am happy to work with the member and his colleagues in the Scottish Conservatives, as they have positive ideas about how we implement SEEP. Mr Stewart, the Minister for Local Government and Housing, will also be happy to engage with Mr Burnett. The Scottish Government has been putting its money where its mouth is. There is not an equivalent programme in England at the moment, so we feel confident that we are making great strides forwards. We can always do more, but we are making significant investment in energy efficiency.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I declare an interest as the vice-president of Energy Action Scotland.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement and for much of the content. In particular, I very much welcome the 50 per cent renewable energy target. That was in Labour's manifesto and it was in the Scottish National Party's manifesto, too. It is ambitious and rightly so; the challenge will be in the implementation and we look forward to examining the detail.

Although Scotland more often than not generates more energy than we use, there have been occasions when we have been required to import energy. Baseload is the key issue, yet the statement is short on what the Government will do to ensure that the lights stay on. What actions will the Scottish Government take to maintain baseload, and does the minister intend to continue our helpful partnership with the rest of the UK energy market?

I am concerned that we measure the effect of what we do on people so, rather than inputs and outputs, I want us to measure outcomes. Will the Scottish Government ensure that the focus is on how many people it lifts out of fuel poverty, rather than on how many houses it insulates?

Paul Wheelhouse: I have some sympathy with Jackie Baillie's latter point. The issue is ultimately about helping people to tackle fuel poverty—I think that we are all in agreement that that is one of the biggest problems that we face. We deal with constituents on a regular basis who face the choice between heating their homes and eating—that is very far from being a satisfactory position. It is not entirely my decision, but I have sympathy with the point about trying to focus on how many people we help rather than on heating houses for the sake of heating houses; this is about helping individuals, so that was a constructive point and I will work with colleagues in the Government to see how we can implement that.

We will work with stakeholders to identify our approach to tackling fuel poverty. We will look at having a renewed strategy for that, at how we measure it and at the scope of the targets in that respect. I hope that there will be the possibility to engage with Jackie Baillie and her colleagues on how we take that agenda forward.

On the flexibility issue, I recognise that there is an important need to ensure that we have a secure and reliable supply of energy. I want to continue to work with UK Government ministers to achieve that end. I have engaged positively with them on issues such as pumped hydro storage. I know that looking at battery storage is one of the focuses of the industrial strategy south of the border, and I hope that we can work together on that. It does take two to tango, as I have discussed with Ms Baillie—[*Laughter.*]

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): That sounded like an offer.

Paul Wheelhouse: It was not a comment directed at Ms Baillie. It was a reference—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Don't keep digging, minister.

Paul Wheelhouse: It was a reference to UK ministers rather than to Ms Baillie, whom I have always worked very well with. *[Laughter.]*

We recognise the need to generate baseload, so it is important that we look at what we can do around areas such as thermal generation as well. An environmental framework is currently in place that is harmful to the establishment of replacement plant for Cockenzie and Longannet. Obviously, there is an existing consent at Cockenzie, but we want to work with the UK Government to create a propitious environment for that baseload to happen.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have 14 people trying to get in, so can everybody be brief and can I ask the minister, with respect, to try to shorten his answers?

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Can the minister give further details of how he believes the proposals in the energy strategy will help to reduce social inequalities and foster inclusive growth? Will he outline what is being done to ensure that individual communities benefit from renewable energy projects?

Paul Wheelhouse: We have touched on issues to do with fuel poverty. There is a particular rural dimension and I know that Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have done work in the past looking at the high cost of living in rural areas. I know that the cost of living is higher in rural areas, which means that fuel poverty is a particularly acute problem in rural areas, particularly in the island communities of Scotland.

Scotland's consumers, households and businesses are very much at the heart of the strategy and we are looking for opportunities for consumers and suppliers alike to address the impact of fuel poverty in particular. There will be a renewed focus on energy efficiency. We want to seek—as I referenced for Ms Baillie—an energy market that works for everyone, working with UK ministers where possible. We want to create local, vibrant energy economies across Scotland in which we can do that and in which there are perhaps local arrangements for electricity supply and demand. We are committed to increasing the scope of that and to working in partnership with host communities where renewable projects are taking place.

We have upped our game—we met our target for the amount of community energy to be generated by 2020 five years early, so we have doubled the 2020 target. A key part of our energy strategy remains to achieve 1GW of community and locally owned energy by 2020, and we have an aspiration for at least half of newly consented and renewable energy projects by 2020 to have an

element of shared ownership. That should also help to ensure that economic benefits are felt at a local level.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by referring to my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to a smart meter company, which is based elsewhere in the UK.

The minister has just announced yet another delay on a decision on fracking, more than two years after the initial moratorium was introduced. In his statement, he stressed the importance of decarbonisation and we agree with that. However, is the minister aware that Scotland is currently importing more than 40,000 barrels of shale gas every day from the US? That is an unnecessary 3,000 mile journey, which is resulting in a significantly increased and unnecessary carbon footprint at a time when we could be using—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Dean Lockhart: —we could be—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question?

Dean Lockhart: —extracting—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question?

Dean Lockhart: —that gas domestically. Does the minister not recognise the huge benefits that would be available for jobs and the economy in Scotland?

Paul Wheelhouse: With the greatest of respect to Mr Lockhart, that is a matter for the people of Scotland to inform us about through the consultation, which is on track—as promised in our November statement—to take place at the end of this month. Mr Lockhart will not have long to wait for the consultation and I look forward to reading his submission to it.

However, I point out that at the time of my statement on underground coal gasification, I was heavily criticised by members on the Conservative benches for taking a decision that was measured and based on evidence, as was our approach rather than the UK Government's approach, but, lo and behold, the UK Government has followed Scotland's lead and has done exactly the same. Perhaps Mr Lockhart will listen to our evidence-based approach and to the determination that we will make when we bring the matter to Parliament and allow Parliament to vote on the future of unconventional gas in Scotland.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Meeting these energy transition targets demands political leadership, but if local supply chains are to benefit and if, in turn, we are to generate local jobs, economic leadership is demanded as well. Is the Government committed to a plan for the economy to go with the energy strategy, so that

we maximise the benefits to local manufacturers, local suppliers and local jobs?

Paul Wheelhouse: I certainly agree with Richard Leonard. One of the key objectives of the Government—which Richard Leonard obviously shares from what he has said—is to try to ensure that, in making a low carbon transition, we generate local jobs in Scotland. It is part of the implicit deal that was struck in 2009 with trade unions and civic Scotland that we would make this historic transition to a low-carbon economy but do so in a way that brought people with us and that helped areas that were high carbon to transition to low carbon.

It is important that as industry develops in response to the climate change plan and the energy strategy that we have set out today, we work hard with it to ensure that we convert the opportunities into jobs in Scotland. We have launched an innovation action plan, which refers specifically to low-carbon issues and tackling climate change. We also have our established manufacturing action plan for Scotland, which is not badged as an industrial policy but which is in effect a component of an industrial policy. We look forward to working with Mr Leonard and others to take forward that agenda and to secure the vital economic opportunities that we hope can come from the strategy.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I warmly welcome the minister's ambitious strategy. As he will know, I have been a long-standing supporter of the creation of a publicly owned national energy company in Scotland to ensure that our people capture more of the benefits from our natural resources. Will he assure me that work is under way to create such a company? If the Danes, the Norwegians and those in other countries can do it, I hope that we can do the same, so that our people get not just the crumbs off the table but the maximum benefits from our vast energy resources.

Paul Wheelhouse: I recognise Mr Lochhead's strong commitment to the issue. I well remember having a conversation with him on the subject as long ago as 2014. I reassure him that, although the issue might not have been referenced in my statement, it is very much part of the energy strategy. We have made a commitment to explore the role and remit of a Government-owned energy company. A specific question in the energy strategy consultation invites views on the potential role for such an organisation, and I look forward to Mr Lochhead's considered contribution to that.

We believe that such a body could address specific market failure issues and add value through accelerating progress towards relevant policy aims or goals that are set out in the strategy. It could even take on a number of roles in

relation to the delivery of projects. There is a potential for the delivery of support for existing and new schemes and initiatives. There is also the potential to deliver energy infrastructure, including district heating, or to co-ordinate the procurement of energy efficiency and heat technology measures. Such a body could act as an energy supplier or even administer the Scottish renewable energy bond, on which there is another question in the consultation. We welcome people's views on the potential role of such an organisation in all those matters.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): We welcome the consultation on the regulation of district heating but, in light of the fact that less than 1 per cent of homes are connected to district heating, what steps will the Government take to develop innovative financial models such as shared stakeholder investment to increase access to district heating?

Paul Wheelhouse: In fairness, I recognise Maurice Golden's strong interest in the area. He has raised the issue of district heating a number of times, and I commend him for taking it forward. It is another issue on which I hope that we can have common ground.

The Government has an ambition to deliver 1.5 terawatt hours of Scotland's heat by district or communal heating by 2020. As part of the wider strategy to 2032 to support the environment secretary's climate change plan, we are looking at what more we can do to step that up. That is why we have the encouraging work that the special working group on regulation has done to inform our thinking on a regulatory environment that might make that happen faster and secure greater private sector investment.

We have had considerable international interest in what we are doing in Scotland. Scotland and London are probably the two locations in the UK that are attracting the most interest in relation to district heating projects, because we are getting the regulatory position correct. I commend my predecessor, Fergus Ewing, for taking forward that work. I have picked up the ball from him.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I congratulate the Scottish Government on rising to the challenge that the Greens set in the Parliament last month by setting a target of half of all our energy being from renewables by 2030. The Government must now match that with a commitment to keep Scotland frack free.

Further to the minister's previous answer on heat, how will he switch nearly 2 million homes to low-carbon heating by 2032, which will clearly require more than just district heating? That is the number of homes that will be required to be dealt with to meet the 80 per cent domestic heat target

that is in the climate plan that the minister just referred to.

Paul Wheelhouse: Mark Ruskell makes the fair point that we cannot rely just on district heating. We do not think that every house will have a district heating solution, so we will have to look at alternatives, and we are looking at alternative fuels. There is a potential for hydrogen to replace existing fuels. Not that long ago, it was part of the town gas that went through the mains in a lot of towns in Scotland, and it may have a role. However, that is a question for the consultation to answer.

On demand management, we are investing heavily in SEEP to reduce people's consumption of energy and to reduce the waste or loss of heat, which will also help. We are trying to reduce demand and improve energy efficiency and to improve the supply of heat from renewable sources, and I hope that we can get there. I welcome potential engagement with Mr Ruskell on his ideas on how we can do that.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I declare an interest as the owner of a microturbine and I join other members in welcoming the Government's acceptance of the demands of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and others for a target of 50 per cent of energy coming from renewables by 2030.

On transport, how does the minister expect the ambitious 33 per cent emissions reduction target that the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform set out last week to square with the expectation in his draft strategy

"that effective biofuel use for transport decarbonisation in the overall transport sector is unlikely to reach above 10% for some time"?

Will the Scottish Government's approach to business rates help or hinder efforts to make Scotland the first area in the UK to host subsidy-free onshore wind?

Paul Wheelhouse: There are two issues in Liam McArthur's questions. The decarbonisation of transport is one of the biggest challenges that we face as a society. I accept that biofuels will not be the only answer that we need to explore. That is why it is important that there are measures in the energy strategy—I appreciate that Liam McArthur has not had a chance to see them—on decarbonisation through electrification as well as hydro vehicles and hydrogen, which I cited in my statement. Hydrogen is being used in Aberdeen for a bus fleet. It is also being used in Fife, and I commend Fife Council for using hydrogen for refuse-collection vehicles, smaller vans and light goods vehicles.

Good pilot work is being done, including some in Orkney. Liam McArthur is right to have mentioned that Orkney is a bit of a living laboratory. Very good work is being done on using hydrogen in the ferry fleet there, which takes advantage of the off-grid nature of Orkney, where surplus electricity that has been generated is used to create hydrogen for use in transport.

We are considering all those issues and we would welcome feedback from industry on how best we can achieve our goals.

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the minister give more detail about how the energy strategy will interact with the climate change plan and offer his thoughts on the news that the UK Government's dithering on carbon capture and storage cost the taxpayer £100 million because of the cancellation of its £1 billion CCS competition, in which Peterhead was the front runner?

Paul Wheelhouse: That issue is hugely important. I do not want to strike a discordant note, but the decision on Peterhead was pretty disgraceful, in that investors were led to believe that there was support, but it was pulled from under them at the last minute.

I appreciate that members have not had an opportunity to look through our energy strategy in detail. In it, we cite the importance of CCS as a technology for demonstration in Scotland. We believe that near-term demonstration of small-scale projects, leading to medium and large-scale deployment of CCS, along with the development of CO₂ utilisation—which potentially has an economic use in itself—will be critical for the cost-effective decarbonisation of heat, power and industry.

We regret strongly the fact that the UK Government withdrew all the funding for the £1 billion CCS competition. We will try to persuade it of the logic of carrying on with investment in CCS, because that is an important part of the future energy supply in Scotland. The development of CCS would protect Scottish businesses against future carbon price rises and secure economic benefit for the supply chain, to pick up Mr Leonard's point. That knowledge and expertise could also be transferred to international markets, where there is growing interest in CCS, and it could allow Scotland to play a leading role in global decarbonisation if it is possible to do so.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): As the minister said, our climate ambitions must underpin all the choices that are laid out in the draft energy strategy. Will he explain what synergies there will be between Parliament's scrutiny of the draft strategy and the draft climate change plan, and what formal assessment is being

made to ensure that the transition to the low-carbon economy is a just one for affected workers and communities?

Paul Wheelhouse: Claudia Beamish's colleagues made a similar point about the need to take into account the impact on society. Part of the challenge that all developed economies face in transitioning from a high-carbon model to a low-carbon one is in ensuring that we take people with us and do not break the economy in the process. I appreciate that, sometimes, the process goes more slowly than some folk would like it to, but we have to have the leading ambition. The targets set the frame, allow industry to see the future that is ahead of it and help industry to migrate over a period to a different model.

I am happy to engage with trade unions and others on how we best advance such work. I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform is also aware of the need to ensure that we take those points on board. I look forward to engaging with Claudia Beamish on the energy aspects.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions. I apologise to the five members from across the parties whom I have been unable to call because of time. I have to move on to the next item of business.

Forestry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-03573, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on developing forestry in Scotland.

14:55

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing): Trees cover 18 per cent of the land area of Scotland. Our forestry resources represent 45 per cent of the United Kingdom total and 60 per cent of UK softwood production. Forestry contributes almost £1,000 million a year to the Scottish economy and it supports 25,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Private plantings cover more than 965,000 hectares, and the national forest estate covers 640,000 hectares—some 8.2 per cent of Scotland.

Those impressive statistics emphasise the enormous importance of woods and forests to Scotland's people, communities, economy and environment, and they explain this Government's unequivocal commitment to forestry and to maintaining the national forest estate. That commitment is backed by ambition, which we now want to extend. Having considered the progress that has been made towards meeting the annual planting target of 10,000 hectares, we have extended our ambition. The draft climate change plan that was published last week by my colleague Roseanna Cunningham proposes to increase that target so that, by 2024-25, we are creating 15,000 hectares of woodland a year.

As one of very few economic activities that absorb more carbon than they produce, and one that supplies low-carbon materials for building, forestry is crucial to our environmental objectives. Trees remove about 10 million tonnes of CO₂ each year, and are home to more than 200 plant, bird and animal species, including some that are unique to Scotland.

Some will rightly question that increased target, given that, as I fully acknowledge, we have not yet managed to meet the previous annual target, but I hope to be able to reassure them today about why I consider the new target to be achievable, and I want to reassure the Conservatives and Labour that our approach will also address the sort of issues that their amendments fairly highlight. At this point, I can say that I am minded to accept the Labour and Conservative amendments, in a perhaps unprecedented display of magnanimity on my part. I wanted to extend that magnanimity to the Greens, and would have done so, were it not for the fact that, unfortunately, their amendment is just a bit too prescriptive; accepting it would pre-empt the debate on the forestry bill and pre-empt a

proper consideration of the views of the consultees, whose views we need to take fully into account. However, if it helps, I can say that I am happy to meet representatives of the Green Party and will discuss their position sympathetically.

I thought that it would be useful to ad lib at that point, but I will go back to my script now—I am sorry about that.

We are putting in place all the necessary components for success: funding, appetite, process, innovation, land, skills and political will. We intend to increase the financial support that is available for tree planting and management from £36 million to £40 million in the current year—provided that our budget is supported, as I hope that it will be—and I will seek to take every opportunity, resources and future budgetary pressures allowing, to seek to invest more funding in planting, and to be an advocate there anent.

Although our target has been challenging, a lot of tree planting has been happening in Scotland. Between 2007 and 2015, this Government supported the creation of more than 54,000 hectares of new woodland with investment of more than £230 million.

Our globally renowned processing sector has also made significant, welcome investments in recent years, which is a sure sign of confidence in and by the industry. That includes firms such as James Jones & Sons, and inward investors such as Norbord, which operates inter alia in my constituency. In 2015, the timber harvest was nearly 7 million tonnes—seven times the size of the 1976 harvest. Interest in investment in forestry in Scotland is growing steadily. In 2015-16, Scotland created 83 per cent of all new woodland in the UK. Timber production in Scotland has grown by 23 per cent since 2007 and timber availability is projected to expand further to 11.9 million cubic metres by 2025.

The streamlining of processes is enabling that trend. The new forestry grant scheme has been well received. Since the scheme opened in October 2015, Forestry Commission Scotland has approved more than 7,400 hectares of new planting; 71 per cent of that approved planting is productive, while 29 per cent focuses on other benefits, such as biodiversity or flood alleviation.

We can streamline the approval process further and create more certainty for investors. Last summer, I appointed former chief planner Jim Mackinnon to review and identify how the process could be improved. I have accepted Mr Mackinnon's recommendations in principle, and Forestry Commission Scotland's plan to implement those recommendations will be published shortly. The plan will be key to delivering our new planting targets.

The availability of land is also key. Currently, Scotland has only 18 per cent forest cover, compared with 37 per cent for the European Union as a whole—twice as much—and 31 per cent worldwide. A study has shown that 30 per cent of our land is suitable for growing trees, without using prime agricultural land or planting on important conservation sites. There is clearly room for growth.

I believe that the case for increased woodland creation is compelling, but I know that others remain to be convinced. Some are particularly concerned about the prospect of a return to 1980s practices when a monoculture approach to conifer plantation was implemented. Let me be clear. The Government will not oversee any return to the bad old days of blanket forest planting. Ours is a modern vision, in which woodland expansion must respect modern standards of sustainable management, such as the UK forestry standard. We will work closely with local authorities and communities to tackle the issue of the availability of land.

We also want sustainable, mixed land use, which is why I am pleased to support the work on sheep and trees that is being led by the National Sheep Association to promote the benefits of tree planting for sheep farming. That does not mean sacrificing one land use for another. Farming and forestry can work well together when managed in an integrated way. Scotland has plenty of land that is not prime agricultural land or valuable habitats for wildlife and where planting trees is absolutely the right thing to do. That will be our focus.

To meet our tree-planting ambitions, we must keep skilled professionals working across all sectors. We need more young people to take up careers and opportunities in forestry and to join the many forestry apprentices who are now working in the sector. The work of organisations such as the Scottish forest and timber technologies industry leadership group, outdoor and woodland learning Scotland and Lantra is crucial in that regard. We should use all available powers and levers to establish modern statutory and operational arrangements to support this valuable and growing sector.

That is why I intend to introduce a bill in this parliamentary session to complete the devolution of forestry and provide a new legislative framework. Although we have consulted on our draft proposals and are currently considering responses, I want to reach out across Parliament to offer to work with members to get that framework and those arrangements right.

To go back off-spiste for a moment, I omitted to say earlier that we have also worked with the Liberal Democrats prior to today. That

underscores the fact that I am determined to work with all members to try to get these matters right.

Our aim is to preserve the knowledge, skills and expertise that we have in place and to ensure that those are deployed to best effect in localities and communities. However, we want to build on the success of Forest Enterprise Scotland to create an enhanced development and management body that will allow us to maintain and, indeed, grow the national forest estate as an asset for the nation.

Forest Enterprise Scotland is already a partner with the private sector and communities in the management of land, supporting 11,000 jobs, many in rural areas. That work involves spending over £50 million with predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises working on the estate. The estate also supports over 100 projects with rural and urban communities on work including urban regeneration, renewable energy, affordable housing, leisure, recreation, mountain biking and opportunities for community businesses. I hope and am sure that I will receive many examples of those good works from members across the chamber during the debate.

To date, managing the estate has involved small, discrete purchases and disposals of appropriate land and forests, and that careful approach will continue. We should also, however, consider how to make best use of the resources that are realised from such sales.

If we are to develop fully the potential of trees, woods and forests for Scotland, and if we are to increase their contribution to our communities, our economy and our environment, we need to work together. I hope that we can do so in this Parliament. However, there is a greater role for people and communities to play. Currently, over 200 community groups all over Scotland are involved in managing woodlands and forests. I intend to ensure that many more are involved and included in the future. I want to add to the success of the 31 communities that already own over 10,000 acres transferred under the national forest land scheme.

The largest forest owner in Scotland is in fact the Government. As the Greens do, the Government wants to see ownership increasingly devolved to communities. Today, I can advise that Forest Enterprise Scotland is developing a new community asset transfer scheme—a digital resource to provide more information and support to communities that are seeking to buy or lease parts of the national forest estate.

To conclude, modern Scottish forestry is indeed a rare thing. It is a win for communities, a win for the economy and a win for the environment. Our forests come in all shapes and sizes: the productive spruce forests of Galloway, the iconic

native pinewoods in my constituency and treasured small pockets of well-used local woodlands and glens scattered throughout our villages, towns and cities.

A study by WWF that was published in 2016 highlights the challenges. Unless we produce more of our own timber and reduce dependency on imports, the current ratio of domestic to imported supply can be supported only until 2030. If we do not plant more trees, the UK will by 2050 be importing nearly 80 per cent of the timber to meet its demand. Surely we should all work together to tackle that.

That is why, in moving the motion in my name, I seek the support of everyone in the Parliament in a shared national endeavour to develop fully the enormous potential offered by planting more forestry and woodland.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the contribution that woods and forests make to Scotland's people, communities, economy and environment; notes ministers' intention to complete the devolution of forestry so that its management in Scotland is fully accountable to ministers and to the Parliament; welcomes the future increase in the Scottish Government's annual target to create 15,000 hectares of woodland per year; recognises that forestry has an important role to play in achieving Scotland's climate targets, and calls on the Scottish Government to take effective action in order to deliver the target and maintain the National Forest Estate as an asset for the nation.

15:08

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

I refer members to my register of interests.

I am glad to be able to speak in the debate today—especially as we await the final plans from the Scottish Government on the future arrangements for forestry management.

There is great deal of consensus across the chamber on the goals and priorities for forestry management; we all recognise that forestry is a vital part of the rural economy. I particularly welcome Jim Mackinnon's report, which is a practical and clear document that includes many good recommendations.

With Scotland's forestry sector currently contributing around £1 billion a year and supporting 25,000 jobs, it is vital that we encourage what can be described only as a growth industry. It is also important that forestry is valued in its own right, and for our professionals to demonstrate that planting trees will secure the long-term supply of productive timber, sustain jobs in rural areas and help Scotland to achieve its ambitious climate change targets.

As forestry will soon come under the direct control of Scottish ministers, we must ensure that

it does not become subject to the whims of electoral cycles: the industry requires a long-term view and a consistent mindset. My colleagues and I are clear that we must retain the knowledge, experience and long-term planning that we currently have in the Forestry Commission Scotland. Indeed, I argue that we should strengthen and develop that skills base.

I welcome the new increasing annual target, which will rise to 15,000 hectares of new trees by 2025. I believe that the target is achievable, but I am concerned that, with the Government having missed its targets of 10,000 hectares being planted every year since 2012, we are setting ourselves up for failure, unless the process of applying for permission to plant is simplified and sped up, and has costs removed from it.

Less than 20 per cent of Scotland's land area is currently forest, which compares poorly with Spain, which has 37 per cent, with Finland, which has 73 per cent and with the EU average, which is 37 per cent. In north-east Scotland, 17 per cent of agricultural land is currently reported as being farm woodland, which is slightly more than 80,000 hectares.

I have a good example. I know a north-east farmer, Mr John Munro, who has demonstrated the potential benefits of farm woodland on his farm. After buying 60 hectares of heavy clay land in 1991, John set about establishing commercial woodland—mostly Sitka spruce. Since then, he has succeeded very well. He is taking advantage of high-quality wood that is ideally suited to timber processing, and the work to deliver his wood stock over the winter ties in well with his farm business. He is also now making profit and employing a member of staff.

That model is absolutely the norm in Scandinavian countries. Across Finland, Sweden and Norway, most farmers are also foresters, so there is nothing unusual about a farmer harvesting crops over the summer and using the same equipment and tractors to harvest timber over the winter months. I argue that we need a complete change of mindset in the farming community here if we are to encourage more planting by farmers. Unlike Scandinavians, Scottish farmers are not natural planters of trees and there is little history of farming and forestry being integrated in Scotland. The argument has often been that good sheep country has been used for planting trees on and that livelihoods have been lost, as a result. However, it is often the case that using such land for trees will provide just as many jobs and deliver more output per acre than when it is used to farm sheep.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Peter Chapman: I will not at this point. I am sorry; I do not have much time.

I am convinced that there are large swathes of land in Scotland where sheep have already gone off the hill. Those areas have not been planted and are basically abandoned. They are a valuable resource and could be a real source of income for the landowner, but they are being wasted.

I agree with much of what James Mackinnon says in his report, but I disagree with his suggestion to have accredited agents who have the authority to certify planting applications. I believe that that decision needs to be taken by the FCS, but the FCS needs to tell its staff to be decisive and get on with it. I agree that informing and engaging communities should happen earlier and should be proportionate to the scale and impact of any scheme.

Although subsidies cover the first 10 years of planting, it takes decades more for trees to become mature enough to be valuable and to provide real income for the grower. How do we support farmers who are, in effect, losing income from their farmland over a long period?

Perhaps, when the cabinet secretary presents the draft forestry bill to Parliament, he will consider ways in which we could encourage the growth of farm woodland. That would assist in making farmers less dependent on volatile food prices by diversifying their businesses, and is vital if we are to deliver our tree-planting targets.

Brexit undoubtedly poses a challenge for funding new forests post-2020, but the answer is simple: the money must be allocated. Reports tell us that we are on course to import nearly 80 per cent of our timber needs by 2050. We must do better than that, so it is vital that we act now to ensure a strong forestry production sector for the future. Of course, we must ensure that we are planting the right trees in order that we create forest that is of real value for sawmills and will not just end up as expensive firewood.

Since around 2005, we have failed to meet our target of 10,000 hectares and, unfortunately, two thirds of the woodland that we have planted has been hardwood, which has limited industrial use. Those species are not the trees that our sawmills require; the failure to plant sufficient high-quality pine forests should have been seen much earlier and measures taken to rebalance planting. I am thankful that that has now been done.

I am fully on board with focusing on Sitka planting, as is outlined in Jim Mackinnon's report, but we cannot just roll out Sitka and ignore other commercial species. There are clear advantages to Sitka. Its rotation age is only 40 years, rather than 80 years, as is the case with Scots pine and larch. However, I fully recognise that the days of

blanket planting of a single species are gone, and that a well-designed forest will have open spaces and different varieties, in order to encourage biodiversity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude.

Peter Chapman: I will leave it there. We can use carbon capture and help to alleviate flooding and we know that trees will take in carbon.

Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Just move the amendment now, please.

Peter Chapman: My colleagues and I are ready to work with the Scottish Government to deliver—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And move your amendment. Just move your amendment, please.

Peter Chapman: —but we remain concerned that not enough work is being done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. We are moving on.

Peter Chapman: I move amendment S5M-03573.1, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert

“recognises the importance of retaining local expertise and cross-border joint working and urges that the end result of this process is not needless centralisation; welcomes the future increase in the Scottish Government’s annual target to create 15,000 hectares of woodland per year, but notes that it is not meeting current, lower targets; recognises that forestry has an important role to play in achieving Scotland’s climate targets; calls on the Scottish Government to take effective action in order to deliver the target and maintain the National Forest Estate as an asset for the nation, and recognises that forestry is a long-term project that requires a long-term vision for a thriving sector.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is that how long a conclusion takes?

I call Rhoda Grant to speak to and move amendment S5M-03573.2. You have six minutes—and I know that you will not be naughty.

15:16

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): You are tempting me, Presiding Officer.

We welcome the further devolution of the Forestry Commission, which should help the Scottish Government to achieve its planting targets. However, we also want to examine how we use our forests and how we grow timber. We agree that the responsibility for forestry should be devolved but, alongside that, we need to work with other parts of the UK to preserve the benefits of working together in areas including research and disease control. Neither the UK nor the devolved Governments will alone have the resources to

replicate what has been achieved through shared resources, so we urge the Scottish Government to look for ways in which research could be carried out as a joint venture throughout the UK, to replicate the research and development work that people really value. The same is true of disease control, as currently happens. The UK works well in that area through animal health work and interagency working, so it would be desirable to link disease control with planting, along with devolution of forestry to the Scottish Government.

Concerns have been expressed about how forestry will be managed going forward, about the changes to the role of the Forestry Commission, and about the perception of a land agency that will cover much wider issues than forestry. There is a fear that it will become a faceless bureaucracy that is one step away from Government but impenetrable and unaccountable, and that it will be run by career civil servants who know nothing about forestry. We are told that one of the benefits of the Forestry Commission is that it is staffed by foresters who understand the industry and its producers. We are therefore not persuaded that one large organisation trying to do so many jobs will work. That also smacks of centralisation.

I agree that the blanket planting of Sitka spruce throughout Scotland was one of the worst things that happened. It was done mostly for tax breaks, so I am glad that the cabinet secretary has acknowledged that and given a commitment that it will not happen in the future. However, we need to plant more, and the Scottish Government has, as has been stated—including by the cabinet secretary—failed to reach targets year on year. We therefore need a strategy that works. The Mackinnon report looks at ways of achieving that by cutting through red tape, which is to be welcomed.

However, we agree with Confor about the role that is proposed for certifying forestry schemes below the threshold of environmental impact assessment. That should be carried out by Forestry Commission staff, not by private agents, because certifying agents to do that work will boost their business while bringing detriment to other businesses,

My reading of the report suggests that many of the problems are due to the people who are involved and their knowledge of the system. That suggests to me that the systems that are in place need to be changed and that staff require better training.

Systems have to be in place to allow a more streamlined application process for schemes that do not require an environmental impact assessment. Likewise, it needs to be clear where more in-depth applications are required.

To allow the system to work, we need a national plan that says where we will encourage tree planting and where we would not necessarily want it—for example, on good agricultural land that is required for food production, or in areas where planting would have a detrimental environmental impact. We need a plan that looks at where forests are required not just for land use and wood production, but for environmental and recreational uses. Forests that are close to towns and cities provide timber very close to market and excellent recreational areas. That encourages people out into our forests for the good of their mental and physical health.

However, areas that lend themselves to planting are often on poorer land, so they are away from towns, cities and easy access. We have a lot of land-locked forests that are ready for harvesting, but getting the timber to market is a real problem. Rural roads are often narrow, poorly constructed and poorly maintained. A large number of heavy timber lorries can cause a lot of damage and therefore impact on other road users.

Where possible, forest roads should be designed to get the timber as close as possible to A-class roads and railways. The railway is ideal: many tracks in our rural areas are underused and have the capacity to take timber, but that needs planning, proper sidings and loading equipment to get the timber on to the rail line.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take a brief intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in her last minute.

Rhoda Grant: I cannot take an intervention. I am sorry.

That would, of course, require Government funding, which has too often been not well thought out or sustainable. Past planting grants have led to people chasing the funding. Funding needs to be in place that ensures that planting happens in the most appropriate places, and there needs to be a clear plan for how to access the timber.

We will support the Conservative amendment, which makes many of the points that we are making, albeit that it does so slightly differently. We share concerns about the Green amendment, but we have the disadvantage of speaking before that party, so it cannot make its points before we have spoken. We do not wish for national forestry to be privatised, and there is a fear that the Green amendment might lead to that. However, I look forward to listening to what the Greens say.

We welcome the debate and having time to consider planning how we can deal constructively with forestry. We will support the Government to

reach its planting targets and hold it to account if it does not do so.

I move amendment S5M-03573.2, to insert at end:

“; recognises the opportunities that forestry provides for community action and in tackling climate change; notes the importance of cross-border working to tackle issues of research and development and disease prevention in any proposed structure; welcomes the recommendations in the report, *Analysis of Current Arrangements for the Consideration and Approval of Forestry Planting Proposals* (Mackinnon report), after a series of failed planting targets; encourages the new strategy to take account of the diversification of forest land use into areas such as recreation and leisure; notes serious concerns about the need for more robust deer management, and recognises the importance of a strong transport infrastructure for forestry products through continuing to support the Timber Support Fund.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not bad, Ms Grant. I call Andy Wightman, who has six minutes, please.

15:22

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): Six minutes, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Six minutes precisely and no more.

Andy Wightman: Thank you.

I welcome this debate on developing forestry in Scotland, as it is nine years since the subject was last debated in Government business. I started my working life in forestry, destroying the birks of Aberfeldy to plant conifer plantations on behalf of Midland Bank in the 1980s. I then went on to the University of Aberdeen to study forestry. When I was at university, I campaigned against the afforestation of the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland. Years later, I learned that I was blacklisted from employment in the forestry sector as a consequence of that. Therefore, I have some experience of the topic.

We are a bit disappointed by the Government's lack of ambition for forestry. The 50th anniversary of the Forestry Act 1967 will be on 22 March this year. Notwithstanding devolution in 1999, the statutory framework for forestry and the responsibilities of Forestry Commission Scotland have moved on little.

We welcome the complete devolution of forestry, of course, but in addition to reforming governance and introducing new mechanisms to achieve afforestation targets, a new act could open with a new suite of statutory purposes for forestry policy in Scotland, including climate change mitigation, supporting the rural economy, advancing land reform and environmental restoration, and promoting social policy in the

fields of health and wellbeing. In particular, a new act should incorporate a statutory duty on ministers to promote sustainable forest management and implement United Nations sustainable development goal 15.2, which is:

“By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally”.

In that light, our amendment calls for two elements of a more ambitious approach to the future of forestry in Scotland. The first relates to the ownership of Scotland's expanding forest cover, which is dominated by those who live far away from the land that they own, often in offshore tax havens, and whose motivations are often limited solely to the financial and tax advantages that are associated with ownership.

A few years ago, I undertook a study of the pattern of private ownership of Scotland's forests. When I asked Forestry Commission Scotland about the source of the ownership data that it submitted to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in 2011, I was astounded to be told that it was based on estimates that were in turn derived from a UK-wide survey that was carried out in 1977.

Unlike the situation in most European countries, the Scottish Government and Forestry Commission Scotland collect minimal information on forest holdings and publish nothing. We now know that Scotland stands at the extreme end of countries in Europe, with the most concentrated pattern of private ownership. In Scotland, more than 44 per cent of forest holdings are of over 100 hectares. Sweden has the next highest level, at 10 per cent, and the European average is 0.7 per cent.

The majority of Scotland's private forest area is owned by absentee owners, a third of whom live outside Scotland. Across Europe, by contrast, forestry is owned by co-operatives, communities and municipalities. In countries such as Sweden and Finland, companies such as Södra and Metsäliitto Co-operative own extensive forest, which is managed on behalf of their members.

The second part of my amendment relates to reform of the governance of the national forest estate. I heard what the minister said and I look forward to further discussions on the matter.

Twenty-five years ago, I asked a prominent historian of the Highlands and Islands, Dr James Hunter, to write an editorial for a magazine that I was editing about the future of forestry in Scotland. Contrary to the prevailing orthodoxy of the time, he noted:

“The Forestry Commission is to Scottish forestry what collectivisation was to Soviet agriculture.”

He went on to argue for reform in how state forests are managed. He made the very good point that public ownership of land does not necessarily mean state ownership; real public ownership means ownership by the public.

It is a common belief that the Forestry Commission owns the national forest estate, but it does not. All land that is managed by the Forestry Commission is owned by Scottish ministers. Section 3 of the Forestry Act 1967, which the Government is intent on repealing, makes it clear that the Forestry Commission is merely the manager of land that is placed at its disposal by Scottish ministers. A new forestry act should allow a much wider range of bodies, such as community groups, environmental charities, co-operatives and local councils, to be appointed by Scottish ministers to manage parts of the national forest estate, which would remove the monopoly that the Forestry Commission enjoys.

I have two further matters to raise in the short time that I have available. The first is on achieving the Government's target for forestry expansion, which will be challenging. The Forestry Commission briefing that the minister helpfully distributed yesterday makes it clear that, although we know where forest expansion should happen in broad terms, it is not happening. Given the climate change imperative of forestry expansion, we need to develop new mechanisms through planning and fiscal policy to make new forestry obligatory.

Secondly, the Forestry Commission's repositioning programme is based on recommendations from a 2004 review. In an answer to a written question in October 2016, I was told by the minister:

“The Scottish Government has yet to decide on any further sales programme beyond those areas already notified.”—[*Written Answers*, 27 October 2016; S5W-03745.]

I understand that the minister possesses lists of new proposed sales of the national forest estate. I would welcome his confirmation of that and I ask him to let Parliament know of such plans as soon as possible.

Is Scotland simply a resource colony for distant corporate, industrial and financial interests, or is it a country that is to be developed for the benefit of the communities that live and work in rural Scotland?

I move amendment S5M-03573.3, to leave out from “calls on” to end and insert:

“; further recognises that forestry expansion should form part of the land reform agenda to increase social and co-operative forest ownership, and calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward proposals for reform of the governance of the National Forest Estate to enable a wider range of bodies to manage it.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to the open speeches. We are tight for time and there is no time in hand, so any interventions will have to be contained in members' six-minute speeches.

15:28

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I remind members that I am the parliamentary liaison officer for the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity.

Forestry, woodlands and trees are of great importance to Scotland's rural communities. Forests contribute to the local economy by providing jobs and creating wealth. They attract visitors and create opportunities for our tourism sector. They are important to our cultural heritage, having inspired generations of artists and writers. Long-established woodlands form part of the historic environment, as evidence of earlier settlements and land use patterns.

The forestry industry contributes almost £1 billion a year to the Scottish economy and supports more than 25,000 full-time-equivalent jobs. The national forest estate is one of Scotland's greatest natural assets and it generates £395 million and 9 million visitors each year.

Dumfries and Galloway, where I was born and where I live now, is one of the most wooded regions of Scotland. The region produces about 30 per cent of Scotland's annual timber harvest and has a major processing capacity through two large sawmills at Lockerbie and Dalbeattie, in addition to a number of smaller facilities. The timber industry employs about 3,000 people across the region.

The industry's continued growth and increased mechanisation have led to a recognised skills gap. Last year, I welcomed the Minister for Employability and Training to Dalbeattie to visit forestry machinery supplier Jas P Wilson, which is an example of a company that is working with young people to fill some of the skills gaps. The minister met apprentices and found out more about the company's partnership with Dalbeattie high school. Minister Hepburn saw at first hand the really positive work that the company has been doing to offer work experience for pupils, which has in some cases led to full apprenticeships that are paid at the living wage. Offering our young people meaningful training opportunities in local businesses is vital to our region's economy and will help to address national skills shortages in important areas of activity such as the forestry industry.

I am pleased that the SNP Government will introduce a forestry bill to complete the devolution of forestry. The bill will ensure that the Scottish Government has control of all aspects of forestry

and will transfer the powers and duties of the forestry commissioners, as they relate to Scotland, to Scottish ministers. It will establish a forestry and land management body to focus on the development of the national forest estate.

As has been mentioned, a detailed analysis by Jim Mackinnon of the challenges that the sector faces was published in December. It outlined a number of recommendations to reduce the complexity and costs of tree planting, all of which the cabinet secretary has accepted in principle. The actions will include streamlining the process to approve sustainable planting schemes; earlier engagement between tree-planting businesses and communities; and the establishment of a dedicated national Forestry Commission Scotland team to deal with complex proposals. Those actions will help to ensure that we reach our manifesto commitment of planting 10,000 hectares of trees every year until 2022 and will also help to hasten the approval of planting. That will help to end the uncertainty over the future of forestry, which will encourage more private investment in the sector.

Stuart Goodall, the chief executive of Confor, recently praised the cabinet secretary for his "real political will" to tackle barriers to greater tree planting and his commitment to work with the sector to reach the target of planting 22 million trees a year. Those actions are especially important given the substantial support that the sector receives from the EU.

At this time of uncertainty for many rural industries, the Scottish Government is focused on creating stability and continuing investment in the sector. It is of extreme importance to reassure investors that Scotland is open for business. The Scottish Government has held summits with the forestry sector to listen to their concerns and ambitions. The cabinet secretary has also met leading representatives from forestry management and investment companies to provide reassurance that the Scottish Government is committed to seeing the forestry sector thrive.

As well as recognising the sector's economic importance, it is crucial to recognise the role that forestry has to play in achieving Scotland's climate targets. Trees and woodland can help us to adapt to the existing and future impacts of climate change by providing opportunities to store carbon, combat air pollution and reduce the risks of flooding.

In 2009, the Scottish Parliament passed the most ambitious climate change law anywhere in the world, and we have met six years early the headline target of reducing carbon emissions by 42 per cent by 2020. Scotland's draft climate change plan, which was published last week, sets out how we intend to continue that progress, and

forestry is an important piece of the jigsaw. By 2032, Scotland's woodland cover will increase from around 18 per cent to 21 per cent of the Scottish land area, and, by 2050, Scotland's woodlands will be delivering a greater level of ecosystem services such as natural flood management and biodiversity enhancement.

The forestry sector is important in many capacities. I hope that we will see support for the Government motion across the chamber and support for the action that the SNP is taking to deliver our tree planting targets, instil confidence and stability in the sector and maintain the national forest estate as an asset for the nation.

15:35

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): Although the forestry sector employs more than 25,000 people across Scotland, the industry is of particular importance to the economy of rural Scotland, including in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries. Indeed, Dumfries and Galloway has the largest forest park in the UK, is one of the most afforested regions in Scotland and produces around 30 per cent of Scotland's annual timber harvest. The timber industry is a major employer in the region, and it supports around 3,000 jobs across all sectors. Many members will have heard of BSW Timber in Dalbeattie, which has one of the largest sawmills in the country.

I want to direct my remarks at the governance of the sector. As we know, the Scottish Government recently consulted on the future of forestry in Scotland ahead of introducing its forestry bill to Parliament. One of the central themes of that bill will be new organisational arrangements for the Forestry Commission Scotland and, in the recent consultation, respondents were specifically asked about their views on the establishment of a dedicated forestry division in the Scottish Government and an executive agency to manage Scotland's national forest estate.

I look forward to seeing what the Scottish Government proposes in its bill, but the cynic in me is more than a little concerned that we are again witnessing an attempt by the Scottish National Party Government to centralise and interfere—this time with forestry—with little regard for the wider implications that that will have for the industry.

If the Government decides to press ahead with absorbing the Forestry Commission into the Scottish Government, an approach must be taken that recognises the long-term nature of forestry as an industry. Excessive tinkering in line with electoral cycles should be avoided at all costs. Furthermore, I urge the cabinet secretary to ensure that, under the new arrangements, a new

Government department would be underpinned by some form of independent or external scrutiny.

It is in all our interests that Scotland has a viable forestry sector, from which the benefits for local economies, communities and the environment can be maximised. Whatever is decided, I urge the Government to come to a decision as soon as possible, because at the moment there is a great deal of uncertainty, which is impacting negatively on the industry. Indeed, the concern was raised in Forestry Commission Scotland's annual report for 2015-16 that

"uncertainty over its future organisational status poses difficulties in managing business as usual and has led to increased losses of key staff".

Concerns about the proposed changes have been raised by a number of organisations, such as the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership. In its response to the consultation, it highlighted a feeling that the changes would ultimately result in the centralisation of services and decision making. It went on to make the very valid point that one of the main strengths of the current arrangement is regional management, which allows for a local approach involving a strong local knowledge base that the local community can easily engage with. In many sectors, the SNP Government talks the talk about a more local approach, but up until now it has not walked the walk. Perhaps it is time for it to do just that.

The Woodland Trust highlighted the risk of professional skills and expertise being lost if a new Government department were to be set up. Such expertise and knowledge are essential to the successful management of our forests.

I do not claim that the current arrangements are perfect and that no changes are needed, but the Government must adopt an evidence-based approach and heed the concerns of stakeholders to ensure that any proposals truly improve the current system and bring tangible benefits. We cannot have what is simply another SNP exercise in centralising power.

I urge MSPs to read James Mackinnon's analysis of the current arrangements for the consideration and approval of forestry planning proposals to get an insight into some of the problems that the sector faces. It is clear that there is a strong desire across the entire sector for things to work more effectively.

When the cabinet secretary introduces the forestry bill, Scottish Conservative members will be constructive and open minded. In making changes, it is important to guard against losing things that currently work, and I will be looking out for any attempt by the Government to become cumbersome in asserting its authority.

Scotland needs a thriving forestry sector. Today's debate has provided us with the opportunity to recognise the importance of forestry to our economy, our rural communities and our environment. We will wait to see what lies in store for the sector, but we must avoid a micromanagement approach that results in a loss of expertise and local knowledge from the sector.

15:39

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I will make some observations for what I think is likely to be a consensual debate—we are all travelling in the same direction on forestry, which is good.

Forestry, of course, has always provided a strategic product. For example, in 1511, the Great Michael was launched—the biggest capital ship in the world, at 1,000 tonnes in weight and 73m in length. The wood for the Great Michael required every tree in Fife to be cleared and timber to be imported from the Baltic and France. In that sense, timber played an important part in the 16th century in national life, and following the building of the Great Michael, a huge tree replanting programme was required.

The Forestry Commission was founded by the Forestry Act 1919 in the aftermath of the first world war, when France had 40,000km of trenches that were largely lined with timber. The percentage of the UK that was covered by forests had dropped to about 4 per cent coverage by 1919. Timber is not simply an amenity in terms of forests or something that feeds industry; it is a matter of strategic interest.

In a debate in the House of Commons in 1919, a Labour member, William Thorne, addressing the issue of where the land would be found to plant trees—it was an issue then, as it is now—simply said:

"Pinch it—take it over!"—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 9 December 1919; Vol 122, c 1144]

I think that we have become a little more sophisticated in our approach to that issue since then. Nonetheless, where the land is to come from for planting trees is a substantial issue. I agree with Peter Chapman that we need to find ways of showing farmers that there is an intrinsic value for them and their businesses in making some of their land available for forestry.

I have some interest in using forests for shelter, and I think that farmers will find that it is useful for that purpose in some circumstances. I say that because where we live we are surrounded by trees on three sides and would be pretty open to the elements if that was not the case. The trees are also an amenity for us because in the forest that surrounds us we have foxes, roe deer,

badgers, weasels, barn owls, buzzards, woodpeckers and a raft of other creatures. That situation is true of forests across Scotland and the UK.

Forests are a national asset and have things that are of interest to everyone. They draw the attention of not simply the industrial interests of bodies such as the Confederation of Forest Industries but of everyone who can benefit emotionally, practically and economically from forests. For those who, like me, enjoy walking, forests are among the most attractive places to go walking, provided that there are forest trails. The bit of forest around where I live is an example of the errors that have been made in the past, because the forest paths are all but overgrown and the forest has never been thinned. I think that the person who planted it—by the way, I am not sure who that was, which addresses Mr Wightman's point—basically took the money and ran. It will probably cost more to take that forest down than the economic benefit that it would be likely to realise.

The management of forests is very important indeed, which is why I very much welcome Jim Mackinnon's report on forestry, which is well informed and well researched. Jim Mackinnon is an excellent fellow, with only one major defect to his name: he is a supporter of Forres Mechanics Football Club—how sad is that?

Fergus Ewing: Is the member sure?

Stewart Stevenson: I am pretty sure that he supports Forres Mechanics. I apologise to Jim Mackinnon if I am wrong about that, but I am pretty sure that I am correct.

In Scotland, we have beautiful land and opportunities for planting more forests. Rhoda Grant was correct to say that we must plant them where we can harvest them. I would have liked to intervene on the one point that she missed, which was that in some places there is the opportunity for the marine removal of forests. I saw an effective scheme in that regard when I visited Raasay to open a new pier there when I was a minister. I think that that was the last time that I met Charles Kennedy. We had an excellent chat, as we always did when whenever we met.

The number of jobs in forestry is already substantial, but it can increase, because the number of uses to which we put forest products is increasing. They are now part of biomass and more of our houses are timber framed, so it is important that we have access to a ready supply of forestry goods.

Forestry also helps in relation to climate change, particularly where there are new plantings, because young trees are particularly well-adapted to absorbing CO₂, whereas older, established

forests that are left to moulder, perhaps like the one that surrounds our house, are less adept at absorbing CO₂. We therefore have to make sure that we replant after we grant permission for forests to come down.

I welcomed last week the assent from members on the Tory benches—from Mr Chapman—to our share of the support for agriculture and forestry remaining the same after 2020. I want that to be delivered, because it is important for the forestry industry, as it is for rural Scotland as a whole.

15:46

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): As we have heard, forestry bestows on us numerous benefits. The forest policy group depicts the scope excellently, stating that woodlands can double as

“a bank, playground, meeting place, nature reserve, classroom, larder, gym, mental health spa, and centre for the rehabilitation of those who need help to re-orientate their lives.”

Forestry is particularly salient to my portfolio as it is the only sector to deliver a net emissions reduction, acting as nature’s benevolence in the climate change challenge. However, the fact that the volume of carbon that is sequestered is set to decrease in the coming years represents a significant missed opportunity. The draft climate change plan, which sets out the Scottish Government’s renewed ambition for woodland creation, is therefore to be welcomed.

The RSPB has stated:

“woodland management grants and subsidies must be better targeted to ensure that wildlife is protected and the negative effects of climate change are mitigated, whilst still supporting rural livelihoods and economy.”

I agree with that view, and I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity does, too.

Agroforestry provides opportunities for multiple benefits. That fits interestingly with the comments of others, such as Peter Chapman, about efforts to encourage farmers to plant more woodland. The significance of agroforestry is recognised by the Forestry Commission Scotland. It is also interesting to look to France, where the law that the French Government passed on the future of agriculture, food and forestry, which was definitively adopted in their Parliament, supports agroforestry. In addition, the UK Committee on Climate Change has stressed the need to address barriers to and awareness of agroforestry.

We must constantly be aware of and challenge ourselves to ensure that we consider the tensions between forestry planting and peatland restoration in relation to both climate change and protecting our fragile ecosystems and wildlife.

In seeking to protect our forests and woodlands, it is also essential that we address the challenging issue of deer management, which we discussed this morning in committee. In my view—and that of others, I believe—we need more robust management structures to protect our trees.

Rhoda Grant has already explored the need for collaborative research on tree health across the UK. I also highlight the importance of the provenance of seedlings and highlight the work of nurseries such as Ravenswood Nursery in Cleghorn in South Scotland in relation to that ambition.

There are rich opportunities for community ownership of woodlands and forests. I welcome the cabinet secretary’s commitments today and I also listened carefully to the Green Party’s comments on that. Small parcels of land near—or indeed in—villages and towns can be used for recreational use and contribute to biodiversity through community management. There are also more adventurous opportunities, such as in South Scotland, where a wealth of woodland sites are already owned and developed by community groups.

Those sites add diversity to the forestry culture and they are often due praise for their focus on community and on conservation. The Gordon Community Woodland Trust is a prime example of such progressive work. The group purchased the Berwickshire site in 2002 with financial assistance from the Scottish land fund, which was the first funding for land purchase outwith the Highlands. Today, the woodland is a far more accessible space and it is used by mental health outreach groups and the local primary school, among others. It is managed by motivated and dedicated volunteers in the community, and it turns a small profit from Christmas tree sales and delivers huge benefits for community cohesion. We need structures that enable more community and co-operative ownership around Scotland.

There is an exciting range of opportunities for uses of wood in my region—South Scotland—that have not been mentioned by others. There is the opportunity to use small-scale biomass to tackle rural fuel poverty. There is also industrial biomass that is on quite a small scale, such as at BHC Ltd in Carnwath, which owns forestry to provide fuel for use in biomass boilers in its factory. There is the use of native wood in house building and there are also many art and craft opportunities with wood, as many of our native woods, from holly to oak, are fine for carving. I highlight the example of the Tweed valley forest festival, which will take place in October. MSPs can promote such issues in their own regions and constituencies.

I want to highlight the land use strategy and one of the UN sustainable development goals that was

already mentioned by Andy Wightman. I commend them both to the cabinet secretary as opportunities for forestry focus. The status of the land use strategy merits further consideration. The what, where and why of tree planting can be addressed through the guidance that the strategy and the bill could bring. As for UN sustainable development goal 15.2—I will not read it out again as another member has done that—it is a global aspiration that we should contribute to. As the cabinet secretary said, there should be a shared national endeavour and we can explore the way forward together.

15:52

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I will look at the issue from the standpoint of meeting our sequestration targets and the role that farming can play in that. That is not to diminish the importance of forestry from a commercial and economic perspective. The sector contributes £1 billion a year to the Scottish economy and supports 25,000 jobs. That really matters and, from a reducing emissions perspective, so does using wood in construction instead of other materials.

As convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, and given that this Parliament today commenced its scrutiny of the new climate plan, I want to focus on carbon sequestration at the initial stage. That said, there is a common thread running through the replanting issue, whether it is approached from the perspective of climate change, biodiversity, flood management, health benefits, water quality or commerce. Those are the raft of challenges that require to be overcome if we are to start planting 10,000 hectares a year and to move on to 15,000 hectares a year by 2024-25, and if we are to increase woodland cover from 18 to 21 per cent by 2032. Those challenges will require action.

It is only fair to offer some perspective on the issue. Although the 10,000 hectare target has not been reached to date, Scotland was responsible for 83 per cent of the new woodland created across these islands in 2015-16 and, in terms of delivery and ambition in that area, we are light years ahead of England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

However, the fact is that we have set targets and we will require a change in attitude and approach if we are to get to the planting levels that we require to secure all those necessary benefits and to ensure that there is not a crisis in access to wood for commercial purposes in years to come. We need to get over the old mantra that planting trees on less productive agricultural land is a sign of farming failure. We must find a means of making it easier for tenant farmers to plant on their farms without suffering detriment. We also need to

identify parcels of land of the kind that Peter Chapman mentioned that are not currently utilised for any meaningful purpose and which would be suited to hosting forestry on whatever scale. Further, we need to deploy the land use strategy on a regional and more local scale to ensure that we begin to integrate land use far better than we have done up until now.

Implementation of the Mackinnon report where it identifies ways to remove barriers to planting will help us on this journey, as will, in terms of enticing farming participation, the move to allowing farmland planted under the forestry grant scheme to still be eligible for basic payments. If that is topped up by the Scottish Government's planned exploration of a scheme that would see farmers paid for sequestering carbon through tree planting from 2020 onwards, as identified in the climate change plan, we might just secure a real breakthrough.

Although we should be demanding much more of farmers by way of emissions reductions without increasing financial support, there is nothing wrong with incentivising them to deliver new step change behaviour that brings about measurable carbon sequestration benefits. Some good work is going on already in terms of establishing new woodlands and improving the management of existing small-scale ones.

With regard to the latter, I was interested to hear recently about LEADER funding being used to support the first stage of the innovative Argyll small woods co-operative project, which is helping farmers and other small woodland owners manage those woodlands. In terms of the former, some interesting work is going on in central Scotland, with the central Scotland green network providing support and advice to farmers within the green network area around opportunities for woodland creation. That is laying the foundations for farmers to access the Scotland rural development programme forest grant scheme. In the past 15 months, 1,500 hectares of woodland creation has been approved and supported by £10 million in funding.

Clearly, courtesy of Brexit, the future nature of LEADER and the SRDP are in doubt, along with a 55 per cent underwriting of the forest grant scheme from the European agricultural fund for rural development, but in the short term at least, those funding streams are accessible for these important purposes and to establish some momentum.

However, in increasing planting in keeping with the woodland carbon code, we need to be mindful of another environmental impact—that of deer. The deer management issue is one that the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee has been wrestling with these past few

months, concluding its extensive evidence gathering only this morning. The public purse in Scotland is facing an annual bill of around £30 million to install new fencing and repair existing protections to keep deer out of our current forest footprint and allow it to flourish.

As we deploy public money to fund new planting, with all its sequestration benefits, we must seek to reduce the risk of the double whammy of having to then increase spend on measures to protect that investment from the impact of deer. I believe that the central Scotland green network scheme already has a fencing element in the funding. We will always need to fence, but I contend that we need to strike a better balance between that and culling.

Another challenge for forestry is coping with the ravages of disease: 12,000 hectares of publicly owned woodland have had to be cleared over the past six years in response to disease impacts. It therefore makes sense that, although full control over forestry will pass to Scotland, we will still maintain cross-border co-operation on plant health, alongside developing common codes and shared research. The UK forestry standard is helpful, for example, in resisting the pressure from some quarters to allow planting on peat of a depth of more than 50cm, which is completely counterproductive in carbon sequestration terms.

It is welcome that the standard is to be revised to improve the sustainability of woodland development. However, I note—as other members have—the concerns of respected bodies such as the Woodland Trust on an aspect of full devolution of forestry functions. As we have heard, those bodies are fearful of the consequences of forest policy and regulation being moved in-house, as it were, to be overseen by a forestry division of the Scottish Government. The concerns around the impact of that may well be unfounded, but I hope that the cabinet secretary will address them directly in closing and that, more importantly, the Scottish Government will proactively engage with those who hold those concerns in order to secure support for and confidence in future governance of the sector.

15:58

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): New woodland in the correct location, with the appropriate species, planted well, is not only good for the environment but vital to the economy.

It is widely recognised that by 2035, we will not be producing enough timber to satisfy the needs of our timber processors—processors that the cabinet secretary and I know well, such as Gordon's in Nairn, Norbord in Inverness and James Jones in Mosstodloch.

There are suggestions that the industry can offset that by “smoothing”, which means reducing harvesting in the lead-up to and post the critical period—in effect, putting the handbrake on our industry, which is not something that I would naturally ever encourage. However, with the long lead-in time for timber production, I see little option at this stage.

Why has this come about? The simple answer is that the Government has failed to reach the planting targets that it set itself—a deficit that has been repeated every year since 2012. Before anyone says that because forests take, in some cases, 60 years to mature, even if we had reached the targets, we still would not have had enough timber, I point out that that would be wrong. Forestry starts producing timber from around the 18-year point and, although not substantial saw-logs, it is timber that can be used.

How far behind the planting targets are we? To reach the target that was announced in 2012 of 100,000 hectares by 2022, we needed to plant 10,000 hectares per annum. As we enter 2017, we are considerably behind that target. The industry tells us that we will need to plant 13,000 hectares per year up until 2022 if we are to make up the shortfall and reach the Government's target. The latest indications from the Government suggest that it will be happy with 10,000 hectares per annum, although there is no clear evidence that that is likely; indeed, it seems very unlikely given the evidence that I have seen.

I want to look at the reasons for failure and at what we might do. I will talk about two areas: grants and the consultation process.

An analysis of previous applications suggests that grants for costs for the establishment of forestry need to be in the region of £4,500 per hectare. Simple maths suggests that, to achieve a target of 13,000 hectares per annum, the budget should be in the region of £59 million. If the new target of 10,000 hectares per annum is accepted, the budget will need to be £45 million. The fact is that the figure that has been set aside for planting in the 2017-18 budget is £40 million.

I have heard arguments that the budget was set on the basis of the forestry grant applications that the Forestry Commission sees coming forward. Of course, that is a circular argument because if potential applicants cannot see sufficient grant funding, they will not bother to apply, simply because the application process is long, tortuous and expensive. If someone does not have a reasonable chance of success, why would they bother?

I turn to the consultation process. First, although I broadly welcome the report by Jim Mackinnon, there are some bits that I do not agree with, and

perhaps I can discuss those further with the cabinet secretary at another time—although while he is still abiding by his 2017 resolution. I speak from bitter experience when I say that consultation processes can be soul destroying. I still bear the scars from some that I have been involved in, in particular one for a scheme aimed at recreating 1,000 hectares of new Caledonian pine forest in the Cairngorms. Although I accept the need to protect the environment, that particular scheme seemed to tick all the boxes, but it still took 10 years to be approved and I cannot remember how many site meetings and consultation reports were required. It is no wonder that trees do not get planted.

Therefore, I believe that the Government, working with all the other agencies that rightly have a say, needs to identify areas where we should see forestry planting. It should then produce maps showing where there is a presumption in favour of forestry and instruct the Forestry Commission conservancies to follow that map and to support the Government in their decisions regarding applications.

In summary, I am truly concerned that the timber supply will not meet the demands of our industry, especially when we reach 2035; I support the Government's original planting ambitions and am disappointed that we have failed to achieve them; and it is clear to me that the Government has not allowed sufficient grant support to achieve its new, downwardly adjusted targets.

I support a lot of what Jim Mackinnon says in his report, but I want to look more closely at the way forward for the Forestry Commission and the use of certified agents. The Government must make the application process a lot easier, with a presumption in favour of forestry planting in specific areas to speed up the process. Sadly, I have serious concerns that if those issues are not addressed, Scotland's forestry will be held back. The knock-on effect will be bad for the environment and the industries in the forestry sector, especially the industries in my region and the cabinet secretary's constituency, where they are important in providing not only employment but skills and training for people.

16:04

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate on the forestry sector in Scotland, particularly as I am a member of the Parliament's Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. In my remarks, I intend to echo much of what has been said by my colleagues, although maybe not by Mr Mountain. In particular, I will reiterate how valuable the forestry sector is to Scotland and the actions that the SNP

Government will take to showcase how much it values the sector.

Scotland's forests and woodlands are one of our greatest and most valuable rural assets. The sector is worth £1 billion per annum and supports approximately 25,000 jobs. It is clear that the forestry sector has the potential to continue to grow—I know that that is a pun—and to go from strength to strength. It is the SNP's ambition for it to expand, flourish and continue to support employment growth for Scotland's rural economy.

It is incredibly important to remember that the forestry sector not only does well for Scotland's economy but plays a hugely important role in tackling climate change, protecting and growing biodiversity, natural flood management and improving general health and wellbeing throughout Scotland. In short, the sector contributes much more than money to our nation. That, I am sure, is why the SNP Government is determined to reduce the complexity, duration and cost of tree planting applications and why, as members are aware, it commissioned a report by Jim Mackinnon CBE.

The report made a number of recommendations, which the cabinet secretary has accepted in principle, but the Government went further: in her programme for government, the First Minister outlined a commitment to announce actions to speed up and streamline approval procedures for sustainable planting schemes. The Scottish Government is exploring the options for stimulating increased planting and has plans to announce later in the year actions to speed up the planting process, particularly for sustainable schemes.

It is important to note that the industry's success lies in the relationship that has developed with our committed cabinet secretary. Indeed, I note that Stuart Goodall, the chief executive of Confor, said:

"Scotland is planting, on average, over 15 million trees a year and the Cabinet Secretary is working with the sector in a determined drive to"

plant more.

"There is an understanding of the benefits and a real political will to tackle the barriers to greater tree planting."

That is a welcome reflection, as it shows that the Government is not only working to fulfil its commitments but is fostering a relationship with the sector that will enable it to go from strength to strength.

I highlighted the benefits of the forestry sector for climate change. I will reflect on that point, because climate change is being questioned by some across the world—or perhaps just across the Atlantic—although it is a very real issue indeed. We have a proud record of work to tackle climate change. Our First Minister represented us

at the UN global climate change summit in France not long ago, and our continual punching above our weight in our efforts to tackle that important issue is well noted.

Our plans, as outlined in the draft climate change plan, show that we are not resting on our laurels but working hard to make the change that we need. That is why we have an ambition for Scotland's woodland cover to go from around 18 per cent to 21 per cent of the Scottish land area by 2032. That is important because those new woodlands will absorb greenhouse gases and provide the forest products industry with confidence to continue to invest in Scotland, which means more development and job creation.

Of course, our commitment, words and ambitions are met with practical support too. That is why the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution outlined in his draft budget an increase in the funding for tree planting schemes from £36 million to £40 million, in addition to our commitment to deliver for woodland creation and improvement through the forestry grant scheme.

Although I am sure that members will wish that we get through a debate without mentioning Brexit, I point out gently that the Scottish forestry sector receives significant EU funding, namely from the European agricultural fund for rural development. That fund reimburses 55 per cent of the forestry grant scheme and it is estimated that, over the period 2014 to 2020, it will make available £252 million.

The final point that I wish to make is that the SNP Government will introduce a forestry bill, which I believe will deliver on our commitment to keep the Forestry Commission as an asset for our country and will ensure that, rightly, the Scottish Government has control of all aspects of forestry. It will also put in place new arrangements for how forestry is governed and supported that will help us to deliver on our overall ambitions for the sector.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I look forward with pleasure to continuing to support this SNP Government and an excellent cabinet secretary, who is delivering the SNP's manifesto commitments to ensure the best possible future for the forestry sector in Scotland.

16:10

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I am not after a job, but there we are.

The Liberal Democrats fully recognise the contribution that Scotland's woods and forests make to our people, communities, economy and environment. We welcome moves to fully devolve

forestry in Scotland so that it is fully accountable to the Scottish Parliament. We are also fully supportive of the Scottish Government's plans to increase the annual target for planting new woodland from 10,000 hectares to 15,000 hectares.

However, if we are to be successful in meeting that new target, the necessary resources to achieve it have to be in place. Although I recognise that the Scottish Government is increasing the annual level of funding for specific grant aid from its current level of £30 million, it is increasing it by only £4 million to £34 million in next year's budget. When the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee took evidence on the matter, Stuart Goodall from Confor said:

"It is quite clear that if the Forestry Commission is going to deliver the objectives that the Scottish Government has set, the budget will be insufficient."—[*Official Report, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee*, 23 November 2016; c 36.]

We also received written evidence on the inability to meet planting targets due to lack of funds. We were told that, although the demand in the application process for this current financial year might well exceed 10,000 hectares for the first time, funding might not be sufficient to meet that demand—and that is with demand set at 10,000 hectares not 15,000. Therefore, at first, I was sceptical that having failed to reach the 10,000 hectares new planting target since it was established five years ago, simply changing the target to 15,000 hectares a year would be good enough.

By the way, I thought that Edward Mountain's contribution to the debate—when he spoke about his personal experience—gave us a valuable insight into the problems that people face. In these debates in Parliament, it is important that we hear from people who have experience in farming and managing land.

In discussions, the cabinet secretary has made it clear that there will be a stepped approach to achieving the new target. The aim is to raise the target to 12,000 hectares in the period from 2020 to 2022, 14,000 hectares for the period from 2022 to 2024 and 15,000 hectares by 2025. That approach strikes me as being far more achievable than the previous one, and informing the spokespeople of all the parties in the chamber of that change is a helpful and constructive approach to the subject.

Jo O'Hara from Forestry Commission Scotland has made it clear that past problems have been addressed. She states that she is aware of more than 11,000 hectares of schemes that are under preparation for planting in 2017-18 and is confident that at least 9,000 hectares of new woodland will be created.

The Mackinnon report, which has been referred to in the debate, has identified a number of mechanisms to streamline the approval process. Delivery of those mechanisms is a priority for the Forestry Commission and we are being told that that has led to an increase in investor confidence. We hope that that is, indeed, the case.

It is clear that as the target for new woodland increases over the next few years, the planting budget must increase with it. Of course, that is a matter for future Scottish Government budgets. We will have to see whether the Scottish Government gets its budget for next year approved in the vote next Thursday. I have my doubts about whether it will pass next week—I do not think that it will—so I am not going to look too far ahead to the budgets to come.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Is that a clue?

Mike Rumbles: It is a clue—Mr Simpson is pretty switched on.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats will be supporting the Conservative and Labour amendments. It is good of the Scottish Government to have said that it will accept the Conservative amendment, since it takes quite a chunk out of the motion. That is a positive step. We will support the Government's motion today, with its modest budget increase for forestry, even if, next week, we might vote against the budget as a whole.

16:15

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I note my registered interest regarding forestry and biomass heating.

The forestry sector has long been the backbone of our rural economy. Throughout Scotland, forests provide jobs and income for many people. Given that forests play such a key role, one would think that it would be a priority of the Scottish Government to ensure that we have enough skilled professionals to keep the sector alive. However, time and again, the Scottish Government has failed to train the next generation and we now face an ever-widening gap between demand for and supply of skilled labour. That is totally unacceptable.

I am not a lone voice on that. In response to the Scottish Government's future of forestry consultation, Aberdeenshire Council laid it bare. It stated that the Scottish Government should not be following the path in which it underrepresents the commercial and economic impact of forestry. In the same consultation, those stakeholders who truly know the sector talked of the increasing centralisation of policy.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Alexander Burnett: At the risk of a forestry ramble from Stewart Stevenson.

Stewart Stevenson: Can the member tell us the number of forestry students at the University of Aberdeen in 1970, and the number in 1974, when the Tories left power? I will give him a hint: the number halved.

Alexander Burnett: I cannot comment on Mr Stevenson's contemporaries, who I am sure he is referring to. However, we will talk about how many forestry students there are in Scotland now, which I think is more important.

Unfortunately, forestry is just the latest addition to the central Government grab. It has happened in policing, education, fire services, council funding, health boards and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and now it is forestry. It is no wonder. There is an ever-widening gap between activity on the ground and those who make the decisions. We have a central Government that does not acknowledge the need for more skills and labour and a forestry sector that is increasingly in despair over how it will lose forestry expertise as it morphs into a bureaucracy covering all land issues—a Jack-of-all-trades but master of none. It is no good further centralising forestry management. Such a solution has led us to the chronic problem that we have today.

It will come as no surprise to the cabinet secretary that the number of Scottish students enrolling in forestry at university has decreased by a staggering 43 per cent since 2003. The number of students studying forestry at the University of Edinburgh is now near zero, while the University of Aberdeen has had to merge its once-renowned forestry department. The lack of interest is of no surprise, given that the route of being a forestry expert or chartered forester in a stand-alone Forestry Commission will disappear.

We need to take a proactive approach to getting the next generation excited about Scotland's forests. No one knows how to do that better than local communities and, dare I say it, businesses that operate in the forestry sector. That is why tours are organised regularly for local schools to visit my biomass facility in Banchory. I know that I would disappoint Ms Martin if I did not mention an interest of mine. Students from Aboyne academy and Banchory academy are taken round the facility and have to find answers relating to their fuels topic in the curriculum. The pupils and teachers leave with a much greater understanding of the workings and economics of biomass and timber supply operations. I cannot guarantee that those children will go into the forestry sector, but

they will have an understanding of what the sector can offer them.

If the Parliament wants to represent all of Scotland, it needs to listen to those who make our economy function. We hear stories from forestry companies of having to go to other sectors to persuade their employees to retrain. How did we arrive at this state of affairs? The fact of the matter is that the Scottish Government should have been planning for this. It is not some flash-in-the-pan issue; it is a subject and a sector that can plan by the decade. The Government has had nearly a decade of failing to understand it. It knew that we had a massive skills gap and it chose to ignore it. Cabinet secretary, why not break the habit of a lifetime and listen to our forestry experts?

16:19

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my register of interests as a local councillor in Dumfries and Galloway.

I am sure that members will forgive me if I am somewhat parochial in my contribution to today's debate. My home region of Dumfries and Galloway has one of the highest concentrations of forestry in the UK; 31 per cent of the land is covered with woods and forests, which exceeds the Scottish average of 18 per cent that the cabinet secretary referred to earlier. The 211,000 hectares range from the great spruce forests of Galloway and Eskdalemuir through the traditional estate forests such as those of Buccleuch Estates Ltd to the small native and farm woodlands that are so important to the beautiful landscape of the region.

Not surprisingly, Dumfries and Galloway is a major timber-producing area, harvesting some 30 per cent of Scotland's home-grown timber annually. As a result, it is home to some of the top sawmills in Britain, such as BSW in Dalbeattie and James Jones & Sons near Lockerbie, as well as a number of smaller mills, all of which process local timber. The region is also home to Scotland's largest biomass power station near Lockerbie, which burns about 475,000 tonnes of wood per year, displacing up to 140,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases.

We have many local engineering companies that design and build forestry and timber transport machinery, supporting the industry locally but also selling equipment across the world. In addition, we have some of the largest forestry plant and equipment suppliers in the UK.

Unlike in many other parts of Scotland, the majority of the timber that is grown in Dumfries and Galloway is processed within the area, reducing our carbon emissions, supporting a low-carbon economy and crucially retaining and

creating badly needed local employment. The timber industry is unquestionably one of the most important employers in the region, with more than 3,000 jobs across all sectors, many within some of the most remote rural areas. With timber production continuing to increase as post-war forests reach maturity, there is potential for more employment opportunities; that growth is almost unique for industries in a rural economy.

With those growth opportunities also come a number of challenges, which I want to touch on briefly. The first challenge is ensuring that there is sufficient planting to support the industry's expansion. We know that we have a relatively healthy timber supply until the late 2030s, but then there is a projected drop-off. That is why I support the Government's new target to plant 15,000 hectares of new forestry each year by 2025. However, the reality is that the Government has no choice but to expand beyond its original 10,000 hectares annual target if it is to meet the aim of 100,000 hectares of planting by 2022, because past targets have, as the cabinet secretary readily acknowledges, been missed.

A lack of local or regional targets in the national strategy and a past forestry grant scheme that was seen as slow and bureaucratic have resulted in those targets being missed. The sudden rise of onshore wind farm developments in recent years in many areas also led to a loss of existing and proposed woodland. A great deal of work needs to be done to deliver the Government's targets, and I welcome the Mackinnon report, which offers a number of very positive and sensible ways forward to remove the barriers to planting.

Of course, we do not just need to plant and grow the trees. We need to harvest them and remove them and that is the next challenge that I want to touch on. The minor road network in many regions such as Dumfries and Galloway, which is so important to the transfer of timber, has not changed a great deal over the years and the capacity to take timber haulage can be very limiting. There are many narrow and structurally weak roads locally that are incredibly challenging for articulated vehicles, and any increase in heavy traffic on minor roads can lead to disruption for many local communities. The rural roads that serve our forests remain a potential barrier to the supply chain and future increased planting.

That is why the strategic timber transport fund in Scotland has been vital since it was established over a decade ago, distributing some £25 million to 119 projects throughout Scotland with a total value of some £55 million. I can think of many projects across Dumfries and Galloway, such as the Eskdalemuir bypass, that have benefited from that fund. I hope that the Government will continue

the fund, but I urge the cabinet secretary to look at the level of intervention.

At present, projects are generally supported up to a maximum of 50 per cent of eligible costs, with local government or private industry having to meet the remaining 50 per cent. Given the current pressures on council budgets, I hope that the Government will consider an intervention level of at least 80 per cent or, in some exceptional cases, full funding. The level of intervention for projects that have exceptional environmental, community and social benefits is already 80 per cent and that is also the level that the Government provides for major flood prevention schemes. Increasing the intervention level of the strategic timber transport fund at a time when councils are facing cuts is more likely to ensure that bids come forward and that the fund is fully utilised.

The final challenge that I want to touch on is the completion of forestry's devolution. I accept that incorporating the management of the forestry estate into the Scottish Government provides a framework for an integrated land management unit, which allows for a more holistic overview of the management of the forest estate. However, the current forestry model provides a great deal of engagement at local level between stakeholders from communities and local authorities on the management of the estate.

In Dumfries and Galloway, the estate is governed by two forest districts: Galloway district and Dumfries and Borders district, which between them cover 171,000 hectares. In addition to the production role, the current arrangements have played a crucial part in developing the wider health and recreational benefits of forests in Dumfries and Galloway, from the development of the 7stanes cycling project to the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory in Galloway forest park. Galloway forest park attracts 1.1 million visitors a year and is so successful that in my view the next logical step is to develop it into Scotland's next national park. Like the cabinet secretary, I have wandered off the script a little.

Given the positive role of local forest districts and their outreach functions, it is crucial that they are reflected in any new management proposals. We need to guard against either an overly centralised structure, which sadly is too often what we get with structural change, and we have to ensure that any new structure not only focuses on timber production, which is crucial, but recognises the wider role of the forestry estate in supporting local biodiversity targets, health and recreation and, of course, tourism, which is vital to a region such as Dumfries and Galloway.

16:26

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I welcome the motion and agree that forestry has a crucial role to play in achieving Scotland's climate targets. I declare a special interest as the species champion for the yew, which is thought to be Scotland's oldest tree, in the form of the famous Forthingall yew in Perthshire.

I pay tribute to the work of Woodland Trust Scotland. The trust owns and manages more than 60 sites across over 11,000 hectares in Scotland, including Den wood, near Oldmeldrum, in my constituency. I met some of its representatives there to discuss the work that they do.

Although it is important that we continue to plant more trees and do everything that we can to meet the Scottish Government's ambitious targets, it is essential that we do our utmost to protect and conserve our existing forests and woodlands.

As well as providing a number of walks and a habitat for wildlife including buzzards and roe deer, Den wood is used by a local group called gardening4kids. The group runs outdoor classes based on forest school principles and is extremely valuable in teaching youngsters from our local schools about the environment. As any pedagogue will tell you, outdoor education is invaluable. A cursory look at how much time the top-performing Finnish schools spend in woodland classrooms is surely an indication of its value.

Woodlands such as Den wood are an important educational resource. They provide an illustration of the development of forestry in the 21st century and show it to be much more than just the management of timber supply. By working with children's groups such as gardening4kids, we help them to understand how important forests and forestry are to our society.

Yesterday, I visited Fintry school, near Turriff, which has been awarded its fourth green flag. It knows the importance of tree planting, and the cabinet secretary will be delighted to hear that it has done its bit in helping us reach our target: last year, it planted 60 trees in the school grounds.

As well as its economic, educational and wider environmental importance, forestry can play a significant part in the nation's flood prevention strategy. My constituency of Aberdeenshire East was one of the areas that was heavily affected by storm Frank last January, with residents in Inverurie, Ellon, Methlick, Fyvie and Rothienorman among those who were impacted by the floods at that time. Even before storm Frank hit, the average cost of flooding in Scotland was estimated in 2015 to be £280 million per year. Of course, the psychological and emotional cost—as many of my constituents know—is significant and cannot be measured. Bodies such as Confor, the

Woodland Trust and the WWF have all proposed that strategic tree planting be made a key component of efforts to mitigate flooding. Indeed, the SNP manifesto supports the planting of woodland, which can help prevent flooding and assist in water basin management.

Work is on-going to develop strategies for the Don, Ury and Ythan rivers in my constituency, to prevent and/or mitigate any future floods. The process can feel frustratingly drawn out to residents whose lives have been upended by the recent floods, but it is essential that we do not make things worse in our haste to make things better. It is vital that all avenues are explored in ensuring that the devastation in the wake of storm Frank is not repeated. In addition to conventional prevention techniques, and as part of an anti-flooding strategy, tree planting could play a significant role.

In 2011, the Scottish Government noted that the state of knowledge of the effectiveness of natural techniques in flood prevention, such as tree planting, was evolving. Much research is still to be done in that area. However, in a study published in March last year, led by the Universities of Birmingham and Southampton, scientists found that planting trees could reduce the height of flood water in towns by up to 20 per cent. Dr Simon Dixon, the study's lead author from the University of Birmingham's institute of forest research, said:

"We believe that tree planting can make a big contribution to reducing flood risk, and should be part of a wider flood risk management approach, including conventional flood defences."

An example of tree planting being employed as part of a flood mitigation strategy is in the previously flood-hit town of Pickering in North Yorkshire, where more than 40 hectares of woodland were planted. A study of that scheme indicated that flooding was prevented that would otherwise have occurred. While tree planting was only one part of a range of measures, it was a significant part.

In closing, I suggest that our tree-planting scheme could help with the Scottish Government's aim to deliver on its manifesto commitment to meeting its climate change targets and to aid the prevention of flooding. Many of my constituents would be very supportive of such moves.

16:31

Andy Wightman: I thank all who have contributed to the debate this afternoon. I repeat the comments that I made in response to the cabinet secretary's speech: we look forward to discussing further our ideas for the new forestry bill.

As an overarching aim, we want the bill to be much more ambitious. I will cite another example. If we want forestry expansion, I do not think that we can rely on so-called traditional investment routes. There is no reason why we should not launch a national people's forest, which could be crowdfunded by the people of Scotland. There is money there for people to invest in forests, and we need to tap into the non-traditional routes.

Peter Chapman talked about forestry being a long-term business, and we would all agree with that. He also talked about the fact that there is little history of farmers doing forestry, and I am sure that he is well aware that that is because of the lack of land reform in Scotland. Most of the land in Scotland was managed by tenant farmers and it was not until 2003 that this Parliament gave tenant farmers the right to plant trees—and even then, that right was constrained. Across Europe, land reform led to the pattern of small-scale farm forestry that we see in countries such as Austria and France. Nevertheless, we will support the Conservatives' amendment this evening.

Rhoda Grant talked about the importance of getting timber to market, and we agree. However, too often timber is taken to markets that are far too far away. I remember that in 2012 the former environment minister, Paul Wheelhouse, launched a £3 million pier on the island of Mull to take timber away from Mull to distant markets. We do not agree that that is a good use of public money. The forest economy of Mull should be developed on Mull. That is the approach taken by other European countries. For example, some years ago, I visited a commune in Norway that was of a similar size to Mull and had similar forest cover. That island has two sawmills and a large prefabricated timber house-building project. It exported high-value products, which is what places such as Mull should do. No minister in Norway would stand up and say that they were proud of spending £3 million to export raw materials from the Norwegian countryside.

Emma Harper talked about the importance of investors and of Scotland being open for business—but who are those investors? I despair at her lack of curiosity. I could sit down with her and talk about the people who own the forests in Dumfries and Galloway. Many of them are absentee or in offshore tax havens, and there is one Russian oligarch. Large areas of forestry and plantations are behind locked gates and there is no community benefit.

Finlay Carson and Alexander Burnett talked about the Scottish Government's tendency to centralise things. In many instances, I share that sentiment, but I do not understand the critique in this instance. The national forest estate is owned by the Scottish ministers—that is about as

centralised as we can get—and Forest Enterprise Scotland is accountable to them. In fact, the Scottish Government's proposals for forestry in its proposed bill will make very little difference. I hope that, if the Conservatives are as critical of the tendency to centralise as I am, they will join the Greens in supporting our amendment and in trying to get more decentralisation of forest management and ownership across Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson talked about strategic interests. I agree with him. Historically, there has been cross-party support in the Parliament for forestry expansion.

Claudia Beamish talked about more community and co-operative ownership. I very much endorse that. She also talked about the biomass initiative in the south of Scotland that Colin Smyth also referred to. She also spoke about local approaches, and such things have always underscored the need for a local approach. In France, for example, 30 per cent of the public forests are owned not by the state, but by the local communes. That is why many of those forest communes are very wealthy. They own the land and the trees, and they can develop the local economy.

Edward Mountain talked about indicative forestry maps. We had them in the 1980s—I remember them, and I am sure that he does, too—as a response to the controversy over planting in places such as the flow country. We now have the land use strategy, which has the potential to allow indicative maps to be produced. Given our climate change obligations, once areas in which we should expand forests are identified, planting should be obligatory. The voluntary approach has failed. I would include very vulnerable land, such as the hillsides above the A83 and the Rest and Be Thankful. If Scotland were a normal European country like Switzerland or Austria, there would be protected forests. It would be illegal for any owner or manager to graze those hills, as happens now. There would be a criminal sanction for that.

Gillian Martin mentioned the importance of forestry in the context of flooding, and for children. Across Europe, family forestry is widespread and vertically integrated. For example, the 54,000 forest owners in the south of Sweden own the processing company to which their timber is sold.

I conclude by repeating our view that there are massive opportunities with a new forestry bill. The Government's existing goals for the bill are limited, though welcome. We look forward to further discussions with the Government on how to make the forestry bill suitable for the 21st century.

16:37

Rhoda Grant: The debate has been really good, and there has been a lot of consensus. The value that forestry provides has been acknowledged. Indeed, the debate has shown the breadth of value that forestry provides in relation to climate change, biodiversity and economic and community wellbeing. The points about those issues were well made.

I did not touch on the environment much in my opening speech. Claudia Beamish and Graeme Dey talked about the use of wood and forestry for carbon sequestration. We almost take that for granted, but there are stages in how we should use timber to get the best carbon sequestration. We should look at high-end uses to start with—producing furniture, for example, and recycling it when need be—processing and, finally, heat. If we could build that approach into our forestry plan, we would make the best use of our woodlands. Suffice it to say that, depending on the need for biomass, for example, it is always better to grow that very close to where it will be used.

We need to look at our natural hardwoods. Others might disagree with me, but some of the natural hardwoods that have been planted have never really been managed properly. They need to be properly managed to get the maximum use out of them.

Claudia Beamish talked about the important issue of deer management. If we are to have good-quality forestry, we need to ensure that the trees are not grazed when they are young, especially by deer, but also by sheep and cattle.

Claudia Beamish also talked about peatlands and the conflict that there sometimes is between protecting peatlands and forestry. We need to be very clear about that. We need to plan how we take forward our forestry to make sure that we do not interfere with other things that are good for the environment and that we maximise its impact.

Richard Lyle and Gillian Martin talked about flood management and prevention through forestry. That was another issue on which we—or at least I, in my opening speech—touched only lightly.

I am still not totally clear about what the Greens are trying to achieve through their amendment. The Forestry Commission Scotland and all of Government should encourage community ownership. When land ownership is in the public domain, they should look at how they can work with communities and others to manage it and, where it is right to do so, transfer it into community ownership. We would expect that approach to be in place for the Forestry Commission Scotland, as well as for Government and local government organisations.

Non-governmental organisations can own forestry and, as landowners, they tend to be more sympathetic to community needs. However, they are still landowners, so they can buy and trade their forestry on the open market. I would not want them to be treated the same as community landowners, hence my concern about the Green amendment remains. We are sympathetic to the direction of travel, but we are not clear about whether there would be unforeseen circumstances. Such forestry could end up in private ownership. We would not want that, and neither would the Greens.

Stewart Stevenson talked about marine transportation. Yesterday, I had the pleasure of being on Raasay. It was a beautiful day. I did not see timber being extracted by boat, but I am sure that that happens. Certainly, the pier looked as though it could more than cope with that. We need to look at those methods of timber extraction, because—

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Rhoda Grant: Very briefly.

Stewart Stevenson: I was not talking about a pier. A special vessel goes on to the beach and creates a temporary pier.

Rhoda Grant: That is even better, because it can be used elsewhere.

Colin Smyth's points about narrow and weak roads in rural areas were absolutely right. He made a plea about the strategic timber transport fund. Such funds help local communities and local government to put in place methods of timber extraction. I very much hope that the Government will look constructively at what he said and see how it can help to promote the scheme with local government and others.

I agree with Andy Wightman's point about timber transportation. Where possible, timber should be grown close to where it will be used. However, if we are to use timber properly, that approach is not always possible, because some of the need is in our urban areas, while the best land for growing timber is often in rural areas.

We talked about planting. There was much agreement that a lot more planting is needed and should be encouraged. Maybe the funding that follows planting could also dictate where the planting happens, so that it takes place in the best possible areas.

Alexander Burnett talked about skills, and of course we need to ensure that the right skills are in place. We also need to address the gender gap in the forestry sector and encourage women to become involved. It is a perfect career path for

women and we need to make sure that they find the sector accessible.

It has been a good debate. I welcome the minister's commitment to listen—not only to the debate, but as the bill progresses through the Parliament. I look forward to many more discussions about forestry and how we can make the bill work for all Scotland.

16:43

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): Along with the majestic mountains, rugged coasts and rolling hills, forests form one of the iconic images of Scotland's natural beauty. They are rich, biodiverse habitats that act as a huge carbon sink, provide us with raw materials and help to support 25,000 jobs, as well as contributing £1 billion to our economy. Our forests are to be truly cherished. Finlay Carson made that point well when he flagged up how important the sector is to his constituency, as did Colin Smyth.

Andy Wightman revealed that he was blacklisted by the forestry sector. He also mentioned the Scottish Government's lack of ambition and promoted forest communes. Unfortunately, we do not agree with those points, but I think that we can all agree on the need to plant more trees.

Stewart Stevenson spoke about making the case to farmers for the intrinsic value of forestry. Claudia Beamish outlined the French model—an agroforestry approach—in an interesting speech. Graeme Dey highlighted deer management and the cost to the public purse of fencing. Those were all worthwhile contributions to the debate.

We acknowledge that the SNP Government recognises the value of forestry, as can be seen in its plans to expand the area of forestry in Scotland. Anyone who cares about our environment and our economy would welcome such an expansion.

In last week's draft climate change plan, the SNP Government announced that it would increase the current target for woodland creation by 50 per cent in order to plant 15,000 hectares of woodland per year. Mike Rumbles asked how, given that the SNP Government has not met the current target yet, the Parliament can be assured that it will meet an even bigger target. The SNP Government also said that it would plant 100 million trees by the end of 2015, but it missed that target by more than 11 million trees.

Edward Mountain flagged up the lack of funding in the area, but Fergus Ewing sought to assure the Parliament, and I respect that. I also welcome Fergus Ewing's commitment to work across the chamber for the benefit of Scotland and to

continue to meet his new year's resolution on that approach.

However, we see inaction on the impact of invasive rhododendrons on Scottish woodlands. Although that impact has been described by one ecologist as the biggest ecological threat that Scotland faces, barely more than one tenth of rhododendron spread has been removed over the past five years. I urge the SNP Government to tackle the problem rather than leave it to landowners alone.

We have a number of concerns about the SNP Government's proposed organisational arrangements for the Forestry Commission. The proposals could lead to the type of centralisation and political interference that might undermine the goals that we all share—a point that Peter Chapman and Alexander Burnett made. Furthermore, Rhoda Grant raised concerns about career civil servants running our forestry sector—a point that we also agree with.

On the other hand, there are occasions when central leadership is required. In January 2015, the biorefinery road map for Scotland was launched to much fanfare. That was right, as the sector is in dire need of leadership. Overall, that means a more active role for the Government in not stepping back but stepping up to back business and ensure that more people, in all corners of the country, share the benefits of its success. That approach is similar to the modern industrial strategy that the UK Government recently launched, which will make Britain and Scotland—with the Scottish Government's support—stronger, fairer and more successful than they are today.

Biorefining means the integrated production of materials, chemicals, fuels and energy from biomass. Timber value chain co-products such as tree stumps, brash and thinnings, as well as residues, could provide a valuable feedstock for a biorefinery. The first stage of feedstock analysis has been beset with delays. However, 2017 is the year that is outlined in the road map for feasibility studies of the three main feedstocks, following technical appraisals, to build a compelling case for biorefinery construction in Scotland, so it is not too late for the road map to be delivered. I urge the cabinet secretary to ensure that it is delivered on time.

Forestry represents a massive opportunity to deliver positive economic and environmental impacts for Scotland. Scottish forestry needs a Government that will show leadership and recognise what we can do better; a Government that supports stakeholders, not one that walks away from problems; and, most of all, a Government that puts results before rhetoric. I

urge the chamber to support the amendment in Peter Chapman's name.

16:49

Fergus Ewing: It has been an excellent debate, which Maurice Golden concluded in the constructive and positive fashion in which most members made their contributions. I am grateful to all members who have taken part in the debate, and I think that the wider community of people who are interested in forestry as a livelihood, a passion or a hobby will feel that it has provided a lot of support for their respective aims and visions of what they wish to achieve from forestry in Scotland.

I want to try to address many points that have been made in the debate, but if I fail to do so—it would be impossible to address all of them in eight minutes—I ask members who are particularly keen for me to respond to them to write to me, please. I repeat the offer that I made exclusively to the Greens earlier: if members wish to meet me to discuss matters, especially as we proceed with the proposed forestry bill, my door is open. I am keen to have discussions so that we can iron out potential areas of disagreement—which Mike Rumbles kindly mentioned we have. A bit of prior discussion often enables us to do that. Exchanges in committee also serve that purpose, as Edward Mountain indicated.

There is an important role for regional policy to play, as one of the Conservative members—I am sorry, but I cannot remember who—mentioned. We strongly believe that there should be a regional approach. The Scottish local authorities' forest and woodland strategies are used to identify suitable areas for woodland expansion. It is not for me to determine where those areas are. If I were to do that, it would be inappropriately centralist. It is for locally elected councillors, working with their communities and community councillors, to do that. The Scottish Government believes that local authorities should play that important role. It is essential that we have a partnership with local authorities, and that is how I seek to deal with them in my areas of responsibility.

Colin Smyth mentioned woodland loss and compensatory planting. Although that is an issue, according to the information that I have, which comes from a report that was published just last year, only a very small part of woodland loss—0.12 per cent of the total forestry area—is attributable to woodland being lost through renewables schemes. We welcome the compensatory planting that is required of developers by local authorities as a way to plant more trees, on which the debate has also focused.

Timber transport is an extremely important issue that was mentioned by all the Labour speakers in the debate, and on which Rhoda Grant majored. The budget continues to support the timber transport scheme, which has provided nearly £25 million to 134 projects since 2005. Of course we want to work effectively with local government to maximise what we can do.

Many members mentioned the importance of business. In my constituency, we live less than 1km away from BSW Timber's Boat of Garten mill, which I visited again recently. Edward Mountain mentioned the mills of Gordon Timber and James Jones. Such mills are at the root of rural life and work in many parts of Scotland, including the Highlands and Islands, the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway, as members including Emma Harper said.

The processing industry has pointed out that the long-term forecasts for softwood production show a peak in the 2030s followed by a trough, which now falls within the timeframe for long-term loans. It is concerned about the availability of future investment funding. That is one of many reasons why we need to up our game in what Mike Rumbles rightly characterised as a stepped increase. It can only be a stepped increase, because capacity cannot double in a year. It takes some time for nurseries to increase their stock, as I learned when I visited Christie-Elite Nurseries not so long ago. The capacity of contractors—who are, I point out, reliant on many migrant workers from the EU, whom we hope will still be welcome in Scotland—to do the work is another factor in our inability to go from where we are now to planting 15,000 hectares a year straight away, but I was pleased that members recognised that we are, as the information that Jo O'Hara provided demonstrated, making progress thereanent.

Many members talked about devolution of forestry, and I am pleased by the broad support in principle for that. I emphasise that in completing that devolution we want to ensure a number of things. First, we will work with the UK on forestry disease and research issues. Assurance on that was sought and is given: we will continue with that work. Secondly, will our actions be accountable? Yes—of course they will. They will be accountable to the Scottish Parliament—both to committees and to individual members in their work, which I think will ensure even greater accountability. Thirdly, will a new era of centralism be brought in whereby I will play the role of centralist-in-chief? I think that I would be miscast in the role of a Scottish Strelnikov; I do not see myself in that light, nor do I intend to apply for the part. We will work in partnership with local authorities and communities, because that is the correct way.

We are already engaging with industry: I have held two summits and met non-governmental organisations, and will meet them again shortly. We are analysing the consultation responses, which will be published in February, and we are committed to introducing the bill in this session, in accordance with our manifesto pledge.

I acknowledge that we have not planted enough trees and that we need to do a variety of things in that regard. One of them, as Alexander Burnett rightly said, concerns skills development. I am pleased that the Forestry Commission has led by example in that regard: 98 apprentices have gained employment with the Forestry Commission, and its graduate development programme has employed 15 graduates since 2007. The Scottish school of forestry at Balloch, near Inverness in my constituency, does a great job and will continue to do so. However, Mr Burnett was correct to raise the issue of skills, because we have to work together more to encourage more young people to pursue what I think would be a terrific career for many of them.

I want to mention also the excellent work that Jim Mackinnon CBE carried out after being asked so to do by me last summer. He visited a huge number of people, gave freely of his time and produced a very valuable report. The Forestry Commission is about to publish a delivery plan, and we will listen carefully to the points that will be made. I suggest that members might benefit from reading paragraph 61 et sequentia of the report, which talk about the role of accredited specialists. That is an idea that is worthy of strong consideration, although there are arguments against it. However, a reading of those paragraphs from the report would perhaps address some of the perfectly understandable doubts that we have heard expressed.

Deer fencing is, of course, an essential tool in ensuring successful establishment of new woodlands. Private forestry is likely to continue to rely principally on fences to protect woodland creation schemes. However, as Rhoda Grant, Andy Wightman and Graeme Dey pointed out, we need robust deer management, and in order to do that we need to work in collaboration with bodies such as the Association of Deer Management Groups and all interested parties, to find a way ahead.

Mr Wightman enlivened the debate with his contribution and his novel suggestion that forestry should be made obligatory. I am not quite sure how that suggestion could accord with article 1 of the first protocol of the European convention on human rights. If he knows how that could be done, I ask him to write to me thereanent. However, I feel that it is far better to work to persuade those involved in land management in Scotland that

forestry is a sensible long-term investment—as, indeed, it is, in the right place, at the right time and in the right way—than it is to tell them “You must do this”, even were it legal to do so, which I suspect one would find it is not.

I think that I am due to close, Presiding Officer, unless I have another few minutes to carry on, in which case I will.

The Presiding Officer: You have 54 seconds.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you.

I close by stating that we are absolutely committed to furthering the cause of community ownership of woodlands in the same way as we did—I played a part in this when I was the energy minister—when we encouraged community ownership of renewables. There is an overwhelming opportunity now for us to work together—the private sector, the public sector, NGOs, professionals, the Scottish Government, local authorities and communities throughout Scotland—to find ways of continuing the good work that has been done, with over 30 community ownership schemes, and to build on new and innovative ways of carrying that out.

I thank all members for what has been one of the most positive and constructive debates in this session of Parliament—at least, of those in which I have taken part.

ScotRail Performance Improvement Plan (Update)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf on an update on the ScotRail performance improvement plan. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so members should refrain from intervening during it.

17:00

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): I welcome the opportunity to update Parliament on the progress of ScotRail's improvement plan. This is an exciting and challenging period for rail in Scotland, with record levels of investment, projects such as the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme and fleets of new electric and high-speed trains, which will revolutionise services. I know that members are also keen to hear an update on the management changes that Network Rail and Abellio recently announced for the ScotRail franchise and to hear details of the free week fares offer.

I start with the performance improvement plan. When I received the plan, the moving annual average performance level was 89.6 per cent, against the contractual trigger of 90.3 per cent. As soon as the plan was received, we set about detailed scrutiny of its delivery. Our latest information is that more than 86 actions have been completed and that the vast majority of those that remain are under way.

As a live document, the original 249-point plan has expanded to include more than 270 initiatives. Members will be familiar with the fact that the improvement plan was split into three distinct sections covering infrastructure, rolling stock and operations. It was also backed by £16 million of accelerated funding by the ScotRail Alliance.

I take the opportunity to thank railway staff up and down the country for all the hard work that they have put in, particularly over the past few railway periods, to help to make our railways run better—from the engineers who have improved signalling through to the station staff who have tweaked operations to run even more efficiently. Their efforts are not often acknowledged enough, so I give heartfelt thanks to each and every one of them.

The particular reason why I thank those staff is that, because of their direct efforts, we have seen an improvement in performance across the railway network in Scotland. I am confident that the continued focus from staff and management through the performance improvement plan will

see a return to the levels of performance that passengers are—rightly—entitled to expect.

Let me be clear that ScotRail is not yet performing at the level that I would like it to. However, let us be equally clear that neither is the situation the apocalyptic scenario that is often presented and painted by some of our opponents. Let us examine the facts. First, since the improvement plan was received, performance has improved. The moving annual average—the contractual measure and the standard industry measure that is used across the United Kingdom—has improved from 89.6 per cent in period 6, when we received the plan, to 90 per cent. That is 0.3 of a percentage point away from ScotRail's target of 90.3 per cent, achieving which would lift it out of improvement plan territory so that—obviously and logically—it would not require an improvement plan any more.

If we look at the most recent railway period—period 10, which coincided with high winds, including two storms—we see that there was a 6 per cent improvement in performance between periods 9 and 10. The comparisons with the rest of the Great Britain rail network tell their own story. ScotRail's bettering performance has seen it increase the gap between how well it is performing and how railways across the United Kingdom are performing. ScotRail's level is now 2.3 per cent better than the GB average.

I know public performance measure and moving annual average figures are not the only measures of how well a railway performs. Passengers and commuters tell me, as I imagine they tell many members across the chamber, that they are frustrated by, for example, practices where their stops are skipped. The managing director of ScotRail, Phil Verster, announced a number of months ago that he would be putting in place a protocol to avoid that practice. Skip-stopping is reducing. I can confirm that, between periods 9 and 10, the practice reduced by about a third. It occurred on only 0.59 per cent of all services booked. I want ScotRail to do even better, but that is further proof that the improvement plan, as instructed, is delivering results.

However, I am disappointed by the national passenger survey results that were published today. The fieldwork for the survey took place in the autumn, just at the time that we demanded the improvement plan and before it started to take effect. There is no sugar-coating it—the results are disappointing.

I know that members also want an update on ScotRail's free week initiative, which was announced at the end of last year. We said that we would make announcements with more details and we will. I reiterate, without any equivocation or doubt, that a week of free travel will be offered to

annual and monthly season ticket holders this year. Further discounts will also be offered to weekly and less frequent travellers—whether the travel is for work or for leisure—and particularly for those who use a ScotRail smart card for their journeys. That is backed by £3 million of funding, which is £1 million more than those in the Opposition called for.

At the time of the announcement, I made it clear that we would bring forward further details of the scheme in early 2017. I was also clear that there will be a contribution from ScotRail, as well as from the Scottish Government. Members are keen to understand the source of funding for our fares initiative. Our service quality incentive regime—SQUIRE—focuses on improving the passenger experience across stations and services. The financial contributions that result from each four-weekly rail period on a rolling basis are reinvested for the benefit of rail passengers. Using a proportion of those funds to benefit ScotRail passengers through the fares initiative falls within the fund's remit. The SQUIRE fund currently stands at £2.06 million, which is the net total after deducting £834,000 that is for projects that have been committed to or delivered. Of the SQUIRE fund, £1.8 million will be used for the fares initiative, and the remaining £1.2 million to fund that initiative will come from Transport Scotland's budget. I want to be clear that other ring-fenced funds, such as the access for all fund and the Scottish stations fund, will not be impacted.

This is an exciting time in our railways. Backed by Scottish Government investment of more than £5 billion in this control period, there will be a revolution in rail. This year, the first of 70 new electric trains is being tested in Scotland. Passengers will be able to travel on those trains from autumn, and all the Edinburgh to Glasgow via Falkirk services will operate with the new fleet by December. Those longer, faster, greener trains will provide 26 per cent more seats at peak times from December 2017 and, from December 2018, that will rise to 44 per cent more seats when eight cars can operate. That will help with the capacity issues that passengers and members around the chamber want to see tackled.

From next year, the new fleet will be joined by 26 high-speed trains to link our seven main cities. Those trains will be completely refurbished before entering service and, combined with the revolution in rail initiative, they will help to deliver a step change in provision from the Highlands to the Borders. Once both fleets are introduced, the ScotRail fleet will contain more than 1,000 carriages, which is an increase of 50 per cent since we took over in government in 2007.

We are progressing our commitment to ensure that a public sector body can bid for future rail

franchises. I set up a group to meet and discuss that important work that comprises delegates from Opposition parties, rail trade unions and other key stakeholders. We met in December and had a positive and constructive discussion, and we will meet again next month. At present, the focus of the work is on examining the suitability of existing bodies as bidders and the steps that would be required to create a new public sector body, if that is necessary.

In recent coverage, members will have noted a focus on the performance of Network Rail, on delays caused by its management of the network and on recent cost increases that have resulted from its development and management of major rail projects. That focus is justified. Network Rail is critical to the delivery of excellent day-to-day services and to our ambitious plans for growth and improvement, and that is why we fully fund it to deliver its network maintenance, management and project functions.

It cannot be right that the partner whose work we specify and fund has little accountability to ministers and to this Parliament, which is why I wrote last week to all parties to seek their support for the devolution of Network Rail. I thank those who have already given somewhat constructive responses. I believe that a properly devolved and accountable Network Rail will bring improved responsibility, accountability and operational efficiency and provide better alignment with Scotland's needs and priorities.

I conclude by looking at one issue of Network Rail management—the planned departure of managing director Phil Verster. That is, of course, a decision for him, Abellio and Network Rail—a reclassified body under the Department for Transport—to make. I have shared a good relationship with him and I have never doubted his commitment to making our railways better. He continues in post and will oversee the improvement plan until he vacates his role. He has already presided over periods of improvement, as I have outlined, and I am grateful for that. I wish him well with his future endeavours. His successor, Alex Hynes, will join us in what are exciting and challenging times, as I have outlined. He comes with considerable experience in the railways.

Ultimately, progress in an industry as large, valuable and complex as rail is not about individuals. It is the collective efforts of the thousands of dedicated employees who I thanked earlier, supported by Government ministers and—critically—by the Parliament, that will deliver our ambitious plans, support and grow the economy and deliver a first-rate service, day in and day out, for passengers across Scotland.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. It is right that he has come to the chamber to make a statement, given the changes at the top of the ScotRail Alliance in the past few days. We welcome the appointment of Alex Hynes to be the new managing director of the ScotRail Alliance. I wonder, however, whether Mr Hynes is prepared for the relationship with the Scottish Government that he will face in his new role, for it is that above all else that seems to have driven Mr Verster from his post.

There have been ill-thought-through announcements regarding public sector bids and the future of the franchise and uncostered raids on the SQUIRE fund without adequate consultation, for which Mr Verster cannot vouch, while the situation on the ground deteriorates for the travelling public, with customer satisfaction down and the latest performance data showing average annual punctuality lower than the contractual target.

It is not good enough. Can we have assurances from the transport minister that Mr Hynes will have the full support of the Government and that the minister will cease to bounce policy into the public domain without proper consultation with either ScotRail and/or the various stakeholders? Will the minister promise those passengers who are so fed up with the performance of our railway network that he will stop the gimmicks and the policy-making on the hoof and finally focus on resolving the underperformance of our national railway?

Humza Yousaf: I am afraid that being lectured on national railways by the Conservative Party—which of course is overseeing a 10-month dispute with Southern Railway—is a bit hard for me to stomach. However, I will say that I do not recognise at all the picture that the member paints of Scotland's railways. I have just said in my 10-minute statement that we have seen improvement since we received the improvement plan.

When we received the plan in period 6, the moving annual average was 89.6 per cent; it is now at 90 per cent. It does not matter which political party members belong to—that is an improvement. When the practice known as skipping stops is reduced so that it takes place on only 0.59 per cent of services that are booked, that is an improvement. When we back investment in rail with £5 billion of Scottish Government funding, that shows our confidence in our railways.

I give the member an absolute assurance that when Alex Hynes takes up post, he will have the full support of this Government—in fact, I hope that I get the chance to speak to him before he takes up post. I imagine and I hope that he will also have the full support of everybody across the chamber.

All of us, whether it is the management of ScotRail and the ScotRail Alliance or Scottish Government ministers are working hard but, crucially, the 7,500 people who work in the alliance are working day in and day out, tirelessly, to ensure that passengers get the best experience possible. It would be nice if those people also received the support of members across the chamber.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. Scottish Labour always welcomes the opportunity to question the Government on behalf of Scotland's passengers. Passengers are fed up with the level of delays, cancellations, overcrowding and skip-stopping.

Despite everything that the minister has said, today's passenger survey by Transport Focus confirms that passenger satisfaction is at a 14-year low. On almost every single measure, satisfaction is down compared to the previous year. Only 38 per cent of people are satisfied with how ScotRail deals with delays. The reality is that targets continue to be missed, passenger confidence has slumped and the ScotRail chief has announced that he is leaving after just 18 months.

The minister has agreed an improvement plan with ScotRail. In October, he told Parliament that he expected ScotRail to hit the 91.3 per cent target by the end of March, which is a clear target, expectation and deadline. That deadline is fast approaching and Phil Verster has announced that he is leaving. Will ScotRail hit that target? If it does not, what responsibility will the transport minister take for the performance of Scotland's railways?

Humza Yousaf: It must be depressing to live in the mind of Neil Bibby, where everything seems to be going wrong. We should have an objective look at the facts, which show that, when we asked for the performance improvement plan in period 6, the moving annual average was at 89.6 per cent and it is now at 90 per cent. To say that there has not been an improvement is absolutely incorrect. The practice of skipping stops has reduced from period 9 to period 10, so to say that there has not been an improvement is incorrect.

I agree with Neil Bibby that the passenger satisfaction results are disappointing. A figure of 83 per cent satisfied is disappointing, although of course that is 2 per cent higher than the GB average. *[Interruption.]* It is incredible that Labour members are moaning and groaning when I am agreeing with their front-bench spokesman. I agree with him on that.

The first target for ScotRail to achieve is of course to no longer need the improvement plan. That would mean getting up to 90.3 per cent, and

it is 0.3 per cent away from that. My expectation is that ScotRail should get to that as soon as possible, and I will keep pushing it on that. Ultimately, if ScotRail does not reach its targets or if it dips and goes into breach or default territory, there are some very severe sanctions, which we have discussed and which people know about. Ultimately, of course, that could lead to Abellio no longer having the franchise. However, I do not see us getting there. Instead of beating down ScotRail, I am working with it and with railway staff to ensure that they continue on the trajectory of improvement. It would be good if Neil Bibby joined me in that. If instead of doing down railway staff, Mr Bibby actually noted and commended them on the fact that they have been working tirelessly and have achieved some improvement, I think that that would help to motivate them to achieve further improvements.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The minister has previously agreed to take an interest in the local improvement plan for services on the Maryhill train line that ScotRail agreed to develop following my representations. I want to ensure that national improvements become a local reality in my constituency, so can the minister assure me that the recent announcement of the looming change of the ScotRail managing director will not impact on improvements that my constituents expect locally? Can I count on the minister's on-going interest in and commitment to the Maryhill train line services? *[Interruption.]*

Humza Yousaf: That is an important local matter, so I am not sure why Opposition members are laughing at it. I thank the member for raising the issue of Maryhill. I can give him an assurance on that. When there is a management change at the top, people of course look for continuity, which is important. I press the ScotRail Alliance to ensure that there is continuity. Phil Verster is currently the MD, and I know that network rail, Abellio and Arriva, as the employer of Alex Hynes, are working closely together to ensure continuity and that the handover is as smooth as possible. If the member has any issues or difficulties or any problems at all in getting that local matter resolved, I will of course be more than happy to have a conversation with him or with ScotRail, but I do not envisage there being any issues or problems with the recent management changes that have been announced.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I am interested in the minister's explanation of the funding for the one-week-free travel scheme. Transport Scotland's website states the following:

"One of the most important aspects introduced for this Franchise, is that all penalties from SQUIRE are retained in a ring fenced fund for re-investment into the Scottish Rail Network. This fund is not used for repairs but for qualitative

improvements or new facilities by agreement between both Transport Scotland and ScotRail."

Indeed, in last week's Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, Mr Verster told me that, if ScotRail felt that the money would best be used on other things, it had the right to choose to do so. He stated:

"I cannot vouch for whether the scheme goes ahead."—*[Official Report, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, 18 January 2017; c 32.]*

Who came to the conclusion that that use of the SQUIRE fund falls within the fund's remit? It is neither a qualitative improvement nor a new facility. Is the minister going to force ScotRail to pay for his announcement at the expense of other passenger improvements?

Humza Yousaf: No. I find that utterly ridiculous. When we made the announcement that £3 million would go towards a free week, Opposition members—including some from the Conservative party—demanded that ScotRail, as well as the Scottish taxpayer in the form of the Scottish Government, make a contribution. Now that it chooses to make that contribution, they are up in arms again. There is simply no pleasing members of the Opposition.

SQUIRE can be reinvested into the Scottish rail network for the benefit of the passenger. A week's free travel is a benefit for the passenger.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The vast majority of passengers on Scotland's railways buy their tickets journey by journey. Labour's plan for a fare freeze would have benefited every passenger in Scotland. Only season-ticket holders will benefit from the free-week scheme that was outlined in the minister's statement. What percentage of passengers will benefit from the scheme?

Humza Yousaf: I will try to correct some of the inaccuracies in what Daniel Johnson just said. When I made the announcement at the end of last year, I did not say that the scheme would be for monthly and annual season-ticket holders only. In fact, 10 minutes ago, I said that we would also look to introduce discounts for people who travel for leisure or for work less frequently.

The independent evaluation that was done by Ernst & Young shows that Labour's rail fare freeze would have cost up to £58 million—£58 million that would not have been invested in our railways.

"I'm irritated by any political party trying to get short term advantage from the railway industry. What has really irritated me is the campaign for rail fares freeze. This year, 2016, is meant to be the year we're turning our backs on populism. It's really done enough damage. But there's little more populist than a rail fares freeze, which is totally unrealistic."

Those are not my words; they are the words of Tom Harris, the former Labour transport minister.

A Labour fare freeze would take £58 million out of the rail industry and has been condemned by somebody in the Labour Party who used to be a transport minister. We have announced a £3 million fares discount that will benefit railway passengers who travel daily, weekly, monthly and annually. Why does the Labour Party not welcome that and get behind rail passengers and the discounts that we are offering them?

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the minister for his statement. I am pleased that he is so excited about the state of Scotland's railways, although I thought that we were all beyond the point of falling back on the support of Tom Harris in a debate about such matters.

I agree with the minister's tribute to the people who work on Scotland's railways for the efforts that they make. Many of them know that a public sector operator is the way to get long-term benefit from Scotland's rail services. Will the minister confirm whether his intention is that a public sector operator would have to bid competitively against privatised operators, or is it simply to change the rules to ensure that the railways have a public sector, not-for-profit operator?

Humza Yousaf: Mr Harvie is being slightly flippant. There is nothing wrong with being excited about the plans that we have for our railways. Seventeen new trains, faster, longer and greener trains and connecting our seven main cities by high-speed trains—those are worth getting excited about. I say to him that, although I recognise the challenges, the service is not nearly as apocalyptic as some present it as being.

On the public sector bid, I thank Mr Harvie's colleague, John Finnie, for being extremely positive about the discussions.

I want to ensure that I give Mr Harvie as much accurate information as possible. My understanding is that, because of the changes in the law, a public sector body could now apply. However, it would absolutely still need to compete. That is what we have said: it would need to compete with a private sector bid and to be part of the process. My understanding is that we do not have the legislative competence to change that. Of course, during the Smith negotiations, it was the unionist parties that stopped us having full control over our railways.

I will get more information to Mr Harvie on the question that he asks. I thank him and his party for the constructive way in which they have taken part in the discussions.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Just before he resigned, Phil Verster made it clear

to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee that he had not agreed to the transport minister's attempted raid of £1.8 million from the SQUIRE fund to help to fund the Government's proposal of a free week of travel.

The SQUIRE fund can be used for disabled access at stations but, in relation to access at Inch station, my constituents in the north-east have been turned down, because, they have been told, there is not enough money. How can the minister say in his statement that disabled access at stations such as Inch will not be impacted by that attempted financial raid for a week's free travel?

Humza Yousaf: The member is incorrect to say that there is no money in the SQUIRE pot. There absolutely will be money in that fund, even when the contribution for the free week is made. As I have said, there is £2.06 million after the deductions for what will be spent. ScotRail will use £1.8 million of that money for the free week and we will put in the other £1.2 million, so there will still be money in the fund.

There are two other funds that are used for compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. One is the access for all fund, £67 million of which the UK Government ring fenced for Scotland. Some 25 Scottish stations have been upgraded through that fund. That is the sort of fund that would be used for the substantial work that is required at Inch station, which I am more than happy to have a conversation with the member about.

There are other funds, as well. The member might be aware that, as part of the franchise, there is a minor works fund. That goes towards improving facilities and services to make them more accessible through more minor works, such as accessible toilets, dropped kerbs and hearing loops.

Although the money from the UK Government's access for all fund is already committed, I am certain that that fund will reopen and I am more than happy to have a conversation with the member about Inch station and to discuss recommending that future money from the access for all fund be used for work at the station, to see where we can get with that.

The Presiding Officer: Seven members wish to ask questions. I ask all members to ask questions without any preamble and the minister to be as brief as possible in his replies.

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): How many of ScotRail's trains that run late currently skip stops to improve their punctuality during rush hour? What action is being taken to improve the situation?

Humza Yousaf: As I said in my statement, if a stop is skipped, that gets marked down against performance. As I also said, that practice has reduced by around a third between period 9 and period 10—the period that has just passed—and it affects 0.59 per cent of all services booked.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Given that the position is a senior one, what process was followed in replacing the managing director of ScotRail? It took place at extremely short notice—barely a weekend. What changes to the role have warranted a starting salary that is 18 grand higher than that of the new managing director's predecessor? Will the new managing director receive the same relocation package as his predecessor?

Humza Yousaf: Of course, those are matters for Network Rail, which, as a reclassified body, comes under the UK Department for Transport. The salary level has the sign-off of the Secretary of State for Transport in the UK Government. Annie Wells should direct her questions to him.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Is the minister content with the fact that, one minute ago, the public performance measurement was 9 per cent better in Scotland than in the GB network, and that, at lunchtime today, there were two trains that were not running to schedule—both of which arrived early?

Humza Yousaf: I am grateful for that. The serious point is that, as I have said, there has been an improvement in performance over the past few railway periods. Performance is not where I want it to be or what it should be, and it is not enough to lift ScotRail out of performance improvement plan territory, but it is important to say that ScotRail is on the right trajectory.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): At the time of the publication of the improvement plan, the public performance measure stood at 90.7 per cent. In the subsequent four periods, it did not reach 90.7 per cent. Can the minister explain why it has never recovered to the September figure, despite his improvement plan being in place?

Humza Yousaf: The member is asking why railway performance in the summer is not as good as railway performance in the winter. The reason why we use the moving annual average as the contractual figure is because it takes account of that seasonal variation. The member is not using the contractual figure—the standard industry measure; he is using what Donald Trump's press secretary would call an alternative fact. He is using the wrong measure, and he is incorrect. The measure is the moving annual average. When we requested the improvement plan, the moving annual average was 89.6 per cent; it now stands

at 90 per cent. By anybody's measure, that is an improvement in performance.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I have a register of interests and anyone can read it if they like.

Can the minister give me an assurance that the review group for the far north line will still go ahead, despite the change of management?

Humza Yousaf: Yes. The review group will go ahead, and its first meeting will take place in Inverness tomorrow morning. The member will be fully apprised of that. We know that there are and have been issues on the far north line. That is why there is a section of the improvement plan specifically for the far north line. We look forward to making those improvements for the people of the north.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister support the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers' safer Scottish trains campaign, which includes an independent review of the operational safety of all driver-only operated trains and an urgent assessment of all services to ensure that they are fully accessible for passengers with disabilities and the impact of skip-stopping?

Humza Yousaf: As the member knows, of course—because she was there—I met her and the RMT to discuss the safer trains campaign. I would support many of the initiatives in the campaign. She knows that Transport Scotland is in dialogue with the RMT, and that I have doubts about the independent safety group, because the Office of Rail and Road, as the regulator, independently verifies, monitors and looks over the safety of the railways. However, I will continue the dialogue with the member and, of course, with the RMT.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Given that more than half the ScotRail delays that were of more than three minutes' duration were as a result of faults attributed to Network Rail, what benefits does the minister see from further devolution of Network Rail's functions, which he mentioned in his statement?
[Interruption.]

Humza Yousaf: That is a hugely important point and I cannot for the life of me understand why Opposition members are groaning about it. Fifty-four per cent of delays are due to Network Rail. It is not just the Scottish Government that believes in the devolution of Network Rail; an excellent report by the Reform Scotland think tank, led by Tom Harris, a former transport minister in the UK Government, backed devolution of Network Rail. We fund a body that is responsible for major projects in Scotland, for the track and infrastructure and for more than half of the delays

on the network. It makes sense to me that that body should be accountable not just to the Government but to the Parliament. Nevertheless, we have Opposition members groaning in dissatisfaction. The point about the devolution of Network Rail is important. We will continue to push for it, and I hope that other parties will join us.

The Presiding Officer: I am particularly grateful to the last seven members for their performance, punctuality and keeping to time.

Decision Time

17:33

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S5M-03573.1, in the name of Peter Chapman, which seeks to amend motion S5M-03573, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on developing forestry in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-03573.2, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S5M-03573, in the name of Fergus Ewing, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-03573.3, in the name of Andy Wightman, which seeks to amend motion S5M-03573, in the name of Fergus Ewing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

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)
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)
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)
Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (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)
Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
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, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (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)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
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)
Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (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)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 4, Against 86, Abstentions 18.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-03573, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on developing forestry in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament acknowledges the contribution that woods and forests make to Scotland's people, communities, economy and environment; notes ministers' intention to complete the devolution of forestry so that its management in Scotland is fully accountable to ministers and to the Parliament; recognises the importance of retaining local expertise and cross-border joint working and urges that the end result of this process is not needless centralisation; welcomes the future increase in the Scottish Government's annual target to create 15,000 hectares of woodland per year, but notes that it is not meeting current, lower targets; recognises that forestry has an important role to play in achieving Scotland's climate targets; calls on the Scottish Government to take effective action in order to deliver the target and maintain the National Forest Estate as an asset for the nation; recognises that forestry is a long-term project that requires a long-term vision for a thriving sector; recognises the opportunities that forestry provides for community action and in tackling climate change; notes the importance of cross-border working to tackle issues of research and development and disease prevention in any proposed structure; welcomes the recommendations in the report, *Analysis of Current Arrangements for the Consideration and Approval of Forestry Planting Proposals* (Mackinnon report), after a series of failed planting targets; encourages the new strategy to take account of the diversification of forest land use into areas such as recreation and leisure; notes serious concerns about the need for more robust deer management, and recognises the importance of a strong transport infrastructure for forestry products through continuing to support the Timber Support Fund.

World Cancer Day

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-3275, in the name of Donald Cameron, on world cancer day: an opportunity to tackle obesity. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Members are allowed to take interventions in a members' debate. It is the same as any other debate, in case there is some misconception lurking.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 4 February 2017 marks World Cancer Day; understands that it is estimated that one-in-two people will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives; notes that Cancer Research UK highlights that four-in-ten cancers are preventable and that obesity, after smoking, is the single biggest cause of preventable cancer in Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands region, and that it is linked to 13 types of cancer; understands that figures show that two thirds of adults and over one quarter of children in Scotland are now overweight or obese; notes the calls on the Scottish Government to take bold action in its new diet and obesity strategy to help tackle the problem; considers that tackling obesity would help to "scale down cancer", and notes that MSPs can show their support for World Cancer Day through the wearing of its unity band.

17:37

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I open by thanking Cancer Research UK for providing the impetus for this debate about world cancer day, which takes place a week from next Saturday, on 4 February 2017.

Given the nature of cancer, and the importance that society places on fundraising to find cures and to support people who suffer from cancer and to assist their families, I feel incredibly privileged to be able to open the debate, and I look forward to speeches from across the chamber. Similarly, I am delighted that the motion has received so much support from across the chamber.

However, that is not surprising. Given that it is estimated that one in every two people will receive a cancer diagnosis at some point in their life, it may be safe to say that everyone in the chamber and the gallery will know at least one person who has either battled cancer and survived or who has, unfortunately, succumbed to the disease. We will all have family members who have died from cancer—my grandfather and uncle, for example. Far too many people die from cancer, and although cancer death rates in Scotland have fallen by a fifth over the past 20 years, the incidence rate has risen.

Referencing a report from Information Services Division Scotland, Cancer Research UK has

highlighted that, on current trends, the number of new cancer cases is expected to rise by a third by 2023 to 2027, which is simply staggering. We know that there are many causes that result in people developing cancer. In some cases, it is genetic. In other cases, it can develop as a result of an infection, or it can occur from exposure to a variety of natural and man-made elements. In those instances, there is little that we can do to prevent cancer occurring.

A matter that has been raised in Parliament recently is cancers that develop as a result of poor working conditions, including mesothelioma, which is a disease that affects about 1.2 per cent of Scots and has devastating long-term consequences. Members will recall the debate that was held on it a month or so ago.

However, as all cancer charities, government bodies and experts alike will acknowledge, there are many instances of cancer that develop simply as a result of lifestyle, habits and addictions—people taking little to no exercise, poor diet, alcohol consumption and excessive smoking. Those are all things which are within our own control and can be addressed, although—granted—that is much easier said than done.

It is estimated that around four in every 10 cancer diagnoses are preventable: 40 per cent is a huge proportion, which is why, in putting the motion together, we have decided to focus on an area in which the Government can make a real impact. Cancer Research UK has noted that obesity is the single biggest cause of preventable cancer after smoking, and is linked to 13 different types of cancer. In Scotland, almost two thirds of adults are classed as either overweight or obese, and almost a quarter of children are in the same categories. Those statistics are not only frightening—they are also a sad indictment of how we in Scotland manage our personal health.

As the World Cancer Research Fund UK notes, about 10 per cent of bowel, breast and womb cancers in the UK can be prevented by people being physically active for at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week. As part of its contribution to the debate, Macmillan Cancer Support has made clear the need for people to be more physically active to reduce their risk of developing cancer. It runs a number of “move more” programmes across Scotland; the importance of such programmes is significant. It is all very well for us to talk about the issue, but we need to act on it and—dare I say it?—fund it. I congratulate Macmillan for not only highlighting the issue but for investing time, money and volunteers in it. In fact, Macmillan acknowledged in its 2011 “Move More” report that more physical activity in our day-to-day lives could be considered a “wonder drug” for

supporting people who have cancer. The report notes that

“physical activity after treatment for cancer can reduce the impact of some debilitating side effects”.

The side effects can be physical and mental and can include anxiety, depression, fatigue, impaired mobility and weight changes.

I also acknowledge Obesity Action Scotland, which provided me and other members with guidance ahead of the debate. It notes that obese and overweight people cost our national health service up to £600 million per year. That is an unbelievable sum of money, but given the statistics that I mentioned earlier, it is hardly surprising.

With all that in mind, it is important that we reflect on what can be done to stem Scotland’s obesity crisis and help bring down cancer incidence. The Scottish Government produced its last obesity strategy in 2010. At the time, it was viewed as groundbreaking. However, as Obesity Action Scotland pointed out, the report has since been reviewed and it has been judged that

“the number of interventions aimed at attitudes, values and behaviours outweighed those aimed at costs and regulation”.

That is why the 2017 obesity strategy that the Scottish Government announced last year is highly welcome and more crucial than ever.

Conservative members have been proactive in focusing on ways to reduce obesity, which will help to lower cancer incidence. My colleague Brian Whittle recently launched our “Healthy Lifestyle Strategy” document, which makes several suggestions, including early intervention in schools through ensuring that the highest-possible nutritional value in school meals is the primary goal for food procurement. It also supports the calls that were made by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, which argues that physical education should be fully embedded in primary care, secondary care, social care and health education, as well as in the health and social care workforce and workplace. I actively encourage the Scottish Government to review the document and all supporting reports and evidence as it considers its next obesity strategy.

I should mention the work of the Health and Sport Committee in the past few months. The committee, on which I sit, has had a number of meetings on obesity and has recently written to the Scottish Government calling for action.

It is vital that we tackle obesity and reduce the incidence of cancer. That is not an easy task, but it is not impossible. Most important is that there is a significant element of personal responsibility: we have to encourage everyone in society to take

responsibility for their own health, both in terms of diet and lifestyle.

It is partly down to Government to look at what it can do, but it is also down to people in the public, private, voluntary and third sectors and beyond to promote a different attitude in our country: an attitude that means that we do not binge on unhealthy food but focus on the food that keeps us healthy; an attitude that means that we do not drink alcohol excessively, but drink responsibly; an attitude to exercise that views it not as a chore or unnecessary use of time, but as something that is so simple yet so effective in the long run.

I thank Cancer Research UK for all its work in promoting world cancer day and I wish it good luck in its “scale down cancer” campaign. I look forward to hearing what members have to say in this crucial debate.

17:44

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank Donald Cameron for bringing this important issue to Parliament today.

It is clear that obesity is a serious problem in Scotland. Almost two-thirds of us are overweight or obese, and people of normal weight are now in the minority. Obesity rates in Scotland are among the highest in the world. It is vital that we address obesity as a matter of public health because of the sheer number of people who are affected and the impact on quality of life and life expectancy.

The link between obesity and cancer is now well established and, as the motion states, obesity is now the second-biggest cause of preventable cancer in Scotland, after smoking. We know that we need to improve diet and exercise to tackle obesity and we know that, if we do that effectively, it will make a big difference to millions of people's lives.

Although strategies that focus on education and public information are useful, they will never effectively address the problem alone. We need to tackle the obesogenic environment that we live in that promotes inactivity and overconsumption. Although personal responsibility plays a role in weight gain, we need to make it easy to do the right thing. At the moment, energy-dense foods are easily available, affordable and widely accepted, which is making an unhealthy lifestyle the default option.

Although I accept that exercise has an important role to play in improving health and preventing weight gain, the evidence is clear that the problem of obesity will not be effectively addressed without changing people's diets and reducing the amount of foods that we consume that are high in sugar and fat.

The motion calls for us to be “bold” on diet and obesity. I agree that we should be bold and I am confident that the Scottish Government will be. It has been pioneering in tackling public health issues including smoking and alcohol in the past, and it has my complete confidence that it will be bold in tackling obesity in the future.

It will not be enough for the Scottish Government to act unilaterally. Parliament's Health and Sport Committee, of which I am a member, has urged the Scottish Government to continue lobbying the UK Government to ban pre-watershed advertising of junk food. I hope that all members will lend their support to that.

We need the European Union to be bold on labelling regulations, and post-Brexit we must ensure that that power comes to the Scottish Parliament so that we can incorporate it in our obesity strategy.

Members will be aware that it is rare indeed for me to praise an action of the UK Government, but its soft drinks levy is the right sort of thing to do. It shows a willingness to use taxation to create an environment in which healthy eating is the easier choice. Unfortunately, I think that it does not go far enough. Fizzy drinks are not the only culprits—I love a bit of chocolate, myself.

We need to address the use of price promotions and till-prompted purchasing, both of which are used disproportionately for food and drink that is high in fat and sugars. Limiting the use of such pricing tools on unhealthy options or—better still—ensuring that they are used for healthier options, will make a difference.

We know that people who are on lower incomes or who live in poorer areas are more likely to be overweight or obese. The aim must be to make the healthy choice the more affordable one, so that if the grocery budget is tight, people will be more able to buy themselves and their families healthier foods.

Obesity remains a challenge facing Scotland and we will need a bold strategy if we are to address it successfully.

17:48

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I congratulate Donald Cameron on bringing focus to this discussion in the chamber this afternoon.

When the present Mrs Carlaw—I should say the only Mrs Carlaw, of 30 years' standing—heard that I was going to take part in a debate on being overweight or obese, she gave me what my grandmother would have called an old-fashioned look. When I first spoke in the chamber on public health, I resolved to lose weight and I lost 3.5 stone. I was very proud of myself and it proved to

me that it could be done. I am afraid, however, that it has not lasted. The truth of the matter is that I look around the chamber and see others who seem to be similarly afflicted by not necessarily paying proper attention to their weight, so I sometimes understand the frustration of people outside Parliament who find it difficult to take admonitions and exhortations from members of the Scottish Parliament on these subjects. As I regularly say, there are members who I have yet to meet on a staircase in the Parliament, and I look forward to it.

It is true that, in Scotland, two thirds of adults and more than a quarter of children are classed as overweight or obese. Those rates are among the poorest in the UK and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Obesity costs the national health service some £600 million per annum and, if we take into account all other factors, it possibly costs the Scottish economy some £4.6 billion per annum.

I want to focus on children. I like chocolate, too, but I have always liked it. The promotion of chocolate to children is nothing new. When I was young and watched children's television programmes way back in the 1960s, there was the Milky Bar Kid, Opal Fruits, which were "Made to make your mouth water", the Cadbury's Flake adverts—very seductive when we were young—Kit Kat and Mars Bar adverts, and Terry Scott in Curly Wurly adverts. We all indulged, but the truth is that we accompanied that with a much more physically active lifestyle. We walked to and from school and ran about. The television programmes for children started at 4.30 in the afternoon and finished at 5.20, and that was basically it. The whole nature of sedentary entertainment for children has transformed dramatically.

It is worth remembering that, when the Parliament first met in 1999, neither obesity nor dementia was even identified as a challenge that faced Scotland's health service. Those issues have grown exponentially during the lifetime of the Parliament, and they require to be tackled.

I am not naturally one to look to a legislative solution. Scottish Conservatives worked with the Scottish Government on minimum unit pricing for alcohol—the Labour Party fought that to the death in the legislative process—because we felt that there was an opportunity to try something. We asked for a sunset clause to be included so that we could have confidence in trying the approach while knowing that, if the measure did not have the effect that was claimed for it, it could be repealed.

I simply say to the Government that I understand the watershed argument although, with digital entertainment, people record programmes and watch them at all times. I am not

sure that that argument in itself can make the difference. I also worry that, if we advise and exhort all the time, that will become a kind of wallpaper in people's lives that is too easy for them to ignore. However, if the Government seeks to go down a legislative route—we have to at least be open to ideas about how we tackle childhood obesity that might lead to legislative solutions—I commend to it the attachment of a sunset clause. That would allow Parliament to consider supporting initiatives with confidence and without the political dynamic of knowing that the change would be permanent. We would be allowed to assess what the impact of the change proved to be. If it was proven that it worked, we could support it, but people would know that, if it did not work, we would withdraw it at that point.

There is a huge challenge. That is why I commend Brian Whittle for the work that he has done, which focuses a lot on childhood exercise and physical activity.

Ultimately, people have a responsibility for their own wellbeing. That responsibility cannot simply be seconded to the Government. We all have a challenge in ensuring that we make progress on the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Childhood days, Mr Carlaw—I remember them well.

17:52

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): It is great to follow the Milky Bar Kid of the Parliament in the debate. Jackson Carlaw mentioned Curly Wurlys, but he failed to mention Toblerone, which is obviously the chocolate of choice for this parliamentary session.

I thank Donald Cameron for securing this really important debate on how to address cancer, which is Scotland's biggest killer. I am sure that the debate unifies us all across the Parliament and, indeed, people throughout Scotland. I also thank Cancer Research UK for all the amazing work that it, its volunteers and staff do all year round in fighting to address this very important issue, and all the other cancer charities for the amazing work that they do all year round.

The Parliament has done bold things on tobacco, and it has been bold on alcohol. I genuinely believe that obesity is the next big challenge for us, and I hope that we can again find cross-party consensus in being bold and challenging on the obesity strategy.

Obesity is the second most likely risk factor for cancer. Throughout the country, around two thirds of adults and a quarter of children are overweight or obese. The figures have already been stated. The cost to the NHS alone is around £600 million

per annum, and we should remember that that is absolutely preventable. How we challenge obesity and have a generational impact is really important.

I will briefly mention an ask from Macmillan Cancer Support. It is important to mention obesity and exercise not only when discussing the prevention of cancer, but when discussing how to live with and to recover from cancer. The charity has direct recommendations on activity being a “standard part” of a patient’s care plan,

“comprehensive rehabilitation ... services to include physiotherapy, exercise”

and

“commissioned schemes in leisure centres”.

Another recommendation is that

“Every person with a cancer diagnosis ... be offered a brief intervention of physical activity to encourage them to do the recommended levels of physical activity, appropriate for their age.”

It is worth remembering all those asks, as well as the rightful ask by Cancer Research UK for bold policy initiatives on portion sizes, advertising, the proximity of unhealthy foods around schools and, indeed, the watershed times for advertising on television. Those are all interesting ideas that I hope we can discuss in more detail as we see the refresh of the Government’s obesity strategy.

It is not lost on us that inequalities in, for example, health and income, have a direct impact on obesity levels and the diagnosis of cancer, so how we challenge inequalities throughout society will have an important impact, too. I hope that, as we develop the NHS action plan, we will see more emphasis on health inequalities being a key part of the plan.

It is worth mentioning the impact on activity of local budget and sports budget cuts. I hope that, through the bold action on the tax powers that the Parliament has and the money that will come from the sugar tax and other policy initiatives, we can find creative ways to use the money. For example, we could use the money from the sugar tax to give every secondary school £800,000 of direct funding to create space for children to exercise in and to learn more about how preventive health measures can help to protect them and future generations.

As Donald Cameron said, this issue touches every person’s heart not only across Scotland, but across the world. I pledge on behalf of my party to work with every other political party and every charity to make sure that we defeat cancer in all its forms.

17:57

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank Donald Cameron for securing time to debate the

issue as we approach world cancer day. To Jackson Carlaw and Anas Sarwar, I have one word to say: Spangles. [*Laughter.*]

I thank the organisations that sent us briefings today. We have heard this fact several times, but we need to make sure that every person in Scotland is aware of it: obesity is the single biggest cause of preventable cancer after smoking, and it is linked to 13 types of cancer. That is important because, at the moment, only one in four Scots is aware that being overweight could cause cancer. Therefore, each and every one of us in the chamber must do what we can to get that message out, because we can change the situation.

Over recess, I watched a film called “84 Charing Cross Road”. Anne Bancroft plays a bibliophile who is addicted equally to English literature and cigarettes, and who carries out a long-distance correspondence with Anthony Hopkins, who works in a well-stocked bookshop in London during the 1940s. Whether she was eating lunch, meeting friends, watching TV or lying in bed reading, she was smoking. I watched in horror, but that was the norm. She was playing an educated woman in the role, but she did what she did because there was no understanding of the risks. The changes since then emphasise that we can alter societal behaviour. We have come a long way on smoking thanks to research, increased understanding, awareness raising and legislation. Change is possible.

The fact that some cancers are preventable means that we can take action—and we have to, because being overweight or obese has become the norm for adults in Scotland. People of normal weight are in the minority. That was not always the case—if we look back at footage of sporting or musical events in the 1970s and the 1980s, we can see that we were a leaner nation. Our population is not alone in getting larger, but our obesity rates are among the highest in the world. However, when one in four children are overweight or obese, the future is not the bright one that we want for our young people.

This evening, we are focusing on the relationship between obesity and cancer. Research in *The Lancet*—Maree Todd touched on this—points to “increased energy intake” as a central cause.

Obesity Action Scotland tells us that preference and demand for unhealthy products may be shaped by an environment that promotes junk food. In his excellent book, “The End of Overeating: taking control of our insatiable appetite”, David Kessler writes about the science and the huge investment behind the creation of some of the most intentionally addictive food on

the planet. Therefore, the issue is about more than personal willpower.

Levels of obesity and overweight among women and children reflect patterns of social and economic inequality. Anas Sarwar touched on that issue. Ultimately, we need strong action to tackle health inequalities from the earliest age, because, compared with other European countries, Scotland has a very high level of obesity among pregnant women.

I welcome calls from Obesity Action Scotland and Cancer Research UK, among others, to tackle price promotions on unhealthy food. I am a member of the Health and Sport Committee, and we heard that over 40 per cent of food in the UK is bought on price promotion. That is the highest rate in Europe, and the vast majority of the food that is promoted is junk food. We therefore have two food cultures running side by side in Scotland. Our world-renowned meat and seafood produce is highly regarded and is flown around the globe to prestigious restaurants while, at home, many Scots have never tasted that food and we struggle to meet the calls of those who exhort us to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day—for all sorts of reasons including cost, affordability, lack of preparation know-how and lack of time for shopping and preparation.

I whole-heartedly support the calls for regulation from Obesity Action Scotland—all five calls are very welcome—the calls from Cancer Research UK for action at a population level and Macmillan Cancer Support's calls for physical activity to become a standard part of care for all cancer patients.

18:01

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I will refrain from revealing my favourite chocolate bar—

Anas Sarwar: It is all of them.

Colin Smyth: Members will probably have noticed that I have several favourites, as Anas Sarwar has pointed out.

I echo the thanks that have been given to Donald Cameron for bringing the motion before Parliament and providing members with the opportunity not only to mark the forthcoming world cancer day but to debate probably the most pressing public health issue that Scotland faces today: obesity.

Our complex and fast-moving modern world is exposing children to ever-more sophisticated commercial pressures, and changes to diet and lifestyle mean that an unhealthy lifestyle has become the default option. The consequence is that Scotland has the highest rates of obesity in the UK and among the highest rates of any OECD

country. Two thirds of Scotland's adults are classed as being overweight and, shamefully, almost a third of our children are at risk of becoming overweight.

As Anas Sarwar and Alison Johnstone highlighted, we know that there is a clear link between deprivation and obesity. A quarter of children aged four to five from the most deprived areas are at risk of being overweight, compared with about 18 per cent of children from the least deprived areas. If we want to tackle health inequalities, we need to tackle wealth inequalities.

What does the obesity crisis mean for our nation's health? We know that obesity is linked to a number of health issues—including, as the motion states, 13 types of cancer. In fact, obesity reduces life expectancy by an average of three years, and severe obesity reduces it by eight to 10 years. It is now six years since the Scottish Government published its obesity route map and, although it provides a positive policy framework, it is clear that the route map's action plan has not reached its milestones. Successful policy initiatives are often not scaled up to make a significant impact, and the number of interventions that focus on attitudes and behaviour significantly outweigh those that are based on regulation.

The Scottish Government's promise to consult on a new strategy is, therefore, welcome. However, in the words of Obesity Action Scotland, it needs to be "brave and bold". As Cancer Research UK says:

"this strategy presents a once in a generation chance to scale down cancer in Scotland".

That means that any new strategy must ensure that the proceeds of any sugar tax are invested in after-school sports. It also means considering better regulation to tackle the fact that, as Alison Johnstone said, more than 40 per cent of food in the UK is bought on promotion—that is the highest rate in Europe—and the vast majority of that is junk food. A new obesity strategy also means ensuring that we have a comprehensive cross-governmental strategy to tackle the root causes of obesity, including inequality.

As Donald Cameron highlighted, however, not every case of ill health, including cancer, can be prevented through a change in diet and lifestyle. I will therefore touch on the importance of early diagnosis. In many cases, detecting cancer at the early stages is the intervention that is required to ensure that it can be successfully treated. For example, Cancer Research UK's studies have shown that nine out of 10 bowel cancer patients survive for more than five years if they are diagnosed at the earliest stage of the disease. The debate and world cancer day provide us with an opportunity to remind everyone of the importance

of regular cancer screenings and of speaking to their general practitioner should they feel that something is amiss.

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, the next step is to ensure the best possible treatment. For people who live in rural areas, that can often involve travelling some distance and spending time away from their loved ones.

Many patients from Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders receive radiotherapy treatment at the Western general hospital in Edinburgh. To avoid having to make the long journey to and from their home daily or taking up a bed in a medical ward, patients who are well enough to leave the ward can stay overnight at Pentland lodge, which is next to the hospital. I have spoken to many constituents who have stayed at Pentland lodge, who talk about the benefits of the invaluable peer support that they received there and how it helped them through a dark time for them and their families.

NHS Lothian is considering changing the use of Pentland lodge, which is likely to mean that patients from Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders will no longer be able to stay there when they receive treatment. I appeal to the minister and the Scottish Government to support the campaign by families in Dumfries and Galloway and ensure that Pentland lodge is retained for the use of patients who receive treatment at the Western general.

I again thank Donald Cameron for bringing his motion to the chamber for debate.

18:05

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): As co-convener of the Parliament's cross-party group on cancer, I congratulate my colleague Donald Cameron on securing today's important debate ahead of world cancer day, and I am pleased to take part in it. I also thank the organisations that have provided us with useful briefings for the debate, which include Cancer Research UK and Macmillan Cancer Support.

Our cancer cross-party group recently heard from Professor Linda Bauld, who is professor of health policy at the University of Stirling, about cancer prevention. She outlined how, with good health, four in 10 cancers are preventable, and she highlighted the fact that—as has been mentioned—obesity is the single largest cause of preventable cancer in Scotland after smoking. I commend Professor Bauld for the excellent work that she is undertaking on cancer prevention. It is estimated that obesity is responsible for about 18,100 cancers in the UK every year and if current trends continue—this is the number that we must hold in our minds—it will lead to a further 670,000

cancer cases over the next 20 years. Those 670,000 cases are preventable.

There is a concerning lack of awareness about the risks of being overweight and obese—only one in four adults report that they are aware that that is a cause of cancer. The motion emphasises the scale of the challenge that we face, given that so many adults and children are overweight and obese, especially in more deprived communities across Scotland. It is of significant concern that the gap between the least and the most deprived is widening when it comes to obesity and ill health.

Scotland has the worst weight outcomes of all the UK nations; indeed, it is one of the worst-performing nations of any in the OECD in that regard. It is therefore clear that the Scottish Government's forthcoming obesity strategy must be as comprehensive as possible and must offer practical policies on the twin themes of diet and exercise. I have been heartened by the fact that every party in the Parliament has put forward ideas on how to strengthen the strategy as much as we can.

As Donald Cameron mentioned, the Health and Sport Committee has been taking evidence in advance of the strategy's publication, and it is clear that the strategy must offer a joined-up approach that works across all the portfolios for which the Parliament has responsibility, including education, local government and transport, as well as health. As the committee heard in evidence today, the proposed cuts to the sports budget could have an impact on encouraging people into grass-roots sport. I hope that the minister will comment on that when she responds. We must consider how we can encourage people to take part in sport and even walking, and how we can change our lives. The Parliament is one of the worst examples—we sit in our offices all day long, apart from when we go down to the canteen to have our lunch. We need to think about how we can transform workplaces across Scotland.

I agree with Cancer Research UK that the strategy must be underpinned by clear and enforceable targets and by interventions that are robustly monitored and evaluated. It is critical that we tackle obesity in the population if we are to scale down cancer by slowing the rise in the incidence of cancer, but Macmillan Cancer Support's briefing for the debate rightly points out that it is also important to understand how valuable physical exercise is for people who have been diagnosed with cancer. I repeat what Anas Sarwar said: in some cases, physical exercise can significantly reduce the risk of dying from cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Support is right to call for physical activity to become a standard part of care for cancer patients, and that is perhaps another area in which the cancer strategy needs to be

improved. The charity's excellent move more programme of exercise for cancer sufferers, which has been mentioned, is running in Edinburgh and some other areas across Scotland, and it is important that patients are signposted to that and similar services. Macmillan also seeks comprehensive rehabilitation services that include physiotherapy, exercise on referral, commissioned schemes in leisure centres and signposting to walking and other exercise groups. I reinforce the importance of that and I hope that we will see improvements.

I welcome the debate and I hope that it will inform the development of the Scottish Government's obesity strategy, which provides a real opportunity and which must be successful if we are to reduce the incidence of cancer and many other preventable diseases.

18:10

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that it was just a coincidence that when Jackson Carlaw was reflecting on the weight and fitness of MSPs, my Fitbit was buzzing to tell me to get moving. Perhaps we need to be more mobile during debates. I join colleagues in thanking Donald Cameron for bringing the motion to Parliament for debate tonight.

Like this debate, world cancer day is an important opportunity to highlight the impact that cancer has on everyone's lives in one way or another. As Members of the Scottish Parliament, we have a particular responsibility over the course of this parliamentary session to explore what decisions and actions can be taken here in Scotland to reduce the prevalence of cancer and the impact that it has on people and communities.

As we learn more about the causes of cancer, it is becoming easier for policy makers to identify possible actions that could be taken to prevent the onset of ill-health. The more evidence that is gathered, the more we can state with certainty that, in so many cases, cancer and ill-health more generally are a result of structured inequality and deprivation. With that convincing and ever-increasing body of evidence, comes an increasing responsibility on us all, but especially those in positions of power, to think about how we can work together to eradicate that inequality.

Evidence from Cancer Research UK shows that four in 10 cancers are preventable, which is a shocking statistic. If 40 per cent of cancers in Scotland are preventable, that means that almost 13,000 people in Scotland who were diagnosed with cancer last year could have had their illness prevented. As colleagues have stated, obesity, after smoking, is the single biggest cause of preventable cancer in Scotland and has been

linked to 13 different types of cancer. Cancer Research UK tells us that those include some of the most common cancers, including breast and bowel cancer. Despite that, however, only a quarter of Scottish adults are aware that being overweight can cause cancer.

In the past few months, I have had personal experience of a cancer scare, having discovered a lump in my breast. After going to my doctor and being referred to the hospital breast clinic, I was lucky and relieved to be told that it was a cyst. I was lucky to be referred quickly and lucky that it did not turn out to be cancer. Due to the fantastic awareness-raising campaigns of breast cancer charities in Scotland, during my early months as an MSP I have become more familiar with the importance of self-examination and of understanding prevention a lot better. I have therefore increased my activity levels; I have a Fitbit and go out walking, even when it is raining. I heard Alex Cole-Hamilton being grilled on the radio this morning about politicians saying one thing but perhaps not putting that into practice, and he admitted on live radio that some MSPs are a bit overweight. Being an MSP makes us all conscious—and self-conscious—of our own behaviours.

My experience of being initially reluctant and fearful about investigating what was wrong with me, made me think again about awareness raising and what more can be done to encourage people to have not only the confidence to get checked out early but the confidence to change behaviours and make different choices. We know that the earlier cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat.

I see that my time is running out, but I want to emphasise that to tackle the problems that we have been discussing, we need more joined-up thinking across government. I state for the record that I am a chartered town planner and a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, because we will have a debate tomorrow in Parliament on the forthcoming planning bill. We have a real opportunity through that to assess how we can embed the issues of health and wellbeing in planning applications. The briefings that we have had for this debate have informed us about how our environments affect our health and our choices.

Tackling obesity is complex and not an easy task, but there are actions that can be taken that will help to reduce health risks. It is the responsibility of all parties across the chamber to work constructively together in an attempt to address the issue, and I think that the tone of the debate has shown that there is a commitment to that.

18:14

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Aileen Campbell): Like all the other speakers in the debate, I thank Donald Cameron for lodging his motion and I welcome Cancer Research UK to the Parliament.

In reading Donald Cameron's motion, I was interested in the last line, which mentions showing support by wearing the unity band. The wrist bands have a knot to represent strength in unity, and that is symbolic in a number of ways for us in the chamber this evening. First, it reminds us how united this Parliament is on tackling cancer, which has been shown in today's speeches and is also demonstrated by the good work of the cross-party group on cancer. Also, as Donald Cameron rightly stated, we all know someone who has had their life impacted by cancer, and in Donald's case, sadly, that impact is felt incredibly closely.

Secondly, we need unity if we wish to tackle, as this Government does, the complex issue of obesity. Success will require not only a commitment from individuals but the support of both our public and private institutions and support from this Parliament to enable more people, more often, to make the right choices to eat less, to eat better and to move more. That includes avoiding the Fry's Chocolate Creams, the Spangles, the Opal Fruits and the host of other things that have been listed this evening, and instead opting for something a bit healthier. Unfortunately, Anas Sarwar stole my line about the uncanny resemblance that we all imagine a young Jackson Carlaw bearing to the Milky Bar Kid.

I thank Cancer Research UK, which has thrown itself into ensuring that we all know that there is a well-established link between cancer and obesity and, therefore, a compelling need for action—a point that I discussed with the organisation when we met last week to consider the Government's commitment to a new diet and obesity strategy.

The Scottish Government fully recognises the damaging impact that cancer has on individuals and their families and friends. However, we also recognise that significant progress has been made. Over the past 10 years, the overall cancer mortality rate has fallen by 11 per cent. That improvement is thanks to the efforts of people across our NHS from primary and acute care to oncology, social care and the third sector. However, we know and recognise that there is a need to do much more to reduce the risk factors for cancer.

Last March, the Scottish Government launched our cancer strategy, "Beating Cancer: Ambition and Action", which serves as a blueprint for the future of cancer services in Scotland and is backed by £100 million of investment. The

strategy has embedded within it a set of very clear ambitions and actions to reduce the risk factors for cancer in Scotland. We want to create a generation of young people who do not want to smoke, with an aim of reducing smoking prevalence to 5 per cent or less by 2034. We want to reduce alcohol-related harm by helping to prevent problems from arising in the first place and to make it easier for people to be more active, to eat less and to eat better. We also want to help people to make healthier choices to reduce their exposure to ultraviolet radiation.

We are tackling the food environment that causes obesity through work in our schools and our communities and, importantly, work with the food and drink industry through our supporting healthy choices framework, which encourages a range of actions including better labelling and the reformulation of products. We are also continuing with campaigns to encourage healthy eating. I have launched the most recent phase of our eat better feel better campaign, which aims to support parents on the thorny issue of children eating their greens.

Maree Todd and Jackson Carlaw both mentioned childhood obesity and discussed in their own ways the rights and wrongs of our call for a ban on the advertising of junk food before the 9 pm watershed. It is important to remember that we need a range of actions to ensure that the unnecessary exposure of our children and our youngest members of society to unhealthy choices is reduced, and to help, support and encourage parents around what their children eat.

I note that my son has given me 17 of his own ideas for our obesity strategy. I sometimes think that it is tough in the chamber, but sometimes it is even tougher at home, with the demands of my child. However, I will be sure to take note of his very good ideas.

I want to highlight two pieces of work. One shows that change to the food environment can be made and the other shows how we are developing our services to support people to make the necessary changes.

The first is the healthcare retail standard, which is bringing positive change to retail outlets in hospitals. With the Scottish Grocers Federation and Food Standards Scotland, we have established a standard that requires 50 per cent of all products sold to be from a healthy range and which restricts promotions on items that are high in fat, sugar and salt. I had the pleasure of visiting the first Royal Voluntary Service shop to meet that standard in Edinburgh and I was impressed by what we can achieve in partnership to create an environment where the healthy choice is the normal choice or, as Maree Todd said, where the healthier choice is the easier choice to go for. I

recommend that members of the Health and Sport Committee—and other members—visit that shop to see what is possible.

Secondly, we know that, if women prevent weight gain or lose a little bit, that will help to reduce their risk of breast cancer. More than 175,000 women attend breast-screening programmes each year, which provide an opportunity to give lifestyle advice and support to women when they attend the screening. However, a greater understanding of the benefits and impacts are needed to know whether that approach works. Therefore, we are supporting the act well initiative with up to £1 million of funding over the next five years to provide a personalised breast cancer risk reduction programme to women who attend routine breast screening clinics. That programme will be fully tested for effectiveness and for its potential for a wider roll out.

I thank Monica Lennon for sharing her story—it cannot have been an easy thing to do or to have gone through—as talking about it raises awareness in other women around the country. Alison Johnstone was also right to highlight the challenges of obesity in pregnancy, which is another issue that we will need to take notice of when developing the strategy.

As we develop our new diet and obesity strategy—I agree that that is a real opportunity—we will learn from the work that has gone before and Jackson Carlaw implored us to take on board lessons from the past on smoking, alcohol and physical activity. We will be bold, as we have been with minimum unit pricing; multifaceted, as we were with physical activity; and in it for the long term, the benefits of which are shown by the progress made by different Administrations on reducing smoking. The benefits to be grasped are personal, societal and economic. I am pleased that there is a unity in our recognition of the need to take action on obesity.

I finish by reiterating the importance of spreading far and wide the word that cancer can be prevented. I want to talk briefly about the walking strategy—the roll out of the daily mile—that has delivered benefits to workplaces. Perhaps we can be the first Parliament to embrace that as an opportunity to stop the sedentary lifestyle that we have in Parliament. I also mention that the Scottish Professional Football League Trust is hosting an event in Parliament tonight to highlight its commendable football fans in training project, which is well worth taking notice of. The project has had an impact in helping people who are harder to reach to lose a considerable amount of weight.

By supporting healthier lifestyle choices—promoting better diets, encouraging a healthy respect for alcohol, providing support to help

people to quit smoking and championing the benefits of physical activity—we can make a difference to the lives of the people of Scotland now and in the future. I thank Linda Bauld and a host of others from Cancer Research UK who are articulating the link between obesity and cancer and allowing us to come together and unite as a Parliament to ensure that cancer does not have to be inevitable. It is not outwith our control and, if we work together, we can find ways to prevent it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:23.

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