Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 30 October 2018

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 30 October 2018

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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Pastor Michael Veitch, who is from Wooler evangelical church in Northumberland, and is a former East Lothian councillor.

Pastor Michael Veitch (Wooler Evangelical Church, Northumberland): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, it is a great honour to stand before you today. When I stood down from politics at last year's council elections to begin life in my ministry, it would be fair to say that I thought that I had forfeited any opportunity of ever appearing in the *Official Report* at Holyrood, so I suppose that my presence here in some way demonstrates that God moves in mysterious ways.

In June, I visited an old congregational chapel in Norwich. Pinned to its door were the following words:

"This chapel is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sick souls".

Sadly, the church is very often perceived as being the place for people who have their lives sorted out or—even worse—for people who think that they are in some way morally superior to everybody else.

In reality, Jesus had very little time for religious hypocrites. He said:

"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance"—

in other words, only people who know that their lives are a mess and who realise that they need a saviour and that they need Jesus. For such as them did Jesus die, so that they may be reconciled with God by faith in him.

None of us would care much for a medic who offered us only vague solutions. As politicians, you are in the business of promoting tangible solutions to the nation's problems each and every day. Likewise, Jesus Christ came into the world to offer truth.

Alongside having my ministry in Northumberland, I continue to study theology here in Edinburgh. This year, we have been looking at the wonderful old document "The Scots Confession" of 1560, which was written by John Knox and others. On the title page of that work, we find these words:

"Exhibited to the Estates of Scotland in Parliament in August 1560 and approved by their public vote as doctrine founded upon the infallible Word of God".

In other words, the Scottish reformation was built on the belief that the Bible is the revealed word of God, and that what it teaches about Jesus, God and humanity is true.

So, as a former politician turned pastor, and as a Scot—albeit one who is currently exiled 14 miles across the border—I wish you well in your endeavours to serve the people of this great country. The Bible teaches that those in authority have been appointed by God, so may he be your guide this day and in the weeks and years ahead.

Thank you very much.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion SM5-14532, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revised business programme for today.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 30 October 2018—

after

followed by   Topical Questions

insert

followed by   Ministerial Statement: NHS Financial Overview—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

United Kingdom Budget

1. **Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the UK budget. (S5T-01279)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): Yesterday's budget from the United Kingdom Government failed to live up to the Prime Minister's commitment to end austerity. Given the continuation of UK welfare reforms, and that Scotland will receive less funding than had previously been promised, it was a budget of broken promises and one that fell short of the £600 million commitment to the national health service. The Scottish Government has already set out plans to support the NHS in the years to come, but has identified a £50 million shortfall in the funding uplift for 2019-20 that was promised by the Tory UK Government only four months ago.

There is little in the way of new funding for our wider public services and, even including the NHS funding uplift, Scotland's resource block grant will still be almost £2 billion lower in real terms in 2019-20 than it was in 2010-11—i.e. when the Tories came into office.

Bruce Crawford: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, although there are elements of the budget that should be given a cautious welcome, it is equally true that the Chancellor of the Exchequer disappointingly failed to respond to the legitimate concerns of the WASPI women—the women against state pension inequality—from the 1950s, who feel cheated and betrayed by the UK Government with regard to their pensions?

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the chancellor also failed to address the fundamental flaws in the miserable universal credit system, particularly given that new analysis by the Resolution Foundation today shows that three quarters of the £12 billion cuts to social security that the UK Government announced in 2015 will remain in place after yesterday's budget?

Derek Mackay: The chancellor could have gone much further in stimulating the economy, giving justice to the WASPI women and investing in public services, and he could have done so while staying within his own fiscal mandate and his own fiscal targets. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, he had fiscal headroom of about £15.4 billion. He has chosen to keep that in reserve rather than to spend it in a way that could have done those things.

It is galling that, in this climate, the chancellor has chosen not to give justice to the WASPI women. More than 2 million women paid their national insurance contributions throughout their lives in the expectation that they would receive their state pension at a certain age, only for the goalposts to be moved by the UK Government.

On welfare, the Tories continue their pernicious welfare policies.

The Resolution Foundation's independent analysis has revealed that the overall impact of Tory tax and benefit policies will once again help the rich at the expense of the poor. The poorest fifth of households are set to be £400 a year worse off by 2023-24, and the richest fifth are set to gain £390 a year.

Bruce Crawford: The chancellor announced his intention to raise the higher-rate threshold of income tax to £50,000 earlier than expected. Given that decisions on the higher-rate threshold are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, his plans do not apply in Scotland. People are therefore asking what the Scottish Government's position is on that matter, and when the cabinet secretary will make it clear what his Government's intentions are on the higher-rate threshold.

Derek Mackay: I will, of course, make that clear in the Scottish budget when I present it on 12 December. However, I take some pride in the fact that I have been a finance secretary who has ensured that we have the fairest income tax system in the United Kingdom. The majority of people in Scotland pay less tax, and Scotland is the lowest-taxed part of the UK. The Tories have once again chosen tax cuts for the richest people in society, but we will choose a fairer and more progressive path. I will set out the details of that in the Scottish budget on 12 December.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): For information, seven members have indicated that they would like to ask questions.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Despite what we have just heard, the UK budget delivers for the people of Scotland. Yesterday, the cabinet secretary acknowledged that the Scottish Government's future budget will increase as a result of the UK budget. In fact, the UK budget will deliver £1 billion of additional funding to Scotland as a result of Barnett consequentials, £550 million of additional resource for Scotland's NHS, £43 million of additional spending for Scotland's high streets, and £41 million of additional funding to fix potholes across Scotland.

Does the cabinet secretary welcome the £1 billion of additional funding that is coming to Scotland from the UK Conservative Government? Will he follow the chancellor's lead and invest the additional £43 million in Scotland's struggling high streets? Can he guarantee that every penny of the £550 million that is coming to Scotland as a result of record NHS spending will be spent on Scotland's NHS?

Derek Mackay: At last year's Tory party conference, the staging fell apart; this year, it is the Tory Prime Minister's commitment to ending austerity that has fallen apart.

No, I do not welcome the figures that the chancellor announced, because they represent— let us put aside the NHS for a moment—real-terms reductions for the rest of Scotland's public services. The Tories promised £600 million for the national health service, but in four months they have already short changed the NHS in Scotland by £59 million.

The budget will not undo the damage of the past eight years of Tory Government, it will not undo the £2 billion pounds real-terms reduction that we have endured and it will not undo the pernicious welfare reform that is pushing so many people into poverty. So, no—I do not welcome it.

The pothole fund south of the border will not fill in the huge crater that has been created by the Tories' economic mismanagement and the Brexit bungling that will cost this whole country dear.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary must accept that, under this Scottish National Party Government, public services are in crisis. That is demonstrated by the fact that NHS patients are stranded on waiting lists, unable to get the treatment that they deserve, and the fact that thousands of teachers took to the streets on Saturday to demand a fair pay settlement. Will the cabinet secretary use his Scottish budget to reverse the chronic underfunding of public services and alleviate the pain that is being piled on local communities?

Derek Mackay: I will deliver a budget that is balanced and competent, unlike the incompetence that I saw from the Labour Party last year. It is very interesting that the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, has already said that Labour would not even overturn the Tory tax cuts for the richest in society. The Labour Party will accept the Tory tax proposals. I think that the Labour Party communication system has broken down in the same way that its calculator never worked in the first place.

We are allocating more money to the NHS than the Labour Party proposed that it would allocate if it won power at the previous Scottish Parliament elections. We are giving more to local government than the Labour Party gives where it is in power in Wales. With the pay uplift, we departed from the public sector pay cap even though the chancellor did not fund it; where the Labour Party is in power, it will lift it only if the chancellor pays for it. It is all

talk with Labour; with the SNP, the people get real action and investment in our public services.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): This should have been a budget not only to end austerity but to repair the harm done by it and to respond to the climate emergency. Instead, we see, yet again, a UK Government giving away the biggest tax cuts to the richest people and continuing to recklessly pursue an unsustainable economy. Will the Scottish Government acknowledge that it needs to respond by providing not only the resources that local communities need but the powers that they need to be able to invest for the future? Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment that we will continue the progress towards a fairer tax system for Scotland?

Derek Mackay: I think that Patrick Harvie is referring to the wider discussion about reform and local authorities. My door is open to that dialogue, and I have said that I am open to constructive suggestion. I agree with Patrick Harvie about the regressive nature of the UK budget and about its failure to invest in our public services and stimulate the economy. It is absurd that the chancellor has in reserve £15.4 billion that could have been unleashed to stimulate our economy, invest in our public services and undo some of the pernicious welfare reforms that the Tory party is hammering the poor with but he has chosen not to do that.

I agree with Patrick Harvie that we should continue to look further at how we use our powers to ensure that we get the best deal possible for all Scotland's public services. On climate change, of course we have to look at the spend that we are undertaking to ensure that we can make that transition to a low-carbon economy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): With a hit to the economy, a fall in living standards and the threat to future investment, Brexit casts a dark shadow over the UK budget. The chancellor is even openly talking about having an emergency budget in the spring. What is the cabinet secretary's plan to respond to that possibility? Does all this chaos not show that we need a people's vote to get us out of this Brexit mess?

Derek Mackay: I point out that the figures that we received from the chancellor are contingent on a deal being reached with the European Union and on the Westminster parliamentary arithmetic for that working out. If there is the calamity of no deal, the chancellor will have to return to an emergency budget. That reflects the economic mismanagement at the hands of the Conservatives and the Tory chancellor. The position with the European Union is well understood. The Scottish Government wanted us to stay in the European Union or, short of that, to stay in the single market and the customs union. If

we had a deal that achieved that, the UK budget numbers would be better and the chancellor would have greater economic growth and more resources to allocate.

I agree that we need to do everything possible to get the least worst Brexit. The Government has made its position clear on how we can get there, and we will continue to push for that.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Just four months ago, the UK Government trumpeted that a swathe of additional health consequentials would be available to the Scottish Government to spend on the NHS. Following yesterday's budget, can the cabinet secretary set out just how far the Tories' promises have fallen short of delivering what they said they would deliver?

Derek Mackay: I have heard the slogan "Never trust a Tory" and this is exactly why. The Tories promised £600 million to Scotland's NHS. I challenged the chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to say whether that would be a net £600 million for Scotland's NHS. We found out after only a matter of minutes that we have already been short-changed to the tune of around £50 million a year. [*Interruption*.] I can hear the Tories grumbling and saying that £50 million is not a lot in the context of £600 million. Over five years, more than a quarter of a billion pounds that was promised by the Tories will have been denied to the Scottish NHS. We cannot trust the Tories with Scotland's NHS.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The SNP's sustainable growth commission said that the Scottish Government should operate the same rate of corporation tax as the UK Government operates, or a lower rate. Does the SNP support a corporation tax cut to 17 per cent or below for big business, or will it support income tax cuts for ordinary families? Whatever happened to putting people before the profits of big business?

Derek Mackay: First, independence is the genuine alternative to austerity as, with all the economic levers, we could deliver greater economic growth. What the Government proposes is targeted investment and relief to stimulate the economy, which is exactly the approach that we have taken with the tax powers that are at our disposal—

Jackie Baillie: And corporation tax?

Derek Mackay: The direct answer to the member's question is no, I do not support a race to the bottom on tax.

Incidentally, the growth commission proposed far higher public spending and stimulation of our economy than the chancellor announced yesterday.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Yesterday's UK Government Tory budget failed to implement the real living wage and perpetuates state-sanctioned pay discrimination against young people. The pay gap between a 16-year-old and a 25-year-old is now a staggering £3.86 per hour. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government budget fails to deliver for people who are trapped in in-work poverty and fails the young people of Scotland?

Derek Mackay: Yes, the budget fails people in that regard. The welfare reforms are a disaster: they are pushing people to use food banks and they are not making work pay. The UK Government should have stepped back from implementation of universal credit and other pernicious policies, such as the two-child cap.

We can take some comfort from the fact that we have the highest proportion of people who are paid the living wage of any UK nation—although we have more to do if we are to reach 100 per cent. Of course, the Tories have played games with the living wage, and we need a substantial minimum wage, a real living wage and equality for young people in that regard.

It is telling that the Resolution Foundation's work shows that the biggest beneficiaries of this UK budget are the richest in society and the biggest losers are the poorest in society. That tells us that, although the Tories' image might have changed, their policies and pernicious approach have not.

The Presiding Officer: I thank the minister and members for getting through all those questions.

National Health Service Financial Overview

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We move on to a statement by Jeane Freeman, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, on a national health service financial overview.

14:20

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I welcome Audit Scotland's recommendations as set out in its recent annual "NHS in Scotland 2018" overview of the national health service. Indeed, the Scottish Government has already taken decisive action to deliver them. They highlight the challenges that our health service faces, which are similar to those that are being faced by health services across the United Kingdom and beyond. Importantly, the report acknowledges that our committed workforce has continued to deliver high-quality care. Today, I pay tribute to all our health and social care staff, who deliver outstanding services, day in and day out.

As the Auditor General recognised last week,

"demands on the service from Scotland's ageing population are growing".

For example, since 2013, we have seen 13 per cent more cancer patients receiving treatment under the 62-day referral standard, and increases of 26 per cent in computed tomography scans, 34 per cent in magnetic resonance imaging scans, and more than 15 per cent in child and adolescent mental health services patients. That is a small snapshot of the additional demand with which our health service is coping.

In addition to demographic change, we face price pressures and rising expectations. However, as the First Minister said last week:

"The task for us is not just to describe the challenge"— [*Official Report*, 25 October 2018; c 14.]

—it is to put the solutions in place. That is exactly what the Scottish Government is doing.

On 4 October, I published the "Scottish Government Medium Term Health and Social Care Financial Framework", to give more detail on the potential approach required to deliver a financially balanced and sustainable health and social care system now and for the years ahead. Last week, I published our "Waiting Times Improvement Plan", which will see more than £850 million of investment through phased, focused and decisive action to secure substantial and sustainable improvements in performance. Solutions will be different in different areas of the country and in different specialties, but the drive for improvement is national in scope, requiring a

focused, intensive programme of work that accelerates action that is already under way.

From my statement on 4 October, members will be aware of my commitment to facilitate a new planning and performance cycle for all NHS boards. Audit Scotland has recommended that that is supported by a robust and transparent financial management system. That is exactly what we intend, and further detail on the new approach will be provided as part of the 2019-20 budget. The new arrangements will require boards to deliver a break-even position over a three-year period, rather than annually as is the case currently. In each year, boards will have 1 per cent flexibility on their annual resource budget, to allow them scope marginally to underspend or overspend in that year.

In its report, Audit Scotland recognised that a range of work was under way to strengthen governance arrangements, including piloting a standardised review of corporate governance across all boards. The review of NHS corporate governance that was carried out by John Brown and Susan Walsh will enable us to pursue the adoption of good practice across all boards. Yesterday, I met our NHS board chairs and tasked them with implementing those recommendations by the end of this financial year. Our review of progress with integration will report in the new year and will consider areas in which integration is working well, along with any in which governance and accountability can be improved. We are also committed to ensuring that all non-executive members of boards have the necessary training, skills and expertise to fulfil their roles effectively. We are addressing issues on leadership positions: project lift is a new approach to recruiting, retaining, developing and managing talent in NHS Scotland to ensure that the very best and most able leaders reach boardrooms.

Audit Scotland's report recommends the development of a national capital investment strategy. I agree, and members will be aware from my statement on 4 October of my commitment to bringing a capital investment strategy to Parliament by the end of this financial year. The new strategy will create a framework considering necessary investment over the longer term and will accompany the medium-term health and social care financial framework to create an integrated overview of the funding that is needed across Scotland's health and care system. It will include important investment in primary and community care projects, which will be key in delivering the emerging health and social care integration agenda and shifting the balance of care from hospitals to local facilities and people's homes.

Audit Scotland recommended that a clear understanding of demand and capacity should inform workforce planning. Again, I agree. Our fully integrated health and social care workforce plan, which we will publish by the end of this year, will encourage all health and social care providers to adopt a comprehensive approach to workforce planning in order to ensure that workforce resources are deployed as efficiently as possible.

Finally, I welcome Audit Scotland's recommendation about publishing clear and easy-to-understand information on how the health funding system works, including information about levels of spending. The Parliament knows that we are committed to ensuring transparency on health funding, and that we have recently introduced regular reporting of the financial position of NHS boards and integration authorities. That is essential in providing the clarity that is necessary for the important discussion that we will need to have about the future shape of our NHS and social care services.

Our financial framework was predicated on what I described in an earlier statement as

"the perhaps bold assumption that the UK Government will honour its commitment"

and

"deliver the consequentials as a true net benefit".—[*Official Report*, 4 October 2018; c 50.]

I regret to tell the Parliament that the UK Government has failed to keep that commitment. I am very disappointed that yesterday's UK autumn budget confirmed that the UK Government would short-change Scotland's NHS by a total of £54.5 million next year, and by more than £270 million over the period to 2023-34. That the UK Government has short-changed our health service by £54.5 million, compared with its claimed level of consequentials in the summer, is an insult to our NHS and the people who depend on it.

In addition, the UK Government has not set out the consequential funding that would be delivered beyond next year, leaving open the possibility of the NHS funding commitment being further eroded, not least as the Chancellor has more than hinted at the potential of a totally revised budget from the UK Government as a result of its crashing us out of Europe with a no-deal Brexit.

Notwithstanding that disappointing—but, regrettably, not surprising—step by the UK Government, the Scottish Government remains committed to channelling every penny of health consequentials into Scotland's health service. I can assure members today that, despite the actions of the UK Government, we remain committed to our programme for government promises and to our recently announced waiting times plan.

Returning to the Audit Scotland overview report, it is understandable that, due to the timing of the report, Audit Scotland was not able to fully reflect that the framework sets out additional funding for the health portfolio of £3.3 billion by 2023-24. That expected increase would mean an annual growth for the health portfolio of 2.9 per cent in real terms. As Audit Scotland's report says, the Fraser of Allander institute predicts that the health resource budget is likely to have to increase by around 2 per cent per year to stand still. That is a vital point about funding and sustainability, which is not reflected—again, understandably—in Audit Scotland's report.

I welcome the annual contribution from Audit Scotland. I accept the recommendations in full and, as I have set out in this statement, I am taking the steps necessary to ensure that the challenges are addressed. We have a record number of staff, record funding in excess of £13 billion this year and even more investment planned by the Scottish Government. Although essential, that will not be enough, and we must continue to follow our twin approach of investment and reform. I now look forward to working together with colleagues across the chamber in a responsible and mature manner to deliver that, and to ensure a balanced and sustainable health and social care system for the years ahead. I commend this statement.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for giving me advance notice of her statement.

Another week, another ministerial statement on health—perhaps the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government are waking up to the fact that they have been failing the NHS over their 11-year tenure. If the Scottish Government had been paying attention to the day job, the cabinet secretary's statement that we have an ageing population would hardly have come as a surprise.

We have a shortfall across Scotland of some 850 general practitioners. Last week, the cabinet secretary announced an extra 400 training places—training that takes seven years to complete. I am afraid that that remains a shortfall. That is hardly prudent workforce planning and does not even take into account any future trends.

The fact that such a high proportion of our nursing staff are approaching retirement age was hardly difficult to work out and plan for. Nonetheless, in 2012, the then cabinet secretary for health, Nicola Sturgeon, cut training places for our nurses and midwives. That was short-sighted, and we are seeing the consequences on the wards today.

The cabinet secretary says that there is record investment in our Scottish NHS, but conveniently fails to mention that that is as a direct result of Barnett consequentials. Yesterday, the Scottish Government was handed an extra nearly £1 billion, and it has complete autonomy to spend that as it sees fit. We know that the Scottish NHS will get an extra £214 million this year and a further £720 million next year.

The damning Audit Scotland report on the state of NHS finances states that, after 11 years of SNP Government, NHS Scotland's performance in meeting key targets is in a downward spiral because the current model is not "financially sustainable". Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the funding boost from the UK Government will go directly to the NHS, or will she continue to follow the Scottish Government's usual pattern of finding a grievance for every solution?

Jeane Freeman: I am always happy to come before Parliament and talk about our health service. It is a successful service and represents an excellent track record on the Scottish Government's part.

I am disappointed, however, that Mr Whittle is surprised that we have an ageing population. The Scottish Government has been talking about that for some time and has taken the steps that I have outlined. It really is a pity that people do not listen, read and pay attention. On the back of the Government's track record, I have already taken steps to further address the challenges that are placed on the Scottish NHS—and on other health services across the UK—both by that ageing population and by other challenges.

What is different is that the Scottish Government has plans in place and action under way to address those challenges. My colleague Mr Mackay has said, and I have repeated, that every penny of the health consequentials will be invested in health by the Scottish Government. We have a track record of providing increased investment in our health service over many years. That is a question of political choice; it is not thanks to the UK Government continuing to cut the overall budget that is delivered to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government, and its political choices, is so much more in tune with what the people of this country need than a Tory Government will ever be.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Audit Scotland has delivered a damning report on 11 years of Scottish National Party mismanagement of our NHS that should shame the Government. Under the SNP, the future of our NHS is not financially sustainable. The SNP cut the health budget in real terms last year, despite rising waiting times and rising staff stress levels.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): Who gave you that nonsense?

Monica Lennon: Audit Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work should read the report.

Derek Mackay: It said no such thing.

Monica Lennon: The serious challenges that face our NHS require action, not more of the same broken promises from the SNP.

Jeane Freeman's grand plan to improve waiting times will continue to break the law for years to come. It hardly inspires confidence. Today's statement does not reveal a plan for the future of our NHS. It is damage control. Jeane Freeman said last week that her predecessors Nicola Sturgeon and Shona Robison failed to keep their promises on the NHS. Why should the people of Scotland believe that this cabinet secretary is any different?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Lennon for her questions. I start by clarifying that Audit Scotland did not say that this Government has cut NHS investment. That really is important. I am genuine in saying, as I have said since the day and hour when I was appointed Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, that I look for a mature and responsible discussion, and the starting point for that has to be accuracy in what we say.

I am disappointed that the medium-term financial framework appears not to have been read. I made the point—and Audit Scotland recognises this—that it came after the time when Audit Scotland could have taken full account of it, but the medium-term financial framework clearly shows the intention to invest in the NHS in Scotland beyond the amount that the Fraser of Allander institute anticipated will be required simply to stand still. The medium-term financial framework also makes clear that what we need is investment and reform. We already have reforms under way, and we have significant investment under way.

We undoubtedly have challenges, and I have been very honest in recognising those and setting out to deal with them. The big difference between those of us who sit on these benches and those who sit elsewhere in the chamber is that we face up to those challenges and have a plan in place. What we do not have are manifesto commitments that would cut our budget for the NHS and reduce the number of nurses, or the current commitment from the Labour Party at UK level not to reverse the tax cuts for the rich that the Tories want to impose.

If we are looking to see who the electorate will believe, I believe that they will put their trust in us—as they currently do—as a Government that delivers, because we understand the reality of the situation that we need to deal with and we have the plans in place to deal with it, not the slogans that we get from either side of us in the chamber.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The increase in agency staff costs over the past five years has been staggering. There has been an unsustainable 38 per cent increase, with almost £166 million being spent last year alone. That is not a new problem and we cannot wait until spring 2020 for the Government's recruitment framework. I would like to understand what the Government is doing now and what it intends to do in the immediate future.

Jeane Freeman: I thank Ms Johnstone. She is, of course, correct, in that agency costs take up too great a proportion of our budget. That is why the workforce recruitment exercises that we have begun are so important; why we have for the sixth successive year increased the numbers of student nurses and midwives in training; and why we announced—only recently—a significant increase to the non-means-tested bursary for student nurses and midwives, which is unique to Scotland when compared with the NHS in England.

It is also why we have undertaken and supported other initiatives such as the return to practice, which we intend to increase; the transfer course with the University of the Highlands and Islands; the increase in the number of radiographers in training; and the new Scottish graduate-entry medicine course with the universities of St Andrews and Dundee, which is a postgraduate course of a shorter duration that is clinically approved and safe and has a particular focus on GPs in remote and rural areas.

We are taking all those actions and more to address the particular pockets of recruitment difficulty in our workforce, notwithstanding the fact that, as Audit Scotland recognises, the workforce numbers in the NHS in Scotland are higher than they have ever been.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Why is it that, given that it has been two weeks since the worst NHS report by Audit Scotland, there is very little that is new in the Government response today? Workforce planning has been a major long-standing weakness for the Government. Why do we have to wait still longer before we see the workforce plan published?

Jeane Freeman: We have already published three workforce plans. The workforce plan that I referred to will integrate all those plans so that we are certain that we are taking a whole-system approach. I do not understand why Mr Rennie does not recognise that.

We appreciate that workforce planning is a critical element of what we must do; it is one of the pillars on which our work goes forward. The medium-term financial framework is one pillar; the waiting times improvement plan is another; and another is the move to integrated health and social care. By the end of this parliamentary session, more than £500 million from the front-line NHS budget will be invested annually in integrated health and social care.

I would never underestimate the challenges that we face and I would never say that we do not have more to do, but the starting point for all of us is an accurate reflection of exactly where we are. We already have three workforce plans on the stocks.

The Presiding Officer: There will be nine more questioners if we get through them all.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Given that the Tory UK Government is to short change the health service in Scotland by almost £55 million next year, has it indicated when it will confirm all the health consequentials that it previously claimed would apply through to 2023-24?

Jeane Freeman: The UK Government has not confirmed when the rest of the consequentials will be announced. That might happen in a spring budget or statement—however the chancellor frames it—but there is uncertainty about whether we will crash out of the European Union with no deal or with a deal that none of us understands and which is totally unclear. A few short months away from that time, the level of uncertainty is a considerable concern for our health service and particularly for our health and social care workforce. We have had no confirmation at all about the rest of the consequentials.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased that the cabinet secretary mentioned governance and leadership—two areas in which her advisers John Brown and Susan Walsh have documented NHS Highland's failures. I welcome the meetings that the cabinet secretary and I have had to discuss that. How will the Scottish Government ensure that NHS Highland's new chief executive, the board's chair and similar appointments across Scotland provide the charismatic and positive leadership that our excellent doctors and nurses deserve?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Mr Mountain for the productive discussions that we have had about NHS Highland, which I am sure will continue. We have changed in two ways how we recruit not only non-executive members of our health boards but those who hold key leadership positions.

We are using values-based recruitment exercises, which look at more than one dimension of an applicant who is before a decision-making panel. That approach has been successfully used for the Golden Jubilee national hospital's board for many years, and it is being picked up for other boards. It considers not only an applicant's experience, what their CV says and their answers to interview questions but how they perform in other situations. That provides a better and more rounded perception of an applicant, which means that more informed choices can be made.

That is happening alongside implementation of the governance work that John Brown and Susan Walsh undertook, as Mr Mountain said, which I require NHS board chairs to have implemented by the end of this financial year. The series of ministerial reviews of boards is also about to begin. All territorial boards will have a ministerial review, which will look directly at their governance issues, at where we expect them to improve their performance and at the challenges that they face, on which we might assist them more.

When all that is taken in the round, we will reach the level of leadership that is required across our NHS from our chief executives and our boards, which have the critical and vital role of scrutiny and challenge. I am not sure that I can promise charisma, but I can commit to all the other aspects.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In her statement, the cabinet secretary recognised the increased demands on the health service. In my South Scotland region, we have a particularly large ageing population with increasingly complex health and care needs. Can the cabinet secretary outline what action is being taken to meet the demand of those needs?

Jeane Freeman: On the ageing population, I will make two points. First, that population as it presents to us is picked up by the additional capacity that the waiting times improvement plan and its £850 million of investment bring into the service and the system in order that they can cope with those additional demands—in particular, in respect of elective healthcare needs and diagnostics—that the ageing population and others place on our health service.

My other point relates to our public health programme and our need to do more in the field of working with mothers before they give birth—hence the element of the mental health plan that Ms Haughey is taking forward around perinatal mental health. Our understanding of the impact of adverse childhood experiences—ACEs—through our work with mothers, babies and children and our work in schools ensures that the generations coming behind us will have healthier lifestyles than we currently have. Therefore, the demands on our health service will change in the future. That is part of what we talk about as a whole-system

approach, and it is part of the investment and reform that I touched on earlier.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Audit Scotland reported that NHS Lothian missed all eight performance targets and that it was not even close to meeting six of them. The cabinet secretary has quietly sent in a rescue team led by the head of NHS Northumbria; can she advise when that task force will report back to the Government and when staff and patients can expect to see significant improvement?

Jeane Freeman: The task force is continuing its work and I receive regular reports on its progress. I am pleased to say that—albeit that it has been only a short time and I would not overclaim this— we have seen a small improvement in NHS Lothian's performance in relation to accident and emergency targets.

I would be happy to update Ms Dugdale—and other MSPs with a particular local interest in NHS Lothian—as the task force continues its work. The approach by the task force is not to go in, look at things, report, and go away again. It is working on the ground with healthcare staff in NHS Lothian and with the management team there to make improvements, which is the right place for it to be.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): On Sunday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit,

"frankly, we'd need to have a new budget that set out a different strategy for the future."

He then promptly forgot about Brexit yesterday. For the record and for the sake of all those who work in our national health service, has the Scottish Government been given any assurances by the UK Government that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, the UK Government's commitment to the NHS spend will be kept and not just thrown away in a new budget?

Jeane Freeman: No such assurances have been given. As I said earlier, that all simply adds to the significant uncertainty that is faced by our NHS staff, on top of the uncertainty among the very valuable members of our healthcare workforce who are European Union nationals. Like everyone else, I have little hope that I will be heard, but I urge not only the UK Government but our Conservative colleagues here to join us in pressing very hard for some sort of resolution from the UK Government. It could start by giving us assurances about the consequentials.

Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con): Although health boards were last year able to make savings of about £500 million, the Audit Scotland report says that that was largely thanks to one-off measures such as building sales. Further savings will obviously have to be made,

and since they cannot come from building sales or, as we saw in NHS Tayside, creative accounting, how will the cabinet secretary ensure that they do not come in areas where they compromise patient safety and patient care?

Jeane Freeman: One point that I have to make about the savings that are required of our NHS boards is that when boards save money, they will keep that money and are expected to use it for patient services and patient care. I have made it clear to all our boards that, as they look at how to make best use of our resources, patient-centred and quality care must be the number 1 priority. As we monitor the boards' use of resources and their spending plans and budgets, we will pay careful attention to where they are looking to make reductions in costs in order to apply those funds elsewhere.

The core answer to Mr Bowman's question is that we need to focus on quality, because quality produces reform and reform produces financial prudence and good use of resources. That is my experience in the health service, and that is what we will do, going forward.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary rightly said that the report is an annual report, but she will know that the Auditor General's warnings of the need for change have grown more urgent year on year. Given the importance of public engagement in meeting those challenges, does the cabinet secretary agree with the Auditor General that better information is needed on how the NHS uses funding to support change, and that reporting on progress towards vision 2020 needs to be made public? If the cabinet secretary agrees with those views in the report, how will she deliver those changes?

Jeane Freeman: Those are important questions. I agree with those views. As I have said, I have accepted all the recommendations in the Audit Scotland report. I hope that I will have the opportunity soon to meet the Auditor General to discuss the report and to hear her thoughts on other areas in which we might make improvements in the coming year.

We are clearly committed to transparency of information. We make information public, but that does not mean that we could not do more. I am happy to hear propositions from across the chamber about what more we can do. It is not just about making information public; it is also about making information accessible and understood. Individual health boards and the Government have a way to go in that regard, so I am keen to look at how we might do that.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary

outline what Audit Scotland observed in its report on the long-term increase in health spending in Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: On long-term health spending in Scotland, the Audit Scotland report said that the Fraser of Allander institute estimates that the health resource budget is likely to have to increase by about 2 per cent per year in order to stand still. In my statement and elsewhere I have said that the commitment in our medium-term financial framework sets out additional funding for the health portfolio of £3.3 billion by 2023-24, which represents a 2.9 per cent increase in real terms. As I said when I made a statement on that, and when I published the waiting times improvement plan and made a statement on that, that additional funding is predicated on the UK Government coming good on its June commitment on consequentials. It has already failed in the first year, but I hope that it will not fail in future years. We need to know from the UK Government how it will make good the shortfall in the first year, and what it will do in future years, so that we can have a realistic forward look and understand whether either we can make good on our political choices and commitments or the UK Government will let us down, yet again.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): At the weekend, NHS Lothian was exposed for taking in private patients for millions of pounds' worth of private procedures and diagnostic tests, while NHS patients wait up to 60 weeks and beyond on waiting lists. Does the cabinet secretary understand how angry at this unacceptable situation are the patients who are waiting with worry and in pain? What will she do about it?

Jeane Freeman: I have to say that I am not best pleased about the situation to which Mr Findlay has referred. Our NHS boards should deal with private patients only in circumstances in which life is at risk. I understand that the amount of money involved is about £2.2 million, which is not enormous, but that does not lessen my concern about what NHS Lothian has done.

I have asked for details on the circumstances in which the board has dealt with the private sector and treated private patients to see whether it can justify it based on its capacity in services for NHS patients. Once I have heard what the board will tell me, I will decide what to do—with regard to not only NHS Lothian's board but other boards—so that that there is clarity that NHS resources are to be focused on NHS patients. That is the right direction; treatment for private sector patients should of course be possible when it is a matter of life or death, but I do not expect otherwise to see it in Scotland's NHS.

Digital Inclusion

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Our next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-14509, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a digital society for all: working together to maximise the benefits of digital inclusion. I encourage all members who wish to take part to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:57

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): I am pleased to debate how Scotland can become a digital society for all and how we are already well on our way to doing so. I thank the members who signed the motion to make the debate possible, and I look forward to hearing contributions from across the chamber.

What does "a digital society for all" mean? We can best understand that by talking to older or disabled users whose lives have been transformed by access to digital platforms. David, for example, led a fairly isolated life; he has epilepsy and chronic mental illness, which has made it difficult for him to socialise. He recently took part in the CleverCogs scheme, which is run by Blackwood Homes and Care and is designed to increase digital participation for adults who receive care and support packages. The scheme uses technology and design to develop low-cost ways to provide services that improve quality of life, choice and independence. Since David took part in the scheme, he has learned new digital skills that have given him the confidence to challenge himself and live life to the full. He used CleverCogs' bespoke systems to educate himself on a range of topics, including ways to manage his depression and anxiety. However, members do not want to hear what I think. David said:

"CleverCogs has wakened me right up. It's made me come out of myself so I'm not just sitting at home anymore. Almost every day I'm going out now and doing things for my neighbours if they are struggling because of old age. I didn't do that before, I just kept myself to myself".

David's story demonstrates how technology has been life changing for not only him but his ageing neighbours. Earlier today, I had the privilege of meeting one of his neighbours, Mandy, who is another CleverCogs user. I believe that she is in the gallery, and I promised her that I would give her a wave so that she could wave back. Did she wave?

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): She did.

Kate Forbes: Good. Mandy, who uses a tablet, was the recipient of the service user achievement award for pioneering the system by tutoring her neighbours in the technology that CleverCogs

uses, building a better sense of community and improving wellbeing. I asked her what she uses her tablet for, and she told me that she is the champion online bowler in her care home, that she listens regularly to Elvis on repeat on YouTube and that she FaceTimes her sister. Further, in terms of improving independence, because her tablet is linked to her caseworkers' phones, she can use it to contact them. That gives her the control that she needs. The system is personalised to her, it is intuitive and she can even pick what she is going to eat for lunch, because the kitchen staff add the menu online.

CleverCogs and systems like it are building up digital skills among the older and disabled population. They give them more independence and control over their lives, and more and more people are getting online.

David and Mandy have clearly made great changes in their lives and the lives of others. Their experiences are documented in a report that was published today by the Carnegie UK Trust called "Living Digitally—An evaluation of the CleverCogs digital care and support system". The results of that independent research back up the anecdotes and stories that I have heard from Mandy and David, and from many others. They clearly demonstrate the impact that digital participation can have. Participants in the study reported increased life satisfaction; most significantly, the life satisfaction of people aged 55 to 64 rose significantly. There were also improvements in the number of people accessing useful health information, with several indicators of improved levels of independence in customers' daily living. That is a critically important point for me, as someone who believes strongly that Scotland can be at the forefront of the digital revolution.

We are seeing the enormous potential for our economy and our society in ensuring that our people have digital skills, that our businesses, third sector and public sector organisations use digital better, and that Scotland has the workforce, the expertise, the talent and the technology to enable us to share all of that with the rest of the world. However, at the end of the day, it comes back to the individuals whose lives are transformed. We want to create a digital society that is not just for those who can already access it, and we want to find new ways to tackle all the issues that affect digital participation.

Incidentally, that work must include connectivity, accessibility and affordability. Our commitment to provide access to superfast broadband for each and every home and business in Scotland is the most ambitious of any target across the United Kingdom. We set that target because we see the importance of two issues. We want to ensure that, first, the infrastructure does not exclude anybody

and, secondly, once the infrastructure is in place, we are equally ambitious in supporting people to be able to use it.

Some £600 million is being invested in the initial procurement of the reaching 100 per cent programme, which is the single largest investment in digital connectivity by any Government in the UK.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): My point is less about the delivery of the infrastructure and more about the skills that are required to use it. If it is true that one in five people in Scotland do not have basic digital skills—a figure that was given by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations—how will the Government address that?

Kate Forbes: That is a vitally important point. Digital skills are not just something that we should deliver to a particular section of the society. By the time that we give our young people digital skills at university or college, it is too late. The process must start first of all in schools.

In partnership with the current digital champions network, we are offering coding clubs to disadvantaged young people through schools and library networks. We continue to support the extension of extracurricular coding activities as part of the Digital Xtra programme. Jamie Greene will also be aware that, to date, we have funded CodeClan with more than £3 million to provide Scotland's first industry-led digital skills academy. CodeClan offers students an intensive four-month training programme, with direct access to employers and an opportunity to attain a professional development qualification.

The opportunities are already there. In community hubs, silver surfers can get online, learn new talents, reduce social isolation and take advantage of all that the internet has to offer. We are also ensuring that young people pick up digital skills as they go through school. An example of where those two things work in tandem is Antonine primary school in Falkirk, where 55 schoolchildren have teamed up with 20 silver surfers to share knowledge about aspects of history—world war one, for example. A true digital society must recognise the ways in which we can share expertise across the generations; it must also be one in which everyone's opinion matters.

The digital sector contributes to employment and economic growth across Scotland. In 2016, it was worth £5.2 billion in gross value added to the Scottish economy, and is forecast to be the fastest-growing sector in Scotland from now until 2024. To get the benefits of that revolution, we must adopt a cradle-to-grave approach. It is essential that we involve everyone at the most formative stage in their lives to ensure that we

provide at the earliest possible stage the essential tools that will best equip their life journey.

One interesting initiative has been a partnership with the Scottish Book Trust, which operates the bookbug programme to provide book bags to every child in Scotland and is developing a smartphone app to complement the existing scheme.

That takes me to another aspect of digital participation, which is that we must consider people's rights. We increasingly recognise that it is nonsensical to refer to a digital world as though it is independent of the world. The digital world is the current world as we see it. Last month, I opened a summit organised by Young Scot and youth leaders to promote the 5Rights agenda in Scotland. The ultimate aim of the 5Rights programme is to put power in the hands of young people so that they know how to be resilient and respond positively to all that the digital world has to offer.

It is the Scottish Government's intention to use that 5Rights work as the foundation of a future proof and inclusive ethical framework that underpins how technology is built, provides the safeguards that we increasingly need and ensures that young people—and all generations—have the rights that they need in this digital world.

The opportunities are there for everyone to become confident, creative and fearless innovators, and to unlock the full potential of people and new technologies. From cyber tots through cyber teens to silver surfers, the Scottish Government is trying to spread an understanding among Scotland's citizens that in a society where bad news travels faster than the speed of light, the internet can be used as a tool for good.

That is seen so clearly when it comes to the experiences of Mandy and David through CleverCogs. We can learn a lot as a society about embracing change and supporting people to realise their potential—wherever they live, whatever their age and whatever challenges they face. Digital should be a way of enabling us to live our lives to the full and we need to ensure that all of Scotland reaps the social, economic and cultural benefits that digital technology offers.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the benefits that digital inclusion can bring to everyone in Scotland; welcomes the findings, published on 29 October 2018, of the two-year research project, Living Digitally, commissioned by Carnegie UK, on the impact of digital technologies on people with a range of disabilities; acknowledges the strong evidence of the positive impact of digital inclusion on their wellbeing; recognises that a combined focus by government, the wider public sector and private and voluntary sectors is the most effective way of increasing digital participation, which in turn will increase educational

attainment, provide better access to fair work and higher-wage jobs, and supports effective, person-centred public services, such as the health and social care sector, to develop innovative solutions and enable Scotland to be a digital society for all.

15:10

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I take this somewhat belated opportunity to welcome Kate Forbes to the front bench. Representing my home constituency, she will be well aware of the problems of digital connectivity in our part of the world. I am delighted that she is representing the Government in this particular brief.

It is vital that we ensure not only that Scotland is one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world, but that our citizens are the most technologically capable. By doing so, we can further grow our economy, create new jobs and remain competitive as a nation. We all know of the need to improve productivity in Scotland and, without doubt, digital inclusion is one of the many aspects of the solution to that pressing problem. Digital inclusion is also a practical necessity for people in their everyday lives, as new technologies can improve quality of life and improve personal health—to mention only a few of the many advantages that accrue from digital inclusion.

However, age barriers, lack of early intervention through education, the impact of disabilities and geographical location are just some of the barriers that exist. Frequently, when there is an issue of access—let us be brutally honest—that is because such access is unaffordable. As the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations notes, the evidence clearly shows that digital exclusion exacerbates existing deep-rooted inequalities, and affordability is a key barrier to those in the poorest communities.

The SCVO also states that 21 per cent of people in Scotland do not have basic digital skills. Given the ever-increasing significance of digital inclusion, the fact that people are being excluded due to the sheer cost should shame us all. In a report that was published earlier this year, Citizens Advice Scotland found that just over one third of respondents said they either "had difficulty" or "could not use" a computer.

In my Highlands and Islands region, there are still issues with the lack of reliable broadband and mobile internet access, which pose huge problems for local businesses and residences. I will come back to that later.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome efforts to improve the inclusivity of technology and increase access to it, and we welcome its inclusion in the Scottish Government's digital strategy for

Scotland. However, we will hold to account the Scottish National Party Government on those commitments to ensure that they come to fruition.

I readily acknowledge that digital inclusion is an issue that requires cross-party co-operation, but it is incumbent on me to set out our concerns that existing support schemes that could be used to improve digital inclusivity have not had the impact that might have been desired. For example, we note that it took more than a year for the Scottish Government to invest any money from the digital growth fund that it announced last year. Similarly, the Scottish growth scheme that was designed to support business has paid out only £25 million in two years, which is a far cry from the £500 million that was pledged to the scheme when it was launched. Although those two funds undoubtedly cover a variety of areas, it is concerning that such little progress has been achieved by them, and I ask the SNP Government to reflect on that.

However, we welcome the Government's recognition of the "Living Digitally – An evaluation of the CleverCogs™ digital care and support system" report by Carnegie UK Trust and Just Economics Research Ltd, which focuses on a system that is designed to help people with disabilities to access the internet with confidence. That is just one example of collaboration between the public, private and voluntary sectors. In particular, I acknowledge remarks in the report about the CleverCogs system, which the minister mentioned, which showed increased happiness and reduced feelings of depression among its users.

It is important that we ensure that every young person is able to access and benefit from digital technology. I found it particularly striking that, according to Citizens Advice Scotland, those in the least deprived areas are twice as likely to be able to "use a computer well" as those in the most deprived areas. It is imperative that there is early intervention for young people in order to alter those trends.

However, to achieve those aims and reduce digital inequality, we need to ensure that there is adequate infrastructure to facilitate that in the first place. Although this is too interesting and nuanced a debate to lapse into the usual arguments about who is responsible for broadband in Scotland, it is important to put on record that we continue to support the aims of the reaching 100 per cent— R100—programme.

As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I know all too well the importance of ensuring that every home, no matter how rural or remote, can access fast and reliable broadband. According to Audit Scotland, average broadband speeds continue to be lowest in rural areas, and of the 376,000 households that are still unable to access superfast broadband, less than half will be able to do so by the R100 deadline of 2021. I mention that simply as a reminder that we still have a long way to go to deliver the vital infrastructure that is necessary to afford all our citizens the opportunity to benefit from digital technology. That is why we noted that in our amendment.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The member appears to have cast doubt on the delivery of the R100 programme to 100 per cent of Scottish premises by 2021. On what basis does he claim that only 50 per cent of the remaining premises will get that coverage?

Donald Cameron: Quite simply, that is based on the Audit Scotland report that I mentioned.

I will move on and provide some local examples. It is easy to talk about digital inclusivity from Edinburgh, where we all work in a high-technology environment in the Scottish Parliament. However, to understand the benefits of inclusivity, it is helpful to share some first-hand experiences from the areas that we represent. I want to mention the e-Sgoil project in Stornoway, which I visited last month. Schools throughout the Western Isles, the Highlands and beyond have linked up, using state-of-the-art video technology, to deliver classes. As a result, young people in some of the most remote parts of Scotland have been offered greater subject choice.

One example of how that project works involves a local music teacher. Previously, she had to travel between three schools on Lewis, racking up miles in her car and spending little time with her pupils. Now, thanks to technology, she can base herself in one school for a whole week, be with the children there and deliver classes to the other two schools via videolink. The following week, she can do the same from another of her schools. For her, the project means cutting her travel time by a third; for the council, it means saving money; and for the pupils, it means face-to-face contact with their teacher.

Another example is the maths teacher who I witnessed teaching remotely. Astonishingly, his students were able to message him confidentially mid-lesson if they were struggling with a topic. That goes way beyond traditional learning methods. A barrier to education is now being resolved through technology, and that is truly inspirational.

However, on the flipside, we have all seen the mass banking closures throughout many rural and remote parts of Scotland. Rural parts of Scotland are far more liable to have slower broadband speeds than those in urban Scotland. That is why the decision of a bank or any major business to significantly alter or reduce its presence in our rural areas can have such a devastating impact.

A digitally inclusive society is as much about social progress as it is about economic benefit. If we can ensure that everyone, irrespective of background, not only has access to new and existing technologies but is able to cope with the ever-changing digital world that we live in, we can be sure that Scotland can be a digital powerhouse.

I move amendment S5M-14509.3, to insert at end:

"; recognises that a lack of quality broadband connection can prevent digital inclusion, especially in remote and rural areas; notes the negative effects of the removal of high street banking services from local communities, regrettably leading to circumstances of digital exclusion, and calls for a comprehensive and sympathetic approach by the Scottish Government that acknowledges the huge advantages that digital technology brings to Scottish society, but also recognises the risks of excluding those who are currently unable to access such technology in their daily lives."

15:17

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome Kate Forbes to her new ministerial role and wish her well.

Today, almost every aspect of society has been transformed by technological advancements. As we become an increasingly digital society, there are constant changes to how businesses operate, our approach to shopping, the services that we access, the way in which we are educated and the way in which we function in the workplace. It is therefore little wonder that research by Which? found that nine out of 10 people view a broadband connection as a necessity, alongside water and energy utilities, food and housing. That is a higher proportion than those who identify a television, a phone, a car or savings as a necessity.

Such advancements open up a vast range of new opportunities for individuals, businesses and communities, and they can bring significant social and economic advantages, as Kate Forbes highlighted in David and Mandy's experience with the CleverCogs digital care and support system. I will say more about that in my closing speech at the end of the debate.

In moving Labour's amendment, I want to highlight the fact that such benefits are sadly not often felt equally. It is too easy to presume that everyone has the basic skills to navigate their way around the digital world or that people have access to the technology, even if they have the skills. Too many people in Scotland are digitally excluded. There are many reasons for that. Scotland's beautiful but fragmented landscape provides challenges to making the necessary technology available for all, and shortcomings in the Government's connectivity policy have so far failed to overcome those barriers. The much-touted digital superfast Scotland broadband programme helped to facilitate the roll-out of digital broadband, but it also entrenched some of Scotland's digital divide.

Kate Forbes: I recognise the comments that the member has made about infrastructure. What is his view on how we ensure that, where there is adequate infrastructure, those who can use digital are supported to do so? There is a disconnect between the 5 per cent of people who do not have the infrastructure and the much bigger number of people who are not using what we have.

Colin Smyth: Kate Forbes raises a very important point, which I will deal with in my speech. A large number of groups, whether it is because of income, disability, age or other factors, are currently excluded from accessing services. I will touch on that in my ideas later on.

People who live in rural areas are one of the groups that are digitally excluded. Although digital broadband coverage is at more than 97 per cent nationally, in some of our rural areas—Orkney, for example—coverage is down to 82 per cent and access to superfast broadband is at just 65 per cent. That is far from unique. In the Western Isles and Ross, Skye and Lochaber, almost 30 per cent of people do not have access to superfast speeds and, across the board, rural areas have much poorer access to digital and superfast broadband. The wider challenges that those communities face—challenges that relate to the economy and accessing services—are exacerbated by that digital divide.

It is not just connectivity issues that are holding Scotland back. The 2017 Scottish household survey found a clear correlation between income and internet access. It stated:

"Home internet access tends to increase with household income".

Indeed, 99 per cent of households with an annual income of more than £40,000 have home internet access compared with 56 per cent of those who earn between £6,001 and £10,000. That is a difference of 43 percentage points. The most disadvantaged in society are too often excluded from the opportunities, services and information that home internet access provides.

The Scottish household survey also revealed a persistent age gap in internet use. Only 63 per cent of adults aged 60 and above and 37 per cent of those aged 75 and above use the internet, compared with 99 per cent of those aged 16 to 24. Although progress has been made in that area, a great deal more remains to be done.

Another worrying trend that was identified in the Scottish household survey was that those with some form of physical or mental health condition were 20 per cent less likely to use the internet

than those without such a condition. That reveals a serious failure to remove the barriers that those with disabilities face. Again, that highlights how digital exclusion reinforces existing inequalities.

The Scottish household survey also identified a

"gender gap in digital skills",

albeit that the information that we have on that is still limited. If we are to tackle digital exclusion, we need more comprehensive data on who is being excluded and why. What is already clear is that digital exclusion is inseparable from broader social and economic inequalities, and that advancing digital inclusion is therefore essential to improving inclusion more broadly.

On coverage, as Donald Cameron highlighted, the R100 programme aims to address the significant shortcomings of the previous broadband roll-out programme, such as the failure to set a minimum speed, and it aims to tackle some of the access issues that rural communities face. Labour fully supports the aims of the programme and its target of 100 per cent superfast broadband coverage by the end of 2021 or, indeed, sooner, but I am concerned by Audit Scotland's assessment that meeting that target remains "difficult". The commitment needs to be delivered in full, but I have yet to be convinced that the Scottish Government has the resources and a clear plan in place in order to achieve that.

I welcome the plan, and I also welcome the Scottish Government's investment to enable improvements in 4G coverage. I look forward to seeing the details of its 5G strategy. However, although the work is welcome and much needed, it is still far from transformative. As I said earlier, expanding coverage is only the first step in improving access. Ensuring genuine digital inclusion means taking a holistic view of access and looking at the additional barriers that people might face. There is a real risk that individuals and communities that have been digitally excluded to date will continue to miss out on the opportunities that the growth in digital will bring.

It is clear that Scotland faces a digital divide. Rural communities, those on the lowest incomes, people with physical or mental health conditions, and older people are being excluded. That exclusion mirrors wider social and economic inequalities, but it also exacerbates those inequalities. A comprehensive strategy is therefore needed. That is why I am happy to move Labour's amendment, which calls for that.

I move amendment S5M-14509.2, to insert at end:

"; notes that rural communities, those on the lowest income, people with physical or mental health conditions and older people are particularly affected by digital exclusion; recognises that digital exclusion exacerbates

wider social and economic inequalities; believes that the Scottish Government has failed to adequately tackle digital exclusion, and calls for a more comprehensive approach by the Scottish Government to end Scotland's digital divide."

15:24

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): As others have done, I welcome Kate Forbes to her position. I think that this is the first time that I have been in a debate with her in her new role in the chamber. I am sure that we all wish her well.

I draw members' attention to the fact that I am a member of the Open Rights Group.

I welcome the chance to take part in this debate. I recognise that positive points are being made on all sides; however, I also recognise that aspects of the agenda are being missed by all sides. The Government motion, which I have got no great beef with and will happily support, says that increasing digital participation will, in turn,

"provide better access to fair work and higher-wage jobs".

It will for some people, but digital participation alone is no guarantee of that. We are all very aware of those involved in the gig economy. They may be highly connected and adept at using online platforms, but they are being exploited in poorly paid and insecure work.

Digital participation, like many other innovations in life, can be used for good or for ill. The economy that we build around it can be fair and sustainable, or it can be exploitative and wasteful.

The Conservative amendment mentions the digital economy's impact on, if I can put it this way, the real-world economy—that is, the high street. The digital services tax that was announced in yesterday's budget is an interesting innovation. It is likely to be too modest in scale to reverse the impact that the UK Government is talking about, but it is acknowledging a genuine issue and we should all welcome the fact that that conversation is taking place.

However, the continual spats between Governments about exactly who is to blame for broadband roll-out not being as fast as some people would like it to be is a dynamic that solves nothing. If we want the state to act, we should argue for public ownership of infrastructure, and I do not hear that case coming from either Government.

We should also consider what the long-term goal is for broadband. How fast is "fast enough"? This is not simply a question of building infrastructure anew every decade or so when technology moves on apace and the demand for data goes up. The energy considerations alone of getting faster and faster are being ignored.

For the vast majority of domestic applications, is having only a 10 megabits per second connection really digital exclusion? I question that. I have stood in my living room flying around the virtual reality version of Google Earth, which is a fully 3D-rendered planet streaming through a broadband connection, perfectly happily without the extremely high speeds that we are talking about as though they are an absolute requirement for everybody. There is a point at which we should say that the speeds that we have are fast enough.

Labour cites many issues in its amendment that we should all share a great deal of concern about, not least the impact of inequality of digital participation. However, it is easy to say that "the Government has failed", and, like a great many Labour amendments that we see in the chamber, its amendment today does not include much by way of positive proposals.

I will argue a little deeper and question the nature and not just extent of digital participation. Is digital participation about creating an online space in which we merely consume services and products, or is about creating a space for collaboration, creativity and community? It is the nature of that participation that we should be concerned about.

Is the role of education about empowering young people to be merely passive consumers or about empowering them to take hold of powerful new tools to make their society better? What can digital participation mean without digital rights? Publications from both the UK and Scottish Governments have been too silent on that question. There has been a particular failure in response to the scandals affecting companies such as Facebook and Cambridge Analytica in recent years.

A free and open internet is not just a commercialised space, and it cannot be allowed to be simply a commercialised space in which more and more control over our lives is taken silently and invisibly by service providers, content providers and advertisers. That applies even to the social media platforms that we all enjoy using—well, sometimes we can still manage to enjoy them—which many of us choose to use without necessarily being conscious of the degree of control that is taken by them.

In its recent paper on the impact of Brexit on digital rights, the Open Rights Group said:

"International trade deals have a long history of disregarding democracy and reflecting corporate agendas."

The group also mentioned that tech giants around the world are becoming very dominant in

"negotiations with the US for cross-border trade and e-commerce."

Among the arguments that it made was that digital privacy must not be allowed to be undermined in the name of protecting the free flow of data and that censorship should not be promoted through draconian or voluntary online IP enforcement commitments. I would like those issues, as well as the issues of the role of surveillance in our society, whether by state or corporate players, and that of privacy and consent to be addressed. They raise more questions than answers and I do not pretend otherwise. However, discussing digital participation only in terms of uptake fails to give us the fuller picture that we need. We should be at least as interested in the nature of participation and the changing social, economic and even political relationships that will emerge in our society.

15:31

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome Kate Forbes to her new role. We wish her well because she knows, as we all do, that delivering the Scottish Government's ambitious commitment of 100 per cent coverage of superfast broadband by 2021 will be challenging. The task that is before the minister has been made all the more difficult because of the glacial progress of previous ministers and cabinet secretaries towards that goal.

Fast and reliable access to the internet and a dependable mobile phone signal are no longer a luxury. I think that we all agree that good connectivity is now an essential service, which allows communities, individuals and businesses to thrive. Indeed, the benefits of good connectivity go far beyond the economic. Access to online knowledge, education and public services supports the spread of ideas, broadens horizons, should improve civic engagement, and enables research to take place almost instantaneously across borders and at a global level.

It is unfortunate that the people who could benefit the most have often been left behind and that society has quickly divided into those who can easily access our digital economy and those who are excluded. The Scottish Government would do a great service to the communities and individuals who have been excluded if it provided a meaningful programme of digital education and universal access to superfast broadband as soon as possible.

The minister will be aware that I lodged an amendment to the motion, which, unfortunately, was not selected for debate.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): What a shame.

Mike Rumbles: I point out to Mr Lyle that, in my amendment, I was trying to be helpful to the Scottish Government. Its target is for 100 per cent coverage by December 2021. Would it not be immensely helpful if the Scottish Government target were to be brought forward to 1 May of that year? After all, that is the date that was in the SNP manifesto for the 2016 election.

Stewart Stevenson: No, it was not.

Mike Rumbles: I have read the manifesto; I am not sure whether the member has done so.

I am sure that the Scottish Government could bring forward the date, if it had the will to implement its own manifesto. I am, of course, trying to be helpful to the minister by making that suggestion.

This is not the first time in this chamber that I have urged the Scottish Government to get a move on with its R100 programme. I have brought to the attention of Scottish Government ministers the fact that thousands of homes in areas such as Aberdeenshire are experiencing nothing like the levels of connectivity that have been promised. In some cases, internet speeds reach barely 1 Mbps, and mobile phone coverage is intermittent or even non-existent.

Only last week, a constituent whose home is in Inverurie, a town of more than 10,000 residents, reported that he could not find a provider or a contract that would deliver speeds of more than 6 Mbps.

It is unfortunate that when the SNP promised, in 2012, to deliver 95 per cent fibre coverage and that

"next generation broadband will be available to all by 2020",

it did not start by investing in the areas that would see the most benefit. Kate Forbes will be aware of that.

I have lost count of the number of times that I have been told that residents who live only a stone's throw from a green cabinet can scarcely access the most basic internet services.

Kate Forbes: Like Mike Rumbles, I believe that universal connectivity is vital. However, my question to him, which is put in a constructive spirit, is about the fact that, even with connectivity, we see that not all adults know how to access the internet. I will give him one statistic: about one third of people between the ages of 45 and 74 do not access the internet at home—not because they do not have connectivity, but because there is an issue with their skills. How does he propose to respond to that?

Mike Rumbles: The minister makes a good point. In the same spirit, I say that there is no point in educating people and helping them if they cannot access the service first. Not everybody will take up the service, but accessibility is very important. We have to tackle both those issues.

The truth of the matter is that the Scottish Government has relied on local authorities, business gateways such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, commercial operators and the UK Government to do a great deal of the heavy lifting. As a matter of fact, the Scottish Government's own contribution to the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme has amounted to around only 15 per cent of the total investment so far.

There is no need to remind me—and I say to Richard Lyle, even before he gets on his feet—

Richard Lyle: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: Not on this point. I would rather make my point first; I am running out of time.

Richard Lyle: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Mr Lyle, please sit down.

Mike Rumbles: If I had more time, I would be delighted to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lyle, the member has said that he does not wish to take an intervention. Please respect that.

Mike Rumbles: I say to Richard Lyle that I would certainly take his intervention if I had more time.

As I was saying, there is no need to remind me that this is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the UK Government—just as there is no need to remind my colleagues in the SNP that it is now six years since they promised to deliver superfast broadband to everyone. Only three years of that commitment remain and it is yet to be achieved.

I fully support the motion that has been moved by the minister today. I also support both amendments. I hope that everyone in this chamber will agree that good and reliable access to our digital economy is not a luxury but a necessity. Therefore, in trying to be helpful to the Scottish Government, I ask the minister to return to the commitment that the SNP made in its manifesto and to deliver the R100 programme by May 2021, rather than by the end of that year. After all, would it not be proud to achieve 100 per cent coverage for all by the next election? It would be in its interests to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. Speeches should be of up to six minutes, please. We are a bit pushed for time; no extra time can be allowed.

15:37

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in today's debate as a representative of the South Scotland region, which is a rural area that has faced challenges in digital competence, connectivity and uptake.

We are all in agreement that tackling barriers to digital inclusion and ensuring digital connectivity across the whole of Scotland will be key to realising the advantages of the digital world, which have been highlighted. In turn, that will boost productivity and efficiency.

This afternoon, I will focus my speech on the last part of the Scottish Government's motion, which suggests that improving digital participation and inclusion will also benefit delivery of healthcare in Scotland. As a nurse and as deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee, I must alert Parliament to that.

The motion

"recognises that a combined focus by government, the wider public sector and private and voluntary sectors is the most effective way of increasing digital participation, which in turn will"

support

"effective, person-centred public services, such as the health and social care sector, to develop innovative solutions and enable Scotland to be a digital society for all."

Members might be aware of one programme that aims to do exactly that. The attend anywhere programme, which is administered by the Scottish centre for telehealth and telecare, with NHS boards and NHS 24, is a resource that allows patients access to healthcare specialists and professionals, general practitioners, psychologists, nurses, physiotherapists and others, in the comfort of their own homes, at work or in places of ease and comfort to them.

The attend anywhere programme has many benefits for people's daily lives. It means that patients can see their GPs without leaving their homes to go to surgeries. It also means that they can access their psychologists or healthcare professionals without going to clinics or hospitals, and it encourages them to seek medical advice from where they may not previously have done so, due to improved ease of access.

In addition, attend anywhere has benefits for health. It means that people with severe and complex healthcare needs may not need to travel to see their professionals, which in some cases— for example, patients who experience chronic pain and patients who have mental health conditions— might reduce the stress of their having to leave the house.

Between 2017 and 2018, the Scottish centre for telehealth and telecare enabled 7,500 new patients to have access to, and to benefit from, home and mobile health monitoring. It supported the scale-up BP programme, to deliver the largest scale-up of blood pressure monitoring to date. It delivered 1,200 consultations to patients, with more than 67 GP practices being registered to use the service. Most important is that it supported 4,000 people across Scotland to learn about the programme and transfer their knowledge of it to others in their respective areas. I understand, however, that some patients might be fearful or reluctant to take up the programme, and I absolutely understand the need for patients to have a choice about the programme after they have been informed about the positives and negatives of it.

Last year, the Scottish Government published its digital strategy, which set out how it intends to place digital at the heart of everything it does, from reforming public services to delivering economic growth. That is welcome, but in order to achieve the aim of placing digital at the heart of everything, the Scottish Government must ensure and encourage a combined effort from itself, third sector organisations and voluntary organisations, in order to help communities, people and businesses to have the confidence, resources and infrastructure to become digitally enabled.

One such third sector organisation currently operates in my South Scotland region. The Castle Douglas Community Information Technology Centre charity, known as the IT centre, is managed by Jackie Williams and provides access to computers, laptops and tablets for people who require digital services in their daily lives. People in the local area rely on the centre for assistance with applications for jobs and welfare support, and for access to college and university applications. The centre also offers courses in CV writing, as well as introductory courses on use of IT, basic programming and other skills. I would like to see such projects being rolled out and supported across Scotland as we move towards being a digital society. I invite the minister to visit when her diary permits.

If we are to have a fully digital Scotland, we must first ensure that we have in place the necessary resources to give people the confidence to use technology. I therefore encourage the Scottish Government to continue to make Scotland the best digital society it can be, while allowing people the time, education and resources to come to terms with changes such as those that come with programmes like attend anywhere.

Finally, the IT centre in Castle Douglas and other such places also offer benefits to many people who have additional learning needs, so

they provide an excellent opportunity for people to become digitally competent.

15:43

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome Kate Forbes to her role. The renewed focus on the digital economy, connectivity and digital inclusion is welcomed by the Conservatives. After I was elected to Parliament, I was made my party's spokesman on the digital economy and connectivity, as some members will recall, and my interest in that portfolio stems from a career in media technology. I spent much of that time asking Government to focus on taking a centralised approach and on how Scotland can be a truly inclusive nation. I also felt that a dedicated minister to focus on digital was much needed, so the reshuffle was music to our ears.

The Carnegie UK report on the CleverCogs system is an interesting read. That system is a perfect example of how technology can be used in the social sector to great effect. It is true that digital change has come around very quickly over the past few years, and that adapting to that change has been difficult for some people. It is important that we take advantage of the digital society, but in doing so we must ensure that no one is left behind.

The minister opened the debate by talking about three ways of achieving that—connectivity, accessibility and affordability. That is a sensible and fair analysis of what we need to do, but I would like to put things slightly differently. I think that the three things that people need are the following. The first is hardware, by which I mean infrastructure—physical access to devices, be it smart phones, tablets or computers, as well as connectivity via broadband or other means. That access does not need to be in the home; it can be in public spaces including libraries, schools and community centres, where such access is often available throughout Scotland.

However, access requires my second point—having the right skills to use the hardware. Much has been said about that today. The development of those skills might start at school, or even pre-school, and continue through college, university and professional development, but it also needs to include people who do not have access to those. That involvement could be achieved through community schemes, charitable organisations, the third sector and even—dare I say it?—Government-operated schemes.

We need to ensure that, truly, no one is left behind. In that respect, the more illustrative we can be in today's debate, the better.

Kate Forbes: Digital participation must be about more than essential skills. The digital participation

charter has secured from more than 500 public, private and third sector organisations a commitment to working together. What does the member see as being the role of digital companies?

Jamie Greene: The conversation around big digital companies is often simply about taxation or employment opportunities. The way that they have transformed our economies is immense, but they also have a fundamental role to play in how people communicate, learn and discover; they have a huge responsibility. I will not name platforms and organisations, but they know who they are and so do we.

The minister is right that they have a huge responsibility to understand that a large proportion of society is now using digital platforms not just to purchase goods but to access information, and to contact and interact with each other in ways that people never did before. How the big digital companies use that responsibility is key; some are clearly using it better than others.

In the short time that I have left, I will focus on the important issue of skills. We often talk about infrastructure in terms of connectivity alone, about whose responsibility it was or is, and about how much money should or should not have been spent. It is fair to say that infrastructure is incredibly hard to deliver in rural parts of any country, especially if we are to reach the sort of broadband speeds that we need in our rural and island communities. It is very technically difficult to deliver to those areas, which is admitted by all sides.

As I said in an intervention, however, the question is what people do with that infrastructure once they have it. If one fifth of the population do not have access to basic digital skills, there needs to be a serious conversation about how we will address that. More than 11 million people across the UK do not have the basic digital skills that they need. If the digital economy is the economy of the future, then surely that one fifth needs to be reduced to zero.

A Citizens Advice Scotland survey found that 50 per cent of all respondents could not do simple things including downloading, completing, saving or uploading electronic forms. We should be mindful of that when we think about how we develop online platforms to access public services such as benefits and welfare services, or health-related services. If people simply cannot download, complete and upload basic forms, and instead still rely on a paper-based approach or face-to face contact, it is clear that something is not working.

I want to quickly plug some of the good work that is being done in my part of the world. North

Ayrshire Women's Aid has been helping people to improve their digital skills in a number of ways. For example, it has helped them to access their universal credit journals and to job search. In one case, as a result of that support, a woman was able to access voluntary roles, and that work experience helped her to achieve paid employment.

It is extremely important that we think about why we need digital inclusion. Digitally excluded people have poorer health outcomes than others, they are lonelier and suffer more from social isolation, and they have fewer employment and educational opportunities. They pay more for essentials, they are financially excluded and they are at increased risk of falling into poverty. They also lack a voice and visibility in modern society.

In a democracy, thought must always be given to how Government services are delivered to people online and digitally. That sums up why systems such as CleverCogs deserve cross-party support. A good start has been made, but more needs to be done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stewart Stevenson. You have up to six minutes, and you must not go beyond that.

15:49

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I declare that I am a member of the Association for Computing Machinery, a member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, all of which have interests in digital inclusion.

The history of the subject goes back a very long way. The Romans communicated digitally across their empire nearly 2,000 years ago, via a system of hilltop signalling. We are now in the electronic world, but some of the things that we are interested in today go back a lot further than we might think. I go back beyond the birth dates of two of the participants in the debate so far, to 1964, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology artificial intelligence laboratory. People think that artificial intelligence is modern, but 54 years ago Joseph Weizenbaum produced a programme called Eliza that was designed to answer questions in such a way that the user could not tell whether it was a human or a computer that was answering them, and very successfully he did that, too.

From that point onwards, we have always said that it will be five years before artificial intelligence takes over from us, and it is still five years away today. In computing, things can take a good deal longer than we would sometimes imagine or like.

Picking up on what Donald Cameron said, I have gone to the Audit Scotland report and the exact words are not as he suggested. Audit Scotland says:

"The Scottish Government achieved its initial target to provide fibre ... access to 95 per cent of premises. Its more recent 'Reaching 100 per cent' ambition will be more difficult to realise."

I acknowledge that that is certainly going to be true.

Donald Cameron rose—

Stewart Stevenson: I really do not have time to take an intervention—I am sorry.

Audit Scotland also says that it might cost more than £600 million, but of course we will see how it turns out.

Mike Rumbles is not wholly wrong when he talks about some of the difficulties in Aberdeenshire. There and in Dumfriesshire, we have a huge number of exchange-only lines, which, with the current programme of technology, means that they cannot readily be attached to fibre.

Nearly 40 years ago, I said that the triumph of computers will be achieved when we no longer realise that we are using them—in other words, when we speak to them and they just do what we ask them. We will reach that point probably in my lifetime, and at that point digital exclusion will become a different animal. Many people cannot work keyboards and many people find the complexities of particular interactions with computers difficult to achieve. Right across Scotland, we absolutely need people to help them to achieve the access to the internet that matters to them, particularly those who are over 75, as 70 per cent of them do not use the internet, which is triple the Scottish average.

It matters economically, because it is estimated that when people use modern systems for their daily lives they save nearly £600 a year. Communication with friends and relatives in other villages, other parts of the island that we live on and other places around the world is now very electronic, too, and if people are denied that opportunity it is a huge loss in their lives.

For people with particular disadvantages, be they physical, mental or whatever, the computer can be a way out of those difficulties. I and two pals, Alasdair Macpherson and Robert Davidson, built the first home computer in Scotland in 1975, and a couple of years later we were able to adapt an Apple II computer for a quadriplegic ex-soldier who had had an accident in the tank that he commanded and was left totally crippled. All that he could move was his head. We were able to rig up a bit of kit, change the way the keyboard worked and develop something that he could hold

in his mouth to tap at the keyboard. Within two months, he was writing programs that he was selling. I felt terrific about that. Unfortunately, his health problems eventually overwhelmed him.

Today, we have much more powerful computers that can do so much more for us, so the exclusion can become wider than it was when there were only little computers. Those who master the new technology can stride off over the horizon and are much further away from those who have not been able to do so. We should recognise that the phones and computers that we use are vital to our world.

A couple of years ago, the computer firm Unisys said that it takes people an average of 26 hours to report a lost wallet, but only 68 minutes to report a lost cellphone. That tells us something about how important technology now is in our lives.

I think that Jamie Greene referred to 20 per cent of adults; it is 20 per cent of adults in the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of areas in Scotland who do not use the internet. For a host of reasons, those people are deprived of many things that the rest of us take for granted. We need to have people in libraries and other public spaces who can help others to access publicly available computers. I hope that, when the Government looks at the comments in the debate and at the opportunities from digital roll-out, it will consider such an approach for the future.

15:55

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, welcome Kate Forbes to her new post. Her constituency should inform her that all is not well with digital connectivity. I am not sure that it augurs well for the debate that the Government's motion cites a report that was not available in hard copy—far less digitally—when the motion was lodged this week. Perhaps that reflects the Government's digital policy—there are great aspirations but little delivery.

Since we previously debated digital inclusion, we have made little progress. The issues are the same—rural areas are being left behind, as are urban deprived communities. Sadly, that follows historical exclusion.

We had the opportunity to do something different with digital connectivity. We could have used it to bridge the social exclusion divide but, unfortunately, it appears to have deepened that divide. The Scottish Government did not have the same ambition for rural Scotland as for urban Scotland. The target of a 95 per cent reach for urban Scotland and a 75 per cent reach for rural Scotland starkly shows that lack of ambition. We are not at the forefront of the digital revolution; sadly, we are lagging behind.

The Government tells us that R100 will address that but, sadly, I do not believe that. People in the industry tell us that R100 will still not reach some communities. The little support that was available to rural communities has been withdrawn as we wait for R100. We are in a hiatus while the tendering process takes place. Surely that process could have been undertaken while the previous roll-out was running. Stopping the roll-out for any time is not good enough.

Stewart Stevenson: The member said that people in the industry tell us that R100 cannot be done. I recently met BT—I understand that it is one of the bidders, but not the only one—and was given absolute assurances that R100 can be achieved, although price is a different issue. Who says that we cannot reach 100 per cent?

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): BT.

Rhoda Grant: Indeed—BT. Many people in the industry say that the technology is not available to reach 100 per cent of the population. However, there are things that the Scottish Government could do now to make a difference. It could map fibre—especially fibre that was paid for by the public purse.

Under R100, the public purse will pay for new fibre to be laid on top of fibre that the public purse paid for. The Government needs to keep ownership of all the fibre that it has funded so that subsequent upgrades and roll-outs can use it. To save money and ensure that we use all products of public investment, the Government also needs to trace what was laid historically. It would also make sense to map privately owned fibre, to see whether it could be used to speed up the roll-out of broadband.

We need to give small communities access to affordable backhaul and ensure that R100 does not undermine that, because commercial rates are too high and prohibit community solutions. That is another thing that can be investigated now.

The roll-out must not compromise current community solutions. As an example, SSE has laid fibre for the Ministry of Defence in Applecross. An additional cable has been laid at the same time, and will be commercially available to bring superfast broadband to parts of Applecross. Applecross has its own broadband system—AppleNet. It is not superfast and it can be unreliable because of weather conditions, but it is there now, providing a service as cheaply as possible to the whole community. If a larger provider buys access to the new fibre, it will be able to provide fast, reliable and cheaper broadband to the easy-to-reach parts of that community. If that happens and those customers are lost to AppleNet, it may well become

unsustainable, meaning that most of the community will have no broadband at all. The public purse, through the MOD, is paying to put down that fibre, which has the potential to undermine a community's access to broadband. The community system should be given access to that fibre at an affordable price. Then it would be able to upgrade for the whole community and make the system faster and more reliable.

It is such areas that will benefit most from digital connectivity. Who would not want to live in such a beautiful place? However, employment in rural areas is hard to find. Better digital connectivity would allow people to work from anywhere and make it easier for new businesses to start up. Such connectivity could make businesses in those places and communities far more financially viable.

I have concentrated most of my comments on remote rural issues, as members would expect, given my constituency. However, as I said, unequal access to connectivity follows the lines of traditional inequalities. Those in deprived communities suffer the same issue with access as those in our remote rural communities: it is not commercially viable for private profit-driven companies to provide them with broadband because they cannot afford to pay for it.

We need to find solutions to those issues and make sure that those communities do not fall behind. We are a long way from equal access to connectivity, which is no longer a nice add-on: it is an essential service that we need to provide.

16:01

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): When I was a young graduate of computer science in the early 1980s, only a decade or so after the technology that took us to the moon was in place, we could still only dream of the possibility that everyone in the world could potentially contact, see and speak to anyone else in the world in real time, at any time.

"Potentially" is the key word, because although the technology is there to enable such an amazing possibility, people are not quite there in terms of their ability to access and use that technology. That is what I hope that the theme of the debate is about—bringing all our people along on this digital train journey so that no one is left behind at the station as the train speeds faster and faster ahead.

We need the technology to be up to the task, we need the connectivity to enable it all to work, we need skilled people to put it all together and make it easier for all of us to use, and we need Governments to think about how best to sell the tickets so that everyone can have a seat on the train, no matter what their circumstances are.

At this point, I make my usual plea for any of our young potential graduates of the future to think seriously about a career in software development. We are short of thousands of software developers in Scotland and good software is the key to the success of all this. It is heartening to see that the Government's digital strategy paper has that in mind—it is essential, in fact. Technology in isolation takes us nowhere, so we need people with the skills to enable the rest of us to use it easily. It is a wonderful career for young graduates to consider. There is the potential to work anywhere in the world—although I hope that they will work in Scotland. The work is never the same two days in a row and it is well paid, and it is a career that can last a lifetime.

We know that there are bigger vacancy rates in the digital economy than in other sectors, with fewer than four out of 10 businesses in Scotland reporting that they have the right digital skills in place to meet requirements, so the Government strategy is crucial in trying to help. The digital growth fund and the pilot project in Edinburgh to help businesses to scale up their digital capabilities will certainly help. I would like to see that pilot being extended to all parts of Scotland, including Ayrshire, since, as we know, it takes far too long for my constituents to get to Edinburgh on a real train, never mind on a digital train—but that is a debate for another time.

We need to see more young undergraduates and especially more young women choosing software degrees to make any of that possible. The number of people choosing those degrees is going up slowly and it is not going up fast enough yet.

In European terms—and without politicising the point too much—we know that the digital single market is fundamental to Scotland's place in a digitally competitive Europe. The single market is worth about €400 billion per year and supports hundreds of thousands of jobs. In my view, it is impossible to leave that market, despite the rhetoric that we hear. It is crucial that our Government finds ways to keep Scotland in that market, because otherwise we as a nation risk exclusion and isolation from it, and we cannot allow that to happen.

On wider inclusion issues, I am delighted to have convened for a number of years the Parliament's cross-party group on digital participation. The group has heard positive stories of how communities across Scotland have been embracing technology and trying to broaden its appeal and relevance to as many citizens as possible. We have heard from community broadband projects that are working well; housing

associations that offer innovative and affordable solutions for tenants; small businesses that rely on fast data access to reach out directly to a wider client base than they might otherwise be able to afford to contact; and from local initiatives across a number of councils that do great work in the important area of providing access to and demystifying technology, particularly for older citizens, many of whom remain sceptical and even suspicious about it.

My council in East Ayrshire is doing great work through its digital participation network to assess the skills gaps in communities wherever they are and to provide lots of support opportunities for everyone. The council knows the importance of reaching out and bringing people along on the digital journey that I mentioned.

We will probably never reach the end of the digital journey that we are so locked into in our modern society. New and ever more exciting technological achievements are bound only by our imagination. The value that our citizens see in all of that depends on our ability and willingness to make it easy for everyone to share the possibilities that come from it. The great Alan Turing said:

"We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done."

That is a wonderful reminder about the challenges ahead for all of us as we seek to build a digital society for all.

16:07

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, welcome Kate Forbes to her new role as a minister. Speaking as a highlander, it is good to have somebody in that role who will have shared the many frustrations that a lot of us in the Highlands and Islands will have felt when using the internet.

As we have heard, digital connectivity touches the lives of an increasing number of Scots in an ever-increasing number of ways. I welcome the Carnegie UK Trust's work in the area and the light that has been cast on those who have been left out. In a 2016 report, the trust set out some of its initial evidence about digital exclusion. We can see clearly the concentration of that exclusion in certain sectors of society as well as some of the consequences and outcomes of that. The issue has been a pressing one in the Highlands and Islands for some time, as the minister will be aware. For many communities in remote and rural areas of Scotland, digital inclusion remains little more than an aspiration.

The Carnegie Trust said:

"many of those groups who are currently digitally excluded could benefit disproportionately from the benefits of being online."

That is an important conclusion that is especially true in areas that are distant from public services, where there is a dependence on goods being delivered and where isolation can be a problem.

I will turn my attention to some of the affected groups. I am pleased that the motion touches on employability, as the evidence shows that digital inclusion is at some of its lowest levels at the lowest-paid end of the socioeconomic scale. There can be no doubt that digital skills are of huge benefit in finding good-quality work in our modern economy and are now invaluable transferable skills in a range of jobs. Increasingly, people look for jobs on the internet, and the online services that agencies such as Jobcentre Plus offer make finding jobs increasingly convenient.

In the Scottish Government's programme for government earlier this year, it committed to greater support for retraining, which I hope recognises to a degree that the nature of employment and careers is changing. However, if we reflect on how people access retraining opportunities and how they keep their skills up to date, the worrying conclusion is that, if the digital skills gap remains unaddressed, the gap in reskilling and adaptability in the labour market at the lowest end of the income scale will grow, too. An economy in which the lowest earners are excluded from those opportunities is not a fair economy.

Being connected can have advantages for older people, too. Many people will have read in the weekend newspapers that only 16 per cent of UK care homes have wi-fi access that is available to all residents—I assume that the figure for Scotland is broadly similar. Care homes use wi-fi in various ways to improve residents' lives, such as to bridge geography by arranging video calls between residents and their families. Demand in the sector will only grow, and older people who live in their own homes will also increasingly expect to have digital connectivity to provide entertainment and to power consumer devices. The impact is even more apparent in the provision of support to older people. In some cases, internet-connected monitoring devices can help people with dementia and allow them to live independently for longer.

My colleague Donald Cameron spoke about the educational work that utilises digital technology in Scotland's island communities, particularly in the Western Isles, where it shows how digital can support our local linguistic and cultural heritage as well as provide educational opportunities.

Parts of my region are heavily dependent on tourism, and an expansion of digital services can offer opportunities, whether in Speyside, Scotland's whisky capital in Moray, or the attractions of my home area of Orkney. The work to support small local businesses to get online

pays dividends and provides a low-cost avenue through which bodies such as VisitScotland can attract and inform visitors. Many businesses are small, particularly in island communities like Orkney and Shetland, and the barriers to fully embracing a digital society are higher for them. We must ensure that the Highlands and Islands are not at a competitive disadvantage.

I refer back to the words of the Carnegie Trust: it is in those communities that digital inclusion will have the greatest benefits, so I have been repeatedly disappointed that, when broadband roll-out takes place, they often appear to be at the bottom of the queue. That leaves a geographical concentration of digital exclusion. Indeed, we know well that the Highlands and Islands have many of the worst areas in the United Kingdom for connectivity—that is not a legacy to be proud of.

In March last year, the responsible cabinet secretary said that

"economic success demands that our ability to benefit from digital is not limited by where we chose to live or work".

That is a fine aspiration, but it is far from the experience of many of my constituents. As the Scottish Government looks forward to the future of its work on digital inclusion, it is clear that people face varying levels of multiple exclusion across many parts of Scotland.

The reality is that much of the expansion in digital inclusion has come from the private sector, as the growth in connected devices has been consumer driven. In the past 20 years, exploitation of the potential of digital technology has moved from the desktop into people's pockets, on to their televisions and even on to devices on their kitchen counter. Digital technology is becoming far more accessible, but an excluded minority remains challenging to reach. The first priority must be to make digital connectivity available. In my region, we have found ourselves lagging behind; it is clear that the timing of roll-out is vitally important.

Therefore, we should look not at challenges and costs but at the opportunities: the potential for economic growth, higher pay, reduced isolation, personalised public services and improved living standards.

16:13

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on a digital society for all, and I thank the minister for the opportunity to talk about the record of the Government on delivering digital participation, thereby providing better access to fair work and higher-wage jobs, which were a key priority for me in my election to Parliament.

Many members may think that they know all about broadband, but we need to see our grandchildren showing us how to access Peppa Pig or robot Transformers. I ask members to forgive me for an aside that sounded a bit like one by my friend Stewart Stevenson.

In an answer last week, the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, Paul Wheelhouse, outlined that the Scottish Government has repeatedly urged the UK Government to match Scotland's ambition of 30 megabits per second, rather than the 10 megabits that it has proposed, as the broadband universal service obligation commitment, which would help to deliver the superfast broadband connections that our rural communities need.

Indeed, Scotland is the only part of the U.K to have committed to extending superfast access to 100 per cent of premises, supported by an initial procurement that is worth £600 million. The minister said that despite numerous requests, and despite regulation of and legislation on telecommunications being wholly reserved to the UK Parliament, the UK Government has contributed a mere 3.5 per cent of that investment, with the Scottish Government committing 96.5 per cent.

Colleagues will therefore understand why I was perplexed, during a summer recess visit to my son's house in Aboyne in Aberdeenshire, by what I read in a letter to him from the local Conservative member of Parliament, Andrew Bowie. The first wrong thing that I noted was that Mr Bowie did not even have the goodness to put my son's name on the letter. In the letter, Mr Bowie stated:

"the overwhelming concern for those I spoke with were the changes to local bus services into Aberdeen and"—

wait for it, because this is where I laughed—

"the lack of broadband provision in the area".

Mr Bowie went on to state that he had been in

"constant communication with both Openreach and Digital Scotland with a view to receiving more information on when better provision will be provided".

My son's broadband and his access to FaceTime and telephone services are excellent. Perhaps Mr Bowie would have been better writing to his colleagues in the Conservative UK Government and asking them when they will help to foot the bill for the investment and, in his own words,

"when better provision will be provided".

I hope that Mr Bowie and his Conservative colleagues in Westminster and, indeed, in Holyrood will remember that the matter is reserved, and that they should get on with the day job and help this SNP Scottish Government to deliver for all of Scotland.

On the topic of remote and rural communities, it is clear that bringing accessible and sustainable wi-fi to remote and rural communities needs innovative ideas that will require us to support wider thinking about potential solutions. I have over recent months been engaging with a company that has ideas that are innovative and involve exactly the type of solution-based approach that we will require. Its idea is to have lamp posts, coupled with self-sustaining electricity through renewables, that would also act as wi-fi connection points for communities. That type of wider thinking is exactly what will be required if we wish to meet the challenges that we face in delivering digital inclusion for all.

The challenges are ones that this Government has recognised and is working to address, having just last year published its digital strategy, which set out how the Scottish Government intends to place digital at the heart of everything that it does, from reforming public services to delivering economic growth. That included the creation of the conditions that could lead to 150,000 jobs in digital technology across Scotland by the start of the next decade. As Willie Coffey said, jobs are the key focus of our work.

That work also involves ensuring that every premises in Scotland is able to access broadband speeds of at least 30Mbps by 2021, as I have already mentioned. All that takes place against a backdrop of funding and investment through a new digital schools programme, a new digital growth fund and a round of funding for community digital inclusion projects, and the expansion of Scotland's digital participation charter.

Closing the digital divide in Scotland will positively impact on social cohesion and will improve social and economic inclusion. That is a fact. It is a sad fact that digital inequalities are more likely to be experienced by people who are already disadvantaged according to other measures. Indeed, in Scotland, the digital divide remains in a number of dimensions, including age and socioeconomic deprivation. For example, 26 per cent of adults—more than one in four—who live in the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland reported not using the internet, compared with 16 per cent in the rest of the country. It is also concerning that 70 per cent of people aged 75 and over do not use the internet.

Closing the digital divide is critically important to the future and to creating a fairer Scotland. I am proud to support the Government, which is doing that.

16:19

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): The advance in technology is one of the biggest things that has happened in my lifetime. In 1981, I was a computer information systems student at Glasgow College of Technology. To get a computer program into the college mainframe, students first had to write the program out on coding sheets, which were then keyed on to cards with a keyboard operator. Before the program could be compiled, the cards had to be fed through into the mainframe. If there were any errors, we had to go through the process again. It is quite astonishing to look at how technology has advanced. Back in 1981, when people went on holiday they sent postcards home. When people go on holiday now, they can take photographs and share them immediately on Facebook or WhatsApp, and people back home and throughout the world can instantly see them enjoying their holiday.

The advance in technology is also great for people in education. There is a wealth of information on the internet that can help students and people who are simply looking to better themselves by acquiring more knowledge. As many members have said, technology saves people money. When people are purchasing goods and services, they can compare rates using the technology that is available.

It would be easy to sit back and bask in the glow of the tremendous advances that have been made in technology, and just to think that everything is fine. The reality, however, is that a lot is going on that means that people do not have access to that technology. In a council ward—Rutherglen Central and North—near where I stay, 28.26 per cent of children live in in-poverty households. Indeed, in Cambuslang and Rutherglen, more than 3,000 children live in in-poverty households. Many of those households do not have access to the sort of technology that members have spoken about in the debate.

That was brought home to me when, as part of the recent challenge poverty week, I visited the Whitlawburn hub, which is an excellent facility that provides IT support facilities to people who do not have IT access. A lot of the people there were locked out of IT—they simply could not afford computers, tablets or smartphones. They required IT accounts in order to access properly the benefits system, and some were using the hub to develop their CVs and to try to get back into work. The IT and CV support in the hub is very beneficial to the people who use the facility.

We should bear in mind the role that is played by big IT providers in excluding people from the digital world. A lot of them try to lock people into long-term contracts that involve substantial financial commitments. They also bundle up a number of facilities and try to lock people in, in that way. People can get locked into contracts that they cannot afford, and then they run into debt.

Others simply cannot afford a long-term and expensive contract.

Research by Harvard University has demonstrated that there is a real benefit in community-owned IT providers. Indeed, there is one near where I stay. West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative has set up its own communications co-op, which provides short-term bundles so that people can access technology for a week at a time. Since the co-op was established, internet access in the area has gone up from 39 per cent to 80 per cent. That shows the massive reach that a community-based IT facility can have.

A lot needs to be done to make progress. There are clearly major policy challenges in respect of the number of people who are in poverty, and the number of people who are doing two or three jobs and do not have enough money to access the facilities that we have been talking about. That is part of the wider debate on the budget that will take place.

I wish the new minister well in her endeavours, and I urge her to do more lobbying of big business IT providers to provide better and lower-cost packages in order to get more people into IT. We should also do more to support community solutions. We have made a lot of advances, but there is a lot still to be done.

16:25

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I welcome Kate Forbes to her new role and thank her for bringing this topic forward for debate.

I note with interest how much of the motion highlights the impact of digital technologies on people with a range of disabilities. That is important, because it recognises how technology has the capacity to transform lives. That is to be embraced and celebrated. New digital technologies, such as assistive technology, can allow people with disabilities to access work at all levels of employment. As we become a more digitally focused society, it is important to consider how technology can help people with disabilities, whether they have a physical disability or a learning disability.

Today, I will focus on one particular way in which technology has the capacity to improve the lives of dyslexic people, particularly while they are in higher education. Dyslexia Scotland estimates that one in 10 people is dyslexic in some way—that is more than half a million people in Scotland. Dyslexia is genetic and commonly runs in families. Although it is known as a learning difficulty, it has many associated abilities: dyslexics tend to be very good problem solvers, innovative thinkers and artistically or musically talented.

Research shows that an equal number of boys and girls have dyslexia, so it is not gender specific. Research has also found that UK entrepreneurs are five times more likely than the average UK citizen to have dyslexia. Despite that, learning can be very challenging at times, as the dyslexic way of thinking often does not fit in. In 2017, the organisation Made By Dyslexia produced research showing that nine out of 10 dyslexic individuals said that their condition had made them feel angry, stupid or embarrassed. The frustration that a dyslexic student can feel while at school or university can damage their self-efficacy—and by "self-efficacy", I mean the belief of the student or pupil in their ability to achieve and how that can make them aim less high in their work, which affects their grades. Among many other factors, a dyslexic student's frustration commonly comes from taking sometimes three times longer to read and comprehend a passage of text.

I will give members a simple example of how technology has the potential to transform the experience of dyslexic students in higher education. Online academic texts can be made available in dyslexia-friendly fonts. That is not an earth-shattering change and it does not require upheaval to make it happen. As education increasingly becomes available online, whether through modules or access to academic texts in digital libraries, there is new potential for education providers to make learning accessible in ways that were not previously possible.

The idea of creating a mechanism for books or articles to be read in a dyslexia-friendly font is not a new one and has already been adopted commercially. Perhaps one of the most significant adopters of dyslexia-friendly fonts is Kindle, as almost all Kindle books are available to read in such a font.

Microsoft Word provides the OpenDyslexic font for people to use on their computers at home or work, which means that if people download a document in Word rather than PDF format, they can manually change the font themselves. The United Nations allows its treaties and documents to be downloaded in Word rather than PDF format, which allows people to make appropriate changes if they deem that to be required.

The Scottish Government's digital strategy is promising. It highlights that digital technology should be at the heart of everything that the Government does, and it promotes cross-sector collaboration in the adoption of digital technologies.

I welcome consideration of the impact of digital technologies on people with a range of disabilities. I encourage those who work in our leading education sector to consider what changes can be made to help students with disabilities of whatever

nature to engage and contribute to the best of their abilities. Working in conjunction with digital libraries such as JSTOR, our Scottish universities have the capacity to make one small change that could have a transformational impact on the lives of dyslexic students.

It is important that we use technology to the best advantage possible. It is available and it can be used, and I very much support the direction that the Scottish Government is taking.

16:30

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, welcome Kate Forbes to her new role.

A digital society is a good thing and something that we are striving to become. However, until we become a digitally inclusive society, we will be failing. We need to be inclusive—that is the key word—of everyone in Scotland. The term "digital inclusion" means that people are able to access digital technology and, perhaps most important, understand how to use it.

Last night, I attended an event at which the minister spoke. I was left sitting there thinking, "I haven't got a Scooby about most of the things they're talking about." Someone can look at something and press buttons but, unless they understand how to use it, frankly, we will not have made much progress.

At a basic level, more and more is done online. We pay our bills online, we look at public policy online, we get application forms online and we do our shopping online. All those things are good in themselves. However, other members have spoken about the geographical issues and other problems that people face in accessing, and being included in, digital material.

I suggest that disabled and elderly people, wherever they live in Scotland, face a greater challenge than the rest of society does. The Centre for Aging Better found that the over-55s made up 94 per cent of non-internet users. That is a startling figure, and it is one that is likely to grow unless we address the problem quickly.

What can we do to address some of those issues? First, proper access is needed. Most of us have our computers at home and our iPhones in our pockets, but elderly and disabled people often do not have that option. Unless there is access to the equipment, we will simply fail. Even if someone has access to the equipment, they then need to have the confidence and the training to use it. That can often be a big challenge for people with disabilities and the elderly.

We can overcome some of those challenges. Computers can open up opportunities, particularly for disabled people, that simply were not previously available. For example, Dragon, which allows people to speak into a computer, opens up access to people who find it difficult to type or use a keyboard. We need to look at whether the right people are getting access to that software. Dragon has revolutionised the way in which I write emails and speeches and correspond with people. Rather than needing to type all the time, I simply speak into the computer. Unfortunately, often gibberish still comes out, but that is my fault, not the computer's. Such things are basic and comparatively cheap, but a lot of people in society simply do not get access to them.

There are good examples of engaging with older people, some of which we have heard about from the minister and others. The moose in the hoose project that is being run in care homes in Edinburgh is an information technology outreach project for older people who live in care homes. On a weekly basis, volunteers in five care homes in Edinburgh encourage and help people to use the internet, email and Skype. That gives older people whose families no longer live in Edinburgh a regular opportunity to catch up with children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.

There are challenges ahead and there are opportunities. The Governments north and south of the border need to work together. However, perhaps the overriding message is that we should not be scared of digital technology and that we should encourage people to use it, but they need to be given the training and the confidence to do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Colin Smyth to close for Labour—you have up to seven minutes.

Mr Smyth, you do not have your microphone on and your card is in upside doon. Just change consoles. [*Interruption.*] Please give Mr Smyth a spare card. It would happen in a digital debate, wouldn't it? We could not plan it. You now have six minutes, Mr Smyth.

16:37

Colin Smyth: I will not accuse anyone of switching off my microphone halfway through or even before I get started. It is usually at the end of my speech that the Presiding Officer cuts me off.

Today's debate—give or take the odd technological fault—has made clear the importance of digital inclusion. There has been real unity of purpose in seeing the barriers that far too many people in our society face when it comes to benefiting from the technological revolution. That revolution impacts on every aspect of society, and every aspect of our lives is changing as a result of digitisation.

In opening the debate and in the Government's motion, Kate Forbes highlighted the Carnegie UK Trust report "Living Digitally—An evaluation of the CleverCogs™ digital care and support system", which gives us a glimpse into the potentially transformative effect of digital inclusion on health and social care. The pilot showed an increase in digital participation among people who used CleverCogs and clearly illustrated the wider benefits of digital participation. The report suggests that the use of CleverCogs resulted in improved overall mental wellbeing, with participants recording higher average life satisfaction, increased happiness and decreased boredom; it also showed improved self-management of health conditions among participants, and some indicators suggested improved independence more broadly. The project also highlighted the help for those who work in the health and social care sector and showed that staff who used CleverCogs saved an average of approximately five minutes per visit in time spent on administrative tasks.

The report concludes:

"The system holds promise ... for reaching those with the most entrenched digital exclusion and improving their quality of life."

That is just one example of how utilising new technology and supporting digital engagement can help to deliver person-centred care and improve wellbeing in the health and social care sector. Emma Harper highlighted the attend anywhere initiative, which is another initiative in healthcare.

In communities throughout Scotland, such innovative, locally led work is taking place to improve digital participation and inclusion. The SCVO has done invaluable work to support such projects throughout Scotland. It has provided £1.6 million-worth of funding to 169 local projects and has received a commitment to tackle digital exclusion from 600 organisations from across the public, private and third sectors as part of its digital participation charter.

In my region, Trust Housing Association has been working with the SCVO to deliver the aims of the digital participation charter across its local services. One resident—a 78-year-old woman—who was initially sceptical about efforts to promote digital learning, now regularly uses her iPad and has said that it has reduced feelings of isolation and boredom. When another resident was having trouble accessing information on her iPad, although the staff were not able to help, a fellow resident managed to solve the problem. That illustrates how digital learning can not only promote independence but foster a sense of community.

Such modern, innovative projects have huge potential across a range of policy areas, and I welcome the Scottish Government's role in supporting them. However, as the debate has shown, that needs to be supported by the necessary infrastructure, and speaker after speaker highlighted the fact that, at present, that infrastructure is not yet fit for purpose.

We all agree with the aims of the R100 programme, which learns from the weaknesses of previous programmes in not setting minimum speeds for everyone. Patrick Harvie may be happy with his internet speed in the centre of Glasgow, where he seems to love nothing more than whirling around Google Earth, but if he visits many rural parts of my region the only whirling around that people have when it comes to broadband is the red circle on the screen when they try to load a Netflix programme but do not have the internet speed to do so. R100 aims to tackle that but, as Rhoda Grant highlighted, we are still waiting to see an overall strategy for delivering genuine 100 per cent coverage at the speed that we want; in particular, there are no details on the planned intervention scheme.

If 100 per cent coverage is possible, the Scottish Government needs to provide details of how that will be achieved and map out clearly its planned timeline of activity as soon as possible after the procurement process has concluded.

As the debate has highlighted, accessibility is not just a matter of coverage. If we are to genuinely advance digital inclusion, we must also consider how to improve affordability and ensure that everyone has the necessary skills to make use of the technology when it is available.

James Kelly highlighted the barriers that people in his area face but, crucially, he also highlighted the many local initiatives to break down those barriers and the need to expand those solutions. Bill Kidd highlighted that those with disabilities can face exclusion and he set out how technological initiatives can break down some of those barriers and transform the lives of those with dyslexia.

Jeremy Balfour spoke very personally about how technology has helped him to break down some of the barriers that he faces, even if none of that takes away from the fact that, as he said, he still talks "gibberish". Nonetheless, he provided a very positive example of how digitisation can be used to redress inequalities. The roll-out of R100 is important in ensuring that people who are on low incomes, those with disabilities and those who do not have access to the internet at broadband speeds are supported so that those barriers are broken down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well recovered, Mr Smyth.

16:42

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate today on behalf of the Conservatives. I, too, welcome Kate Forbes to her new ministerial role, which is a role that I am pleased to shadow. We have already had positive discussions, including those that go beyond who has the most beautiful constituency, and I look forward to having further positive meetings.

In the words of the founder of the World Economic Forum:

"We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before. We do not yet know just how it will unfold, but one thing is clear: the response to it must be integrated and comprehensive, involving all stakeholders of the global polity, from the public and private sectors to academia and civil society."

However, unless we take urgent action, the dawn of the digital age will not be coming soon to a small town near you. That is clearly true of my constituency, where the lack of reliable digital connectivity remains one of the biggest issues.

I do not often agree with Patrick Harvie, but in this case he is absolutely spot on. The issue is not the lack of superfast speeds, but the lack of reliability. We know that superfast fibre broadband will deliver much improved reliability and a network that we can depend on to deliver the information and the services that we need.

In debates in this chamber and elsewhere, we hear constantly about the speeds that the two Governments want to commit to. The reality is that people who are left out from the digital world do not care much about the commitment to speeds; they just want to know when they will be reliably connected. Right now, too many of our vulnerable and isolated people have little or no confidence or trust in their broadband network. Unreliable internet connection alone is a barrier to their even considering accessing the internet and its benefits.

I genuinely hope that the Government's R100 programme can be delivered by 2021. However, as has been said by other members and suggested by Digital Scotland, the Scottish Government faces significant challenges in delivering R100 within the timeframe. That said, the Scottish Conservatives welcome the motion and the Carnegie UK report that the minister referred to.

If we get it right for Scotland, everyone, wherever or whoever they are, should benefit from solutions in the blue light and justice sectors that will deliver better governance and automation and therefore speedier responses; and from improved choice and availability in education, moving from reliance on physical posts to digital channels. In health, benefit will come from better support for clinicians and from technology that encourages patient engagement. Improvements will also be derived from individually focused communications and transactions between councils and their citizens. Interactive solutions for social housing and care at home will bring more choice and independence and more face-to-face time to those who need it most.

The biggest benefit from digital inclusion will, of course, be felt by those groups who are currently excluded from participating in much of what the majority of people take for granted. Getting everybody on board, and getting those who need it most on board first, is therefore critical. That should be our overriding ambition.

Members have mentioned the Carnegie report in which CleverCogs is highlighted as a digital and social care system that helps those who have never used the internet or who do not have the technology skills, confidence or ability to use it independently at home. CleverCogs brings huge positives for many of its participants.

The SCVO reported that it is vital to have projects such as CleverCogs in place as we push for an inclusive digital society. As the SCVO said,

"One in five people lack essential digital skills."

It is equally worrying that almost half our businesses in Scotland identify gaps in their digital skills, with some 21 per cent of businesses identifying a significant gap.

We seriously need to push for more children to get involved in digital skills courses—a point that was not lost on the leading businesses that took part in last night's RBS techpitch 2018 event, which the minister attended.

Responses to Scotland's draft strategy on tackling social isolation reinforced the importance of inclusion. As it says in, "Analysing responses to 'A Connected Scotland' the Scottish Government's draft strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness",

"Digital technology can facilitate social connection, particularly where it links people to in-person activities or services. It was also viewed as beneficial for rural communities and disabled people as a way of overcoming geographical and physical barriers to social interaction."

Including everyone in the digital revolution is one of the biggest challenges that society faces. If we do not get it right, we run the risk of creating a further digital divide, not just in relation to connectivity but between the people who can benefit from our fast-approaching digital society and those who cannot do so. The problem is apparent in rural areas—my colleague Donald Cameron's amendment refers to that.

It is equally important that we ensure that everyone has the required skills to be able not just to utilise but to develop digital solutions. Education and training must start now and must include everyone—almost from the cradle to the grave. Digital inclusion will be the defining challenge of our age. Let us get it right.

16:48

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): I thank members who took part in the debate. At the outset of my speech, I will resolve the argument between Mr Carson and Ms Forbes: neither member represents the most beautiful constituency in Scotland; that privilege is entirely mine.

I welcome the speeches in the debate, which, by and large, demonstrated a great degree of consensus. I think that that comes from an acceptance by all members that, as Colin Smyth said and Rhoda Grant emphasised, access to digital services is, just like access to the utilities, an essential component of life.

I recognise that it is socially and economically imperative that we ensure that people have access to technology and infrastructure and also to the skills that they use to harness them. In that regard, it is important that we recognise the work to increase digital inclusion across the country. That work has been led by this Government, it involves the wider public sector and the private and voluntary sectors, it has taken place across the length and breadth of Scotland and we have seen significant progress on it. The latest available figures show that digital participation in Scotland has risen from just under 63 per cent in 2007 to 82 per cent in 2016. Over the same period of time, the gap in internet access between the lowest and highest income brackets decreased from 67 to 30 per cent. I say to Colin Smyth that, although I recognise that we have had great consensus, I thought that his amendment saying that the Scottish Government is failing to tackle digital exclusion is a little uncharitable, so I cannot accept it.

However, I can say that I recognise that there is still a challenge before us. As I have laid out, we have seen the gap in digital participation narrow, with better digital infrastructure and internet access. Over the past few years, we have seen a flatlining among those in the highest income deciles, largely because we have reached saturation point as regards access to the internet and to digital technology. The challenge now is for us to ensure that we bridge the gap between those who have such access and those who do not.

Jamie Greene said that the SCVO had identified as a concern the fact that one in five people in Scotland lack digital skills. Of course that is a concern, which is why the Scottish Government has laid out its digital participation strategy. One of the key players in responding to that challenge is the SCVO itself, with which the Scottish Government is working closely—as we are with registered social landlords and third sector organisations—to respond to that challenge. We are doing so because we recognise that they are in most direct contact with the people whom we need to involve in the process.

As has been said, the population in which we see the digital deficit at its most pronounced is older people. That is why the Scottish Government has introduced its let's get online campaign, which encourages older people to take the first steps to doing so and is supported by a wide range of promotional activity. In that regard we have made a lot of progress. There is more to do, and it will be done. Mike Rumbles spoke of the need for a meaningful process of education. Of course I agree with that, which is why, as part of our science, technology, engineering and mathematics strategy, we encourage people to pursue careers in digital by providing a variety of careers advice, information and guidance that they can access in schools. It is also why we are putting in place, in the school environment, a foundation apprenticeship in software and hardware. We are increasing the number of college and university student placements with employers in STEM curriculum areas and we also now have a graduate apprenticeship in software and hardware, to ensure that our education system is geared towards equipping people with the digital skills that they need.

Mike Rumbles: In addition to my point on education, my main point was that where there is a will, there is a way. I am trying to be helpful to the Scottish Government here. If it could bring forward the 100 per cent target to May, it would benefit tremendously, as would the people of Scotland. The Scottish Government would reap the rewards if it would do that, in accordance with page 9 of its manifesto.

Jamie Hepburn: I look forward to Mike Rumbles's new-found charitable attitude to the Scottish Government being the hallmark of every future contribution that he makes in the chamber. I assure him that I will take on the issue of infrastructure in a minute, because I recognise that it is important, but first I will pick up on contributions from a few other members, particularly Emma Harper, because she invited Kate Forbes to visit her region. I am happy to accept that invitation on Kate Forbes's behalf, and I can tell the chamber that she said it would be okay to do that.

Emma Harper also spoke of the need to utilise digital technology for better health management, and that is one of the other ways in which we can demonstrate the need to increase the digital competence of Scotland's population and to invest in that area, because great health benefits can be achieved through that approach. That is why we welcome the fact that there are now more than 2 million visitors in a single month to the NHS inform website. That is why we now have the attend anywhere video consultation service operating in the NHS Highland area, and why we have home and mobile health monitoring being used to inform self-management decisions by patients and to support diagnosis, treatment and care decisions by the professionals supporting them.

It was encouraging to note in the findings of the report that we are debating that, although social care was not part of the main study, CleverCogs's potential as a telecare device was welcomed. The City of Edinburgh Council has helped 15 people who wanted to change their method of overnight care, which has improved the service for them and has also led to savings for the local authority.

Bill Kidd spoke tellingly of the power of technology in supporting those with dyslexia, which was another reminder of the positive power of technological change.

Patrick Harvie: I may have been the only member who talked prominently about digital rights, but does the Government accept the basic point that I was making, that as we live more of our lives online we are going to maximise the benefits and reduce and manage any potential downsides only if digital rights are every bit as much a part of the Government's focus as digital participation? What will the Government do to address that agenda?

Jamie Hepburn: The short answer is yes, I accept that point. Work is under way, but time for this debate is short, so I would be happy to respond more fully to Mr Harvie if he wanted to write to me on the issue.

I turn to infrastructure, because there was understandably some discussion about it. Mike Rumbles invited me to comment and so did Donald Cameron. I want to place this in context, because it is important to do so. The digital Scotland superfast broadband scheme exceeded its 95 per cent fibre coverage target by the end of last year and it has benefited some 900,000 homes in the country. The point of saying that is to place it clearly in the context of infrastructure development, and I want to take the Highlands and Islands area as a specific example, because I know that Mr Cameron will be interested in it. Without that level of investment, coverage in the Highlands and Islands would have been just 21 per cent. There was no planned commercial coverage at all in Orkney, Shetland or the Western Isles, so it is only through the activity that we have engaged in that we now have the coverage that we do, although of course we need to go further.

That is why the R100 programme remains an area of concerted focus for us. Concern was expressed that we will not hit that target. I will be very clear about the manner in which we are delivering the contracts that we have put in place. The prioritisation of the areas in rural Scotland that we know must be targeted first because they will not be served commercially will be the focus of our activity, so we are very confident of hitting that target. If Mr Cameron or any of his colleagues have such concerns, they are of course welcome to raise them with us, but equally I hope that they will speak to their colleagues in the United Kingdom Government to express their concern that the UK Government is committing only 3.5 per cent of the £600 million of investment that we are leveraging into that infrastructure. That is a sign of this Government's commitment to the agenda, as is the range of activity that we have in place and that is under way to ensure that everyone in Scotland can benefit.

I will close by responding to Jeremy Balfour's point, which I agreed with. If we do not have a digitally inclusive society, we will have failed. I agree with that, Presiding Officer, and I make it clear that this Government does not intend to fail.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-14509.3, in the name of Donald Cameron, which seeks to amend motion S5M-14509, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a digital society for all, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-14509.2, in the name of Colin Smyth, which seeks to amend motion S5M-14509, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a digital society for all, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

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)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, 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)
McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 68, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-14509, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a digital society for all, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the benefits that digital inclusion can bring to everyone in Scotland; welcomes the findings, published on 29 October 2018, of the two-year research project, Living Digitally, commissioned by Carnegie UK, on the impact of digital technologies on people with a range of disabilities; acknowledges the strong evidence of the positive impact of digital inclusion on their wellbeing; recognises that a combined focus by government, the wider public sector and private and voluntary sectors is the most effective way of increasing digital participation, which in turn will increase educational attainment, provide better access to fair work and higher-wage jobs; supports effective, person-centred public services, such as the health and social care sector, to develop innovative solutions and enable Scotland to be a digital society for all; recognises that a lack of quality broadband connection can prevent digital inclusion, especially in remote and rural areas; notes the negative effects of the removal of high street banking services from local communities, regrettably leading to circumstances of digital exclusion, and calls for a comprehensive and sympathetic approach by the Scottish Government that acknowledges the huge advantages that digital technology brings to Scottish society, but also recognises the risks of excluding those who are currently unable to access such technology in their daily lives.

Export of Live Animals for Slaughtering and Fattening

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-13785, in the name of Colin Smyth, on a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter and fattening. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the Farm Animal Welfare Committee's review into the transportation of live animals exports from the UK; understands that in 2017 3,073 sheep, 5,595 calves and 661 cattle were exported from Scotland for either slaughter or fattening; considers that Scotland's reputation for high animal welfare standards is of huge value to the sector; is particularly concerned about the export of young male dairy calves on long journeys to Spain and Italy where they are fattened for beef or veal; recognises what it understands is widespread support for a ban on the exporting of animals for slaughter and for fattening, including in the South Scotland region, and the serious concerns raised by the export of live animals in relation to animal welfare, and notes calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter or fattening.

17:03

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank all members from across the chamber who signed my motion so quickly to secure cross-party support and make today's debate possible.

I am sure that, at some point during the debate, we will be told that the export of live animals is an emotive subject—good, because so it should be. Animals are not cargo; they breathe, they think and they suffer. Sadly, that can often be the case for animals that are subjected to live export. Unweaned calves that are just a few weeks old are taken from their mothers, not just from one end of the country to another, but on to a different country or countries where we have no say and no control over the conditions that they are kept in for their short existence before they are slaughtered.

I am sure that every member in the chamber shares the belief that livestock should be reared and ultimately slaughtered as close to the farm as possible, but the reality is that, in 2017 alone, hundreds of cattle, more than 3,000 sheep and almost 6,000 calves were exported from Scotland on journeys of up to 135 hours. That was not for breeding or for them to be reared elsewhere; it was for them to be kept for a few hours or days just to be slaughtered, or for fattening, which in effect is for slaughter.

The recent BBC "Disclosure" documentary on the issue revealed the role that Scotland plays in the trade, with P&O Ferries exporting thousands of

calves, some of which were as young as three weeks old, out of Cairnryan port in my South Scotland region with the full support of the Scottish Government. In response to the documentary's findings, P&O Ferries, to its credit, rightly made the decision to end its involvement in the trade, leaving the Scottish Government increasingly isolated in its continued defence of the practice.

Now, the calves that would, presumably, have been exported through Cairnryan are being transported to Ramsgate in Kent and shipped across the channel from there—again, it seems, with the support of the Scottish Government. Many members will remember that Ramsgate was the location of an appalling animal welfare incident in 2012. A single lorry carrying more than 500 sheep was declared unfit to travel. Forty-three sheep had to be euthanised due to injury, six fell into the water and two drowned. The local council put in place a temporary ban on exports but, following an injunction by the shippers, it had to be lifted on the grounds of European Union and United Kingdom legislation.

Since then, there have been growing calls for a change to the law to secure a permanent ban. A year ago, Theresa Villiers introduced in the UK Parliament a private member's bill to secure a ban. Ultimately, it was withdrawn in February on the basis that the UK Government was considering such a ban. In April, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Michael Gove, declared that the UK Government was consulting on what it described as

"all options for future improvements of animal welfare during transport ... including the potential ban on the live export for slaughter."

How serious the UK Government is on the matter remains to be seen. However, the Scottish Government's immediate response was disappointing. The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy, Fergus Ewing, declared:

"The Scottish Government will ... not support the banning of live exports of livestock".

He went on to say:

"Any such move would potentially do substantial harm to our quality livestock sector, not least farming in the Western Isles, Shetland and Orkney, as well as trade with Northern Ireland."

Let us nail that myth. A specific ban on the export of live animals from the UK would have no impact on the ability of farmers in our island communities to transport their livestock to the mainland, so the cabinet secretary's view is not correct. Such a knee-jerk reaction undermines Scotland's hard-earned reputation for always being at the forefront of the highest animal welfare standards, which is so important to the livestock sector.

Scotland does not and cannot compete on the basis of a race to the bottom on animal welfare. We have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, but we should always aim to do better and continue to build our reputation.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): Does Mr Smyth recognise that, quite rightly, the transportation of animals, whether it is for export outwith the UK or intra the UK—from the northern isles to Aberdeen, for example—must be done in accordance with the same high animal welfare standards, and therefore to suggest that, somehow, the two issues are entirely different is not factually correct?

Colin Smyth: What is not factually correct is to say that a specific ban on the export of live animals outwith the UK would impact on the ability of farmers in our island communities to transport their livestock to the mainland. It is a fact that, as soon as an animal leaves these shores and is taken to another country, the Scottish Government loses all control over what happens to it. It is fine to talk about welfare standards in Scotland, but as soon as animals are outwith Scotland, we have no control. That is the point of this evening's debate, and that is the point of banning the export of live animals.

We have some of the highest welfare standards—there is no question about that—and we need to continue to build our reputation as a producer of ethically sourced meat and not argue that, if we have a ban on exports from the UK, Scotland should opt out of that, as Fergus Ewing seems to imply. That would be a race to the bottom.

To be fair, I note that, since those comments were made, we have seen a more measured response from the Scottish Government, which has indicated that it will consider the outcome of the UK Government's consultation. However, the Scottish Government argues that it has not yet found evidence that livestock that is exported from Scotland to other EU countries is then exported beyond them. Notwithstanding the fact that welfare standards are not as rigorously enforced in some other EU countries as they are in Scotland, once the animals leave Scotland, their future is entirely out of our hands. Any additional journeys, the conditions that they face and the circumstances in which they are killed are all out of our control.

If the Government believes that the transport of Scottish livestock across the world in poor conditions is unacceptable, it cannot continue to support a system that allows that to happen. Scotland should lead the way in making the case for an end to live exports and should set an example for others.

I fully understand that there are heartfelt concerns about the impact that a ban could have on the livestock sector. The lack of a market for veal in the UK has often been cited as a reason for the export of baby calves, but we should be working with the industry to find solutions, not finding excuses for inaction.

During the debate, others will argue for the development of ruby or red veal in Scotland as a high-value, high-welfare Scottish delicacy, instead of Scottish calves being treated as a waste product. We should also consider ways to better support ethical and environmentally friendly farming, in a way that ensures that no farmers are put at a disadvantage if they make positive animal welfare choices.

The UK is only 75 per cent self-sufficient in beef, so the export of young calves is by no means a necessity. There is scope to develop a new approach that supports greater cohesion between the dairy sector and the meat sector.

In my home region of Dumfries and Galloway, David and Wilma Finlay are leading the way in ethical farming and have rejected the premise that calves should be immediately taken away from their mothers. They let calves stay with their mothers for longer and have found that prioritising animal welfare in that way has not only resulted in healthier livestock but proved more financially viable than was first thought, because of the significant improvements that it makes to productivity and lifespan.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Colin Smyth: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be quick.

Alex Rowley: Does the Government need to do more to support farmers to develop the ethical farming that the member describes?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Colin Smyth to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Colin Smyth: Alex Rowley makes a vital point. The Government is considering what will replace the common agricultural policy, and we should put animal welfare and environmentally sustainable food production at the heart of the future policy.

I have great faith in Scotland's agriculture sector. In the debate about post-Brexit support, we have seen that the sector is pragmatic and, if anything, it has led the way while us politicians have stumbled behind. The sector is also adaptable. If we set the framework and give the sector time and support, it will deliver.

However, we must show leadership, listen to our constituents and stop coming up with excuses not to do the right thing. That means that we must consign to the history books, where it belongs, the practice of exporting animals for slaughter and fattening and that we must continue to build Scotland's fine reputation as a food producer of high quality and high animal welfare standards.

17:12

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will declare an interest. My family used to be involved in a dairy farm and, with my family, I have a herd of pedigree Simmental cattle, which we have had since 1972. I was an agricultural consultant for 12 years, and I have a degree in land management and a diploma in farm management. I have had hands-on experience of farming since I was about 16. I therefore like to think that I come to the debate with a degree of knowledge.

First, I will deal with some ground rules. I know of no farmer in Scotland or any other country who wants their stock to suffer; farmers will not allow that to happen. All farmers understand that brand Scotland is important to Scotland and that we all need to protect it. All farmers in Scotland believe that we have some of the highest welfare standards in the world, which we are—rightly—proud of. Our animal transport regulations are commendably strong, which I can say having passed the relevant tests to allow me to transport animals.

Why do we export animals from Scotland? We do so for breeding. I freely admit that some of my stock bulls have gone to Europe, Ireland and beyond. Some animals go abroad for fattening. However, there is no point in sending them abroad purely for slaughter because, to be brutally honest, it is cheaper to transport them on the hook than on the hoof.

What numbers are we talking about? We do not really know what each export licence does, because licences do not specify the exact use. For cattle, we are probably in most cases talking about breeding livestock or about calves for fattening. With calves, we are talking mainly about dairy calves.

Let us look at the dairy industry. Whether we like it or not, there is a 50 per cent chance that calves that are born naturally will be male and a 50 per cent chance that they will be female. Sadly, male calves are not required in the dairy industry and—let us be brutally honest—they are not suitable for the high-quality beef that we produce in Scotland. That beef industry is based on specific breeds including Aberdeen Angus, Charolais, Limousin, Simmental and, of course, native breeds including the shorthorn. They have been bred for generations for their high food-to-

muscle conversion rates and because they are quick to mature. That is the high-quality meat production that we are so proud of in Scotland. They are the very traits that dairy calves, that are bred for milk and not meat production, do not have.

A sensible comparison would be that of a weightlifter with a sprinter. Beef cattle will take 12 to 18 months to slaughter. The margin on each animal varies between £100 and—if we are very lucky—£300 excluding subsidy, depending on the system, the timings and the price that is achieved. That is not much for the investment—the entire amount of money that farmers put into it—and it takes no account of the fixed costs that farmers must also face.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): As Edward Mountain will know, there is a tremendous market for veal in continental Europe. There is not so much of a market here but, in the interests of the producers, the Scottish Government could help to develop that market.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If Edward Mountain could take us up to five minutes, that would be good.

Edward Mountain: I have some concerns about white-veal production; it is not something that sits comfortably with me, as a farmer. If other countries want to do it, that is a decision for them to make. It is not something that a lot of farmers here want to do.

I was talking about dairy calves. We have got to the stage at which beef from Friesian and Holstein cattle will never compete with the quality or financial return from beef cattle. They are not hardy animals; they need to be kept in in the winter. The gross margin on a Friesian bull, if it is being fed, might be as little as £20, which is not very much.

We have to look for a solution: let us be honest—we have to have a solution because we will continue to use milk. We can reduce the risk of getting male calves by using sexed semen, which does not work every time, but I would encourage it. The other sad alternative would be to destroy male calves at birth. That is something that farmers find particularly difficult because they want to find a use for their animals. We could export the animals to units that have the same standards as us, which I believe we are doing in many cases of export to Europe. I say to Colin Smyth that there might be an argument for not allowing those units then to export them on to countries that do not have the same abattoir standards as we have in the United Kingdom. That might be worth looking at.

However, before we decide what we think is morally right, let us look at what is possible and then work out what we are going to do. I am afraid that moral indignation about exporting calves does not sit right with me, because I know that it is done in the most humane way possible. There are many people making unfeasible demands on the industry, which will have huge unintended consequences. We must be wary of that before we act further.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will be a bit stricter about timing with the rest of the speakers. Ruth Maguire is next.

17:18

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Animal welfare is an emotive topic; it is an important topic that provokes strong opinions on both sides of the debate, and it is one on which my Cunninghame South constituents regularly make their views known to me. They tell me of their concern about puppy smuggling. They write to express their opposition to snares, stink pits, mountain-hare culls and raptor persecution. They tell me about their disgust that there are adults in this day and age who think that watching a pack of dogs tear a fox to shreds is sport, and they express their shock that fox hunting is still not banned. Many have written to me because they are distressed by the images that they have seen of the worldwide phenomenon of animals having to endure long journeys only to be slaughtered at the journey's end.

I therefore thank Colin Smyth for securing the debate on banning export of live animals for slaughter or fattening. I say at the outset that I am sympathetic to calls from OneKind, Compassion in World Farming and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to end all long-distance live transport of animals for slaughter. Animals are sentient beings that feel pain and stress in the same way as we do. There is no escaping the fact that animals that are transported in cramped conditions with insufficient water supplies, uncontrolled temperatures and inadequate rest periods will suffer.

As I mentioned, transportation of animals for slaughter is a worldwide phenomenon; it is not unique to Scotland. Compassion in World Farming reports that each year millions of live farm animals are transported thousands of miles for slaughter, or to places where they will be fattened for slaughter. The Scottish Government has stated that no one is comfortable with the issue of male dairy calves being exported. The commercial pressures on the dairy industry are huge and require maximum lactation and production from dairy cows. Male calves have no value in the process, so the majority are exported for fattening in Spain and then moved on for slaughter in north Africa. We simply cannot guarantee that that will

be done in compliance with the welfare standards that apply in Scotland.

I am glad that the Scottish Government is supporting ethical dairy farming, as Colin Smyth mentioned. I hope that the Government will support other farmers to transition to a more ethical model of farming. I acknowledge that animals are transported for a variety of reasons and that those journeys are an essential part of business for livestock owners and crofters; I accept that livestock production is an important part of the rural community in Scotland. Jobs and the economy are important, but that does not diminish the fact that the long-distance transportation of live animals is a serious animal welfare issue, and that the people whom we represent continue to raise concerns about it.

The minister, Mairi Gougeon, has inherited many of the animal welfare issues that I mentioned at the start of my speech. I have watched her respond to questions on them with sensitivity, care and professionalism. I have promised my constituents that I will keep a keen eye on those matters and do whatever I can to find solutions to their concerns. I trust that the minister will ensure that our Scottish National Party Government will show, by its actions as well as its words, just how committed it is to welfare of all animals.

17:22

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Colin Smyth for bringing the issue to Parliament for debate. He is strongly committed to bettering animal welfare standards in Scotland, and a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter or fattening would be an important step forward. It is Scottish Labour policy.

As my colleagues have described, the reality of live exporting for those purposes is that it often involves very young unweaned calves that face journeys of significant length and often in conditions that, as farm animals, they are not built for and should not be subjected to. As my colleague Ruth Maguire said, they are sentient beings. Members mostly agree that it is a distressing thought, so surely we should agree that there must be a positive solution.

In answer to a topical question on 11 September, the minister stated that the scenes in the BBC documentary on the issue "shocked" her. She went on to say that everything that the documentary showed was in line with animal welfare standards. In my view, if Scotland's legal standards allow for practice that is shocking, the Government cannot in good faith claim a commitment to animal welfare.

Cows that are bred for maximum milk production are of course less useful for beef production, but there are pioneering systems that use herds for both purposes. As Colin Smyth described, using larger cows for dairy and breeding them with beef bulls produces calves that can be reared for meat, thereby addressing the difficulties that force farmers to export live calves.

Edward Mountain: Will the member give way?

Claudia Beamish: I will give way very briefly, because I have only four minutes.

Edward Mountain: Breeding dairy cows with bull beef produces a completely different animal. It has been tried with Simmentals and Friesians, but it does not really work. Surely the best approach is to produce an animal that is designated for what it is supposed to do, which is to produce milk.

Claudia Beamish: I am not a farmer and Edward Mountain is, but I will go on to develop the arguments that I have seen in certain places, and I hope that he will listen to them with care.

As that approach develops, it would address the difficulties that force farmers to export live calves, and it would also be a solution to the greenhouse gas emissions that are produced by suckler beef— an advantage that the Government would be foolish to disregard.

Two examples of the ethical farming of cows can be found in my region of South Scotland, which is fantastic. The sight of the calves at David and Wilma Finlay's farm in Dumfries and Galloway warmed the cockles of my heart. The Finlays describe their system as "deliberate deintensification" that approaches the farm as an integrated food system. Above all, they treat their land, animals and workers with respect. Peelham farm in the Borders rears organic produce and has an on-site butchery. It operates successfully under the simple philosophy of "sustainable self-reliance". Scotland's agricultural policy could learn a lot from those inspiring examples.

Let us be positive tonight, even about Brexit for once. Brexit is an opportunity to rethink our farming system for the benefit of farmers, our climate change ambitions and our animal welfare standards. If we change practices in farming, we will need to enable farmers to adapt. I would welcome comment from the minister on the suggestion of funding to support beef and dairy farmers to transition to farming systems that do not require live export as an uncomfortable truth and to develop suitable herd-breeding programmes.

Just as the ethical dairy project in South Scotland has done, we need to reimagine agriculture as a whole system that combines the needs of production with ecosystems, social

systems and animal welfare standards. An agroecological approach would mean that newborn calves would not be considered a useless by-product; instead, we could develop a system that would maintain the highest standards of animal welfare. Such a shift would truly be in the best interests of farmers. I understand that agroecology could mean that the productive life of the cow could be doubled, cutting the need for antibiotics by 90 per cent and bringing more people into jobs on the farm.

Edward Mountain: Oh, come on!

Claudia Beamish: Some members may laugh, but there is clear evidence, which they might like to go to see. Clearer provenance could also help to repopularise veal in public opinion. Beyond that, the approach would bring a much-needed reduction in the agricultural sector's greenhouse gases, as beef and dairy herds would become one herd. It is vital that the Government works with the industry on those issues to hear the concerns and support the sector to shift to more environmentally friendly farming, and that it bans the live export of animals for fattening and slaughter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Everyone will get their say at the appropriate time.

17:27

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Colin Smyth for this timely topic for debate. My views on the inhumane transport of live calves on six-day journeys to their slaughter in Spain and beyond are well known. I have raised the issue repeatedly in the chamber and directly with the Scottish Government since the start of this year, when the cabinet secretary felt the need to express his opposition to a ban to the BBC, rather than to Parliament.

P&O Ferries' announcement that it would finally enforce its policy on stopping the shipping to Ireland of animals that are intended for fattening or slaughter was very welcome, though long overdue. However, we should not kid ourselves into thinking that the trade is over—live exports of young calves from Scottish farms continue as we speak. Earlier this month, footage was released that showed about 200 young calves heading for the port of Ramsgate in Kent, where they boarded a Latvia-registered private ferry that headed for Spain. Identity tags on the calves showed that they had originated in Scotland and some were as young as two weeks old. We are shipping lorry loads of unweaned animals to their deaths.

I have not been able to establish how much of Scotland's live export trade has been diverted via Ramsgate, and I would welcome any update that the minister is able to provide tonight. Without a commitment from the Scottish Government to at least consider a ban, it is clear that this cruel trade—and the suffering that goes with it—will continue under the radar. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ran a UK-wide consultation over the summer on a live export ban, which I hope my Conservative colleagues welcomed at the time.

The UK Government has made it clear that a ban could still be the outcome of the consultation. Therefore, instead of pressurising a ferry company to circumvent its own policies and begin accepting live exports again, the Scottish Government should be spending its time working with its Westminster counterparts to address the glaring and urgent concerns about animal welfare.

We have a rare opportunity to update welfare standards that the European Commission itself has admitted show poor performance and in relation to which there is poor compliance. The current standards were set more than 12 years ago, before the sentience of animals was legally recognised and, since then, the scientific and veterinary evidence has repeatedly stated that we should avoid transporting young calves as much as possible. We should be embracing with both hands this opportunity to consider a live export ban, not picking political arguments for the sake of it.

The cabinet secretary says that he does not want to do anything that creates further challenges or difficulty for the farming sector. I suggest that having the poorest animal welfare standards in the whole of the UK when it comes to live export transportation would be a significant disadvantage in terms of the reputation of our farming sector.

If we are going to promote and support a dairy industry in Scotland, we have to be prepared to deal with the male offspring in an ethical and humane way. That means channelling resources into calf-at-hoof dairying, making it standard practice that calves stay with their mothers until weaning. It means investing in a network of local and mobile abattoirs, and it means investing just a fraction of the millions that we spend each year on food marketing schemes into creating a sustainable market for rosé veal and beef. We could start right here in Parliament by switching our milk supply to an ethical calf-at-hoof dairy and putting rose veal on our restaurant menus. I am pleased that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body is investigating that suggestion at present, which might mean that Edward Mountain will have an opportunity to taste those items for himself.

Leadership needs to come not just from the bottom but from the top. It is time for the Scottish Government to clearly state its position. Will it get behind the 73 per cent of voters who support an export ban, the ethical dairy sector and the scientific evidence that says that the current

practice has to stop? Alternatively, will it continue to resist change at all costs, painting Scotland as a nation that puts cheap high-volume production ahead of sustainability, ethics and animal welfare?

17:32

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): When Christine Grahame asked a parliamentary question on the issue earlier in the year, I was heartened to hear Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy, confirm that there are no live animal exports for slaughter from Scotland. The minister confirmed that again to me during a later meeting that I had with him. Following that meeting, I had a meeting with representatives of Compassion in World Farming, who told me, contrary to what the minister had led me to believe, that 5000 calves were exported from Scotland to Spain, via Northern Ireland, for fattening and slaughter, and that some of those animals had been taken to countries outside the EU, where slaughter facilities and methods are not of the highest standard.

I wrote to Fergus Ewing about that, and, on 7 June, I received a letter from him, which said:

"I am disappointed that you were surprised to learn that around 5,000 calves are exported annually to Spain for fattening and production".

No doubt "production" is the euphemistic term for "slaughter". I suddenly realised how naive I had been, even after 14 years in this Parliament: I had actually taken Fergus Ewing's response to me at face value.

It is clear that Fergus Ewing did not say anything that was not true. He had just been clever with his statements. In this context, I am not being particularly complimentary when I use the word, "clever". I have to ask whether that is really the best way for a cabinet secretary to respond to MSPs who raise this important issue. I will be very wary about what Fergus Ewing says in the chamber in the future.

As others who have spoken tonight do, I firmly believe that we must move to ending export of live animals for slaughter. That move should be industry-led. Our agriculture industry relies on public support. If we lose that public support, we risk damaging the quality of brand Scotland.

I might have misunderstood Edward Mountain, but I got the idea that, as a farmer, he is somewhat sceptical about tackling the issue, which is quite disappointing. On a previous occasion in the chamber, I said that public perception is important. At that time, I was surprised that some members felt that that was not the case, and seemed instead to be more concerned about pointing out what they felt were inconsistencies in a recent BBC television programme on the subject.

It is really important that we promote a commercial market for young calves in order that we can end export of those animals. That is the way forward; simply calling for a ban is not. The industry must come up with a solution, with help from the Scottish Government. If we are to move forward and satisfy everyone, that is what will be successful.

We want a situation in which new markets are developed, farmers make profits and animal welfare issues are properly addressed. The answer lies in encouraging development of the veal market. All our efforts and those of the industry should be focused on that. That is where the Scottish Government could help. I hope that the minister, in summing up, appeals to the industry and indicates that the Scottish Government will support it in finding a market for young calves. That would be the most comprehensive solution.

17:36

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Colin Smyth for securing the debate, which gives us an opportunity to discuss an important subject. He used the word "emotive". In my notes for the debate, I have written that this is an extremely emotive subject, and one that we should approach in a measured, educated and evidence-based way.

Although I do not have Edward Mountain's knowledge or credentials, I grew up on two dairy farms, so I am familiar with the issue of male bull calves, which is important to people in Scotland. My dad used to say, "They werenae worth that much." Nevertheless, we should look seriously at the economic aspects of keeping bull calves or sending them elsewhere.

I wanted to amend the motion, because the Government has expressed its preference that animals be killed as close to their farm of origin as possible. The motion says that in 2017,

"3,073 sheep, 5,595 calves and 661 cattle were exported from Scotland",

but I was told yesterday by my contact at NFU Scotland that 2,700 of the 38,700 male dairy calves that were registered in Scotland were transported, so there are some interesting numbers that might not reflect reality. Many dairy farmers whom I have spoken to locally move their bull calves to other farms in Scotland to be reared, so I would like to see some figures that accurately reflect what is happening.

In the past two decades, there has been a 34 per cent reduction in the number of abattoirs

across the UK. I would be interested to hear about any work that the Government has been engaged in on mobile abattoirs. I have been doing some research on that and, in the past two years as parliamentary liaison officer to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, I have engaged with many dairy farmers on that issue, among others. I have visited many dairy farms across the south-west of Scotland and the issue of transportation of animals over long distances has been raised. The welfare of animals in transit is a key issue, irrespective of whether that journey takes place over land or sea. I would be interested in further discussion about the model of mobile abattoirs, which are currently in use in Sweden, Norway, France and Germany—our European neighbours—and the United States.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Does Emma Harper agree that if the Government was fully committed to the evidenced fact that animals are sentient beings, it would move as quickly as it could to ban the export of live animals?

Emma Harper: I am aware that research is currently being conducted by the Scottish Government on the evidence and science. Decisions will be made based on evidence, rather than being snap judgments. We should always look at the science and evidence so that we can make informed decisions.

I return to the mobile abattoir issue. Some members have commented that abattoirs are more ethical. They operate in accordance with strict animal welfare rules and regulations, and reducing stress on animals might be a factor to consider. There is much more detail on that issue, which would require another debate. Time is short today.

Yesterday, I spoke to Gary Mitchell, who is the vice-president of NFU Scotland, which is absolutely committed to engaging on the issue. He will attend a meeting tomorrow to discuss the issues and, following that, I will seek to learn about the discussion at that meeting from Gary. I take the opportunity to support NFU Scotland's call for any decision on transportation of animals being made on the basis of evidence and science. I urge the Scottish Government to explore the possibility of mobile abattoirs, which might benefit everybody, including with regard to the issue of transporting live animals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Peter Chapman to speak, I note that there are still two other members who wish to speak, so I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

17:41

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): I note my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business and as a member of NFU Scotland. In my farming business, we had a dairy herd for a long number of years. We do not have it now; we have a suckler cow herd.

I echo the sentiments of my colleague Edward Mountain, and support Emma Harper's amendment; I hope that all members in the chamber also support it. It is important that we back the continuation of live animal exports when necessary. We must back the Scottish livestock industry and our farmers, the vast majority of whom see live animal exports as an important option, which must always be done to the highest standards.

The transportation of live animals for export from Scotland should not be used as a political pawn. We all agree that we want the best animal welfare standards for our stock from birth to slaughter, and the animal welfare regulations are there to ensure that we maintain those standards for the small number of stock that require to be exported.

Every farmer wants their animals to be slaughtered as close as possible to where they were born, but that is not possible in some of Scotland's most remote rural areas and, in particular, on our islands. The recent closure of Orkney's slaughterhouse is a prime example of the difficulties that farmers face in remote locations. With no local slaughterhouses, transferring livestock to the mainland for fattening or slaughter is the only option. If we ban exports to the EU—26 miles across the Channel—how can we argue that farmers in Shetland can continue to export livestock to Aberdeen, which is 10 times further in distance? We cannot close that door—it would be the end for livestock farming in our island communities.

Colin Smyth: Does Peter Chapman accept that the point of the ban on the export of live animals outwith the UK is that, once they leave the UK and reach another country, we no longer have control over their welfare or what happens to them? In the UK, we have control over welfare standards, so nobody is proposing that we ban the transport of animals from the islands to the UK mainland. It is just a ban on taking live animals outwith the UK, where we no longer have control. If the UK Government, which is carrying out a consultation

on the issue, proposes a ban for the rest of the UK, is Peter Chapman seriously saying that Scotland should exempt itself and have a different policy?

Peter Chapman: Scotland could have a different policy. It is okay for Mr Smyth to say that nobody is suggesting that we should not shift livestock off the islands, but some people would suggest that, if we ban exporting live animals across the Channel, that would be the next logical step.

The NFUS has stated that, although live exports are a

"very small part of the Scottish trade, the option of well managed and regulated exports should be retained".

[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Chapman. I ask members who are intent on shouting at each other across the chamber to press their buttons; I will give them a short time to speak if they wish.

Peter Chapman: What NFU Scotland said is particularly important as we move closer to Brexit. At this crucial time, the last thing that we need is to close down potential export opportunities to mainland Europe. Many Scottish farmers are already struggling, and the latest farming income figures show just how poor returns are for the farming industry. The last thing that we need is to put in place another economic disadvantage.

There are many ways in which Scotland can continue to improve our reputation as one of the best countries in the world for animal welfare standards, without placing a ban on live animal exports; we can continue to back farm assurance schemes and link farms, transporters, markets and abattoirs in order to ensure the highest animal welfare standards right along the chain. Ensuring the rigorous enforcement of the legislation is the way forward.

For many, this is an emotive debate that was prompted by the BBC Panorama programme, which chose to sensationalise and try to show the trade in the worst possible light. It was, in fact, a disgraceful programme that lacked balance and even the most basic objectivity. Its sole intention was to damage our reputation for high animal welfare standards.

Claudia Beamish: Will the member take an intervention?

Peter Chapman: I am closing.

Ruth Maguire's assertion that calves are exported to north Africa for slaughter is an absolute nonsense. There is absolutely no evidence of that.

Let me finish by making clear that Scotland's farmers work hard to maintain the highest level of animal welfare. They care passionately about their animals' welfare during any necessary journey—that is always taken very seriously.

Claudia Beamish: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I highlight that Colin Smyth's motion was lodged before the BBC documentary aired. Scottish Labour has been looking at the issue for some time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not a point of order, but it is now on the record.

17:47

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest as convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare. I congratulate Colin Smyth on securing the debate. I exclude animals that are exported for breeding from anything that I will say.

It is appropriate for meat eaters certainly and, indeed, for people such as me who consume dairy produce, to accept that animals including dairy cows, pigs, sheep and so on are raised to be killed and, in the main, eaten by us. If we are to eat such animals, the least that we can do is to ensure their welfare from field to fork. I agree with Colin Smyth on our changing view of animals and our seeing them as sentient beings.

The key word—although it is not mine—is "production". As it stands, like it or not, animals are products, so when bull calves are born to a dairy cow, they are by-products to be shot or shipped.

A ban on live exports for slaughter or fattening for slaughter needs to be planned. All that the ban by P&O Ferries did was to simply shift the animals to ports in England or lead to more of them being shot.

In reply to my topical question on 11 September, the Scottish Government said that it wants animals to be killed as close to the farm of origin as possible. As the farmers on the Conservative benches have said, that is commendable but, if we look at the statistics, we can see that that is not happening. For example—I do not know where Emma Harper got her figures—more than 5,000 cattle were exported to Spain for rearing as veal, and more than 17,000 pigs were sent to Northern Ireland for slaughter.

Emma Harper: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I do not have time.

I want to keep to the idea of exporting as being transport beyond the UK's shores. I am interested in what the Scottish Government is doing to achieve the commendable aim of there being the

least amount of travel between field and slaughter for the animals involved. We know that the long-distance transport across Europe of live animals that are destined for slaughter has long been recognised as one of the most serious and intractable problems for farm animal welfare. Neither the Scottish Government nor the UK Government can monitor the welfare of animals once they leave the UK's shores.

Edward Mountain: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: Please let me make a bit of progress. I have only four minutes.

I accept that there is no simple solution. I hope that the Government, the farming community, Quality Meat Scotland and others can find some way of bringing quality of life to the animals, specifically bull dairy calves, before they are slaughtered and eaten.

I am not an expert, and I do not pretend to be an expert, on some of the issues that the farmers in the chamber have raised. That is why they must take part in the discussion.

One of the discussions is about whether there can be any financial support for farmers who are required to keep bull calves for a period of time for consumption. Edward Mountain has raised that issue. Those matters are to be explored.

Collaboration is the key. Taking the heat out of the debate would be something, but I want to do that and to take party politics out of it. To that end—Finlay Carson knows this—Mark Ruskell, Mike Rumbles, Finlay Carson and Colin Smyth and I are trying to work together in collaboration to find a way to resolve the situation, which nobody is happy with, including the farmers. That was why Mark Ruskell wrote to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body on our behalf to see whether we could get rose veal put on the menu and why Finlay Carson has written to Quality Meat Scotland so that the five of us could meet it and see whether there is some way of doing that.

I want to see a time come—I am sure that we all do—when slaughter or fattening for slaughter takes place in Scotland. I say to Emma Harper that I have long campaigned for more local abattoirs as they have become more centralised. Ensuring that slaughtering from lairing to dispatch adheres to the highest welfare standards is not just for the animals' sake. It is important that that can be monitored by the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government said:

"No one is ... comfortable with that situation".—[*Official Report*, 11 September 2018; c 7.]

It should take a lead and fulfil its commitment to ensuring that animals that we raise for consumption are killed as close to the field as possible and are exported on the hook, not the hoof.

17:51

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): Christine Grahame's contribution is the perfect note for me to follow on from: it is the note that I hoped to strike. I have felt that I was agreeing with members whom I normally would not agree with and disagreeing with others. As Peter Chapman said, however, the issue should not be a political pawn. I hope that there will not be too much of a political situation.

I genuinely thank Colin Smyth for lodging the motion for debate and everyone for their contributions so far. As Colin Smyth said at the start of the debate, we are all aware of how emotive the issue is. I have said in the chamber before that I care about it and take it extremely seriously. That is why I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the debate and to talk about not just the issues that have been raised, but some of the work that has been going on since the issue was previously raised in Parliament. I genuinely believe that, across the chamber, we are all trying to do exactly the same thing, and I hope that that is where we end up. I hope that we get to a point at which we can work together to move forward and take positive action.

In my relatively short time in this role, I have learned that nothing is ever as clear-cut and straightforward as it can sometimes be made out to be. There are a lot of issues that we will have to consider around a very complex part of our farming industry. I thank the wider stakeholders in the animal welfare sector and the farming industry for all their constructive contributions on the issue, and I look forward to engaging with them in continued dialogue as we move forward.

There are a few things that I want to make clear before I get into the main body of my response.

In my role as the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment and representing the Scottish Government, I am absolutely committed to implementing and upholding the highest animal welfare standards. That is the case now and that will continue to be the case, regardless of what happens post-Brexit.

It is important to recognise that we have to be able to transport animals by road and sea. I completely understand the point that Colin Smyth made about that earlier. However, we have to ensure that, during all those journeys, regardless of what they are for, the highest animal welfare standards that are currently in place are adhered to at all times. I am confident that we do that.

We do not currently export any animals directly to Europe for slaughter. There is no point in that, as Edward Mountain said in his contribution.

We will always support the principle that, ideally, animals should be slaughtered as close to their farms of origin as practical. Colin Smyth, Peter Chapman and Christine Grahame talked about that. However, we must recognise that other factors are also at play.

Colin Smyth, Ruth Maguire and many other members talked about the potential for our cattle to journey beyond the EU. I want to talk about the Scottish Government's research project that is being undertaken on exactly that aspect. As Emma Harper said, we want to make policy based on evidence and supported by science; it would be irresponsible as a Government if we did otherwise.

We have been aware of concerns about the trade for a number of years, so we initiated an international monitoring project to gather evidence. I do not think that the project has had the recognition that it deserves, because it is the first of its kind anywhere in the world. It is being undertaken by two of the top animal welfare scientists in Europe and will provide valuable up-to-date scientific evidence about the conditions for calves on export journeys. The findings could make best practice recommendations for the journeys and other recommendations that will be of great interest in Europe and more widely.

The UK Government has also recently undertaken work that a number of members have mentioned. The Scottish Government supports DEFRA undertaking a call for evidence on the transport of live animals to continental Europe for slaughter, and on animal transport legislation in general. As well as the public call for evidence, DEFRA has commissioned a systematic review of the scientific evidence on all livestock transport, which has recently reported. I understand that the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, which is the UK-wide expert advisory body, is considering that evidence. We very much look forward to the outcome, once the committee has reviewed all the evidence.

The projects that the Scottish Government has undertaken and the work that the UK Government has undertaken are just two strands of the work that is being done on the issue.

As I mentioned, the issue of surplus male dairy calves is complex, but the Scottish Government is working with the sector to look at all the options available to find a sustainable way forward. We support initiatives such as the ethical dairy model, which was mentioned in the BBC documentary, and the pioneering approach—

Edward Mountain: Will the minister give way?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, of course.

Edward Mountain: The research that the minister mentions is very interesting. Will it look at the requirements under the animal health regulations on vehicle inspections in relation to drinking, ventilation systems, temperature monitoring and the monitoring of journey times to make sure that those are complied with? Those are Europe-wide standards. Looking at that aspect would greatly help to inform the debate.

Mairi Gougeon: I confirm that the research will take all those matters into consideration.

I was talking about the ethical dairy model and the approach to keeping dairy cows and their calves together. I will be visiting the Ethical Dairy shortly to find out more about that. The Ethical Dairy's innovative work has been recognised by a recent food processing, marketing and co-operation grant scheme, which Mark Ruskell mentioned. The dairy was awarded £160,000 to expand its cheese production.

Claudia Beamish and Colin Smyth talked about how vital it is that we work with industry. That is exactly what we have been doing. Contrary to Mark Ruskell's claim, we are not resisting change—

Christine Grahame: Will the minister taken an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I really do not have—

Christine Grahame: It is extremely important.

Mairi Gougeon: Okay, if the Presiding Officer will—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I shall be generous, minister.

Christine Grahame: It is such a brief point. Will abattoir facilities in Scotland be part of your inquiries?

Mairi Gougeon: I confirm to the chamber that no stone will be left unturned when it comes to this issue. We are looking at the matter from all angles.

I have undertaken a number of visits to dairy farms in different parts of the country and I have many more planned. I am visiting a range of dairy farms—the big, the small, the organic and the non-organic—to find out more about how they operate as a business and what happens to their bull calves. If I have learned one thing so far, it is that there is no simple, single solution that can easily be applied across the whole dairy sector.

Peter Chapman: Will the minister take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I really do not have time, but—

Peter Chapman: It would be really helpful.

Mairi Gougeon: Will you indulge me, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Oh, why not? I have indulged everybody else.

Peter Chapman: I suggest that the best way forward is to encourage more use of sexed semen on dairy cows, so that there is a heifer calf. Other cows can be put to a beef bull.

Mairi Gougeon: Mr Chapman has kindly covered a point that I was just about to come to, if I ever manage to make progress—although I thank members for their points.

There is no single, simple solution to all this. Every farm that I have visited so far has been different. Some farmers sell their calves, some wean their calves at 12 months and others cannot sell calves on because of the contracts that they have with supermarkets.

However, a universal problem that I have encountered is the increase in costs and the impact of that on businesses. For example, the cost of feed has almost doubled. That and other costs deter some people from holding on to their calves. Other farms have space restrictions and would need capital spend to be able to provide the infrastructure that could house extra calves, should they keep them.

I completely agree with Mike Rumbles on this vital point: we could ban the export of animals for further production, but if we are to be a responsible Government there is no way that we can do that without first considering the wider impact that such an approach would have on the dairy sector, where many farms are under extreme pressure. The approach might simply lead to more bull calves being killed.

There are many positive initiatives and developments. I mentioned the Ethical Dairy's approach. I have also met a farmer who is not a dairy farmer but who is purchasing dairy bull calves for the first time, to see what he can do with them, in the context of further production.

There is also scientific progress in relation to breeding. I commend the good progress that the wider dairy industry is making in developing strategies to reduce the number of surplus dairy bull calves. Key to that is the use of sexed semen for breeding dairy cows, which Peter Chapman and Edward Mountain mentioned. The approach has drawbacks—it is considered to be more expensive and it is not available for all bulls—but it is an option.

A number of other innovative projects are coming forward, through the rural innovation support service.

I am keen to get out and meet as many dairy farmers as possible, so that I can hear their concerns and their views on the future of the industry. I am not for one minute going to stand here and pretend that I am a farmer. I want to get out as much as possible so that I can understand as best I can the operation of the industry and where the pressures are.

I mentioned that I have started making visits. I have a programme of visits over the coming weeks, including a visit to the Ethical Dairy. I have met NFUS and Quality Meat Scotland to discuss the issue and will soon meet OneKind and Compassion in World Farming to discuss it.

As I have said before in the chamber, this is a situation with which no one is happy. In this chamber, many issues come up on which political parties have fundamentally different and opposing points of view, but I genuinely do not see this as one of those issues. I genuinely believe that we are all trying to do the same thing, and I hope that we can take the politics out of the situation.

I, for one, am willing to work across the Parliament on the issue, as I hope that I have shown in the work that I have undertaken so far and in the commitments that I have made tonight. I want us to find a way forward, working with our farmers in the dairy industry while upholding the highest standards of animal welfare.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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