



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 7 January 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 January 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon and welcome back. We start, as we often do on a Tuesday, with time for reflection, for which our leader is the Rev Sarah Nicol, minister of St Cuthbert's church in Saltcoats.

The Rev Sarah Nicol (St Cuthbert's Church, Saltcoats): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you.

Yesterday was the feast of the Epiphany, a day when Christians remember the visit of wise men to the Christ child in Bethlehem. Although nativity plays and paintings often portray the wise men as being present with the shepherds on the night of Jesus's birth, it is quite likely that their journey from wherever their homelands were took some time. Based on Herod's slaughter of boys under the age of two in that town, scholars have suggested that their arrival may have taken up to two years after they first spotted the new star in the sky.

Epiphany has inspired many with its wonderful message of the love of God being revealed widely to people from every corner of the world. God does not restrict his love to the people of one nation or ancestry, for he is a God who includes everyone in his embrace—although, of course, we are free to accept or reject his love.

While Christmas shows us the long journey that God is willing to make to reveal his love for us, leaving the wonder of heaven for the down-to-earth life of a child sleeping in a manger in an animal shelter in a crowded town in a troubled land, Epiphany goes on to show us that even our shorter journeys, from where we are now to where God wants us to be, need great commitment and perseverance from ourselves.

Where does God want us to be? He wants us to be in a place where every child is valued and cared for as God's gift to us. We have some distance still to travel, haven't we?

God's far-reaching love and the journeys that we need to undertake to respond to and share his love are something to remember at a time when many people are seeking refuge in lands such as our own. Epiphany challenges us to recognise the value of the journeys that those people have made, and to consider how in our land they may

experience something of the all-embracing love of God, which has been such an important part of the faith and heritage of our land and our people.

There is a hymn that we sing that could be adapted for use across our land:

"Let us build a land where love can dwell, and all can safely live"

for

"all are welcome, all are welcome in this place."

Thank you.

Business Motions

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Our next item of business is consideration of business motion SM5-20324, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to business for tomorrow and Thursday.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Wednesday 8 January 2020—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Improving the Lives of Gypsy/Travellers

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Short-term Lets

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Legislative Consent to the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill

(b) Thursday 9 January 2020—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Ministerial Statement: Enhancing Scotland's Digital Connectivity

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform—[*Graeme Dey.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Our next item of business is consideration of business motion SM5-20325, also in the name of Graeme Dey on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on designation of a lead committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Finance and Constitution Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill (UK Legislation).—[*Graeme Dey.*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Drug-related Deaths

1. **Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that drug-related deaths are continuing to increase. (S5T-01931)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): Each and every death is a tragedy, and tackling this issue is a priority for me and the Government. We set up the drug deaths task force specifically to advise on measures to reduce deaths, and it will meet for the third time next week. We are also working with local services to implement our action plan to deliver our strategy to reduce alcohol and drug harm in Scotland. That is supported by investment of £800 million, including an additional £10 million in 2020-21.

We will continue to pursue the options that are available to us within current devolved powers to reduce deaths, but we also want to work constructively with the United Kingdom Government on aspects that remain reserved. I have written again to the Home Secretary to invite her to attend a drug summit in Glasgow to discuss this vital issue.

Monica Lennon: I completely agree that each life that is lost to substance misuse is a tragedy. It is to the collective shame of this Parliament and the UK Parliament that more and more lives are being lost. We need co-operation between all parts of Government and our public services to respond to this humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands of Scots are living in the shadow of addiction, and it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are dying in increasing numbers.

Does the minister accept that there is a desperate need for additional residential rehab beds in Scotland? Despite charities and people in recovery making that clear to him, beds are closing and people are stuck on waiting lists for years. What action is he taking to increase the number of rehab beds?

Joe FitzPatrick: Decisions on the configuration of local services, including residential rehabilitation, are made locally across Scotland, and I am sure that the member is not asking me to centralise those services. We are committed to reviewing the demand for residential services and to support the development of more effective services across Scotland.

It is important that there is a range of services available where and when people need them, and

they should be focused on person-centred care. In the past number of months, I have spent a fair amount of my time visiting a range of local rehabilitation services, some residential and some community based. There is some really good practice in various places across Scotland.

I am keen that we look at that evidence, see how it fits in and ensure that people genuinely have access to the services that will work for them as individuals. We have to remember that this is about individual people and saving those lives.

Monica Lennon: I appreciate that the minister has undertaken many visits, but he must see that the problem is that there are simply not enough services. He must take this seriously and properly fund the third sector and the front-line workers who are the difference between life and death for people who are trying to get off drugs.

Does the minister accept the recommendations that were presented to him by Faces and Voices of Recovery Scotland when he got the FAVOR UK report last year?

Aside from residential rehab, we know that supervised injecting facilities will help to preserve lives, and I urge the Tories to accept the evidence on that. The Lord Advocate has acknowledged that he has powers to extend the scope of Police Scotland's current de facto decriminalisation policy to drugs other than cannabis. That surely can be extended to safe and supervised injecting facilities. Does the minister agree with me and the Scottish Drugs Forum that the Lord Advocate can grant immunity from prosecution to anyone working in a safe injecting facility? Is that an approach that the minister would support?

Joe FitzPatrick: The member made a number of points there. The FAVOR UK report came out at a similar time to reports from the UK Parliament's Health and Social Care Committee and Scottish Affairs Committee. I have made it clear that all three of those reports contain important information that the drug deaths task force will continue to consider as part of its wider work.

On safer injecting facilities, the member is absolutely right that there is good international evidence that safe consumption facilities will save lives. They have become standard health practice around the world. Most recently, advances have been made in Dublin, which has gone to the next stage of having a safer injecting facility.

Clearly, it is one of the bizarre aspects of devolution that, although we all agree that this is a public health issue and public health is devolved, the levers that allow us to take these public health approaches remain reserved to Westminster. I do not want to have a constitutional battle about this; we should be able to work together to take this forward and make a difference.

The member will be well aware that there is a line between the Government's powers and the Lord Advocate's powers, and it would not be appropriate or within my remit for me to direct the Lord Advocate to take action on this. The Lord Advocate has made clear that the law in this area is clear and, if he were to make such a direction, he would be going directly against the law as it stands in the reserved powers and against the wishes of the UK Government and Parliament. He has been clear that, if we want to make such a change, it should be a policy change. The evidence is becoming increasingly strong for a public health approach. Now that the UK election is out the road and the dust has settled to some extent, I hope that this will become a priority for the UK Government and it will realise that, not just here in Scotland but across the UK, this is a public health issue and it should be seen as such. We should be taking the public health measures that are evidenced not just in Europe but across the globe.

The Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in this subject. There are five members who wish to ask further questions, so I ask all members, and the minister, to keep questions and answers relatively concise.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): This week, I wrote to the Prime Minister, asking him to make drug deaths his top priority in Scotland, ahead of everything else. Will the minister agree with me, by sending a cross-party political message, that drug deaths should be every politician's main focus in 2020 and should come ahead of a section 30 order, Brexit and all the other distractions that have stopped us from saving lives?

Joe FitzPatrick: I would certainly welcome the Prime Minister parking Brexit in order for us to focus on that matter, but we live in the real world, so I do not expect the Prime Minister to do that.

However, that does not prevent the relevant UK ministers from working with us—it does not need to be a constitutional issue. That is why I have written to the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, asking her to work with us on taking the matter forward and on jointly doing everything that we can to save lives in Scotland and elsewhere across the UK.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Given the seriousness and urgency of the issue, will the minister join me in welcoming the emerging cross-party consensus that is calling for transfer of the necessary powers to tackle this critical issue effectively? Given the high number of drug-related deaths in Dundee, will the minister give serious consideration to ensuring that Dundee is at the forefront of the roll-out of new and innovative approaches?

Joe FitzPatrick: I very much welcome the growing cross-party support that has emerged, calling on the UK Government to devolve the powers that are necessary to tackle drug deaths in Scotland effectively. It is a public health issue. When the Scottish Affairs Committee discussed it, there was cross-party support for taking a public health approach and for decisions on the matter to be made in the Scottish Parliament by members from across the chamber.

We absolutely have to tackle the matter as a public health issue across Scotland, including in Dundee. Of course, I am aware of the particular efforts that are being made in Dundee and the challenges that are faced there. That is an area where we would hope to make significant improvements with the powers to take further action. Dundee will be at the forefront, given the particular circumstances there.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The minister referred to the Scottish Affairs Committee's report. That committee made it clear that the Scottish Government has the power to do more than it is doing at present. Scottish Liberal Democrats have consistently said that people who are caught in possession of drugs for personal use need treatment, not prison sentences—especially given that 50 per cent of people leaving HMP Addiewell have tested positive for illegal drugs. Has the minister examined the pilots in the Thames valley and in north Wales, where the police have focused on signing people up for treatment, and will the Scottish Government now end the destructive response of imprisoning people for misusing drugs?

Joe FitzPatrick: That is one of the areas of focus of the drug deaths task force's work. We are working with Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. It is crucial that we have all the partners round the table, in order that we can take that forward. Liam McArthur is well aware of my views on the issue.

There are good examples in other parts of the world of a move away from a justice-based approach to a public health approach having made a difference.

Clearly, we need to be able to do that in practice. I can say that we want to take that approach, but we need to see how it works in practice, which is why one of the drug death task force's streams of work is looking specifically at that area. We are on the same page: clearly, we all want to move faster.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The FAVOR—Faces & Voices of Recovery—UK report highlighted the fact that there is a crisis in relation to rehabilitation beds across Scotland: their numbers have been cut dramatically in many

alcohol and drug partnerships. The relevant powers lie with Scottish Government ministers. Therefore, I will ask two key questions. First, has the minister looked across Scotland at how many requests have been made to access those beds? Secondly, given that we have seen such dramatic cuts, will he consider establishing a fund to increase dramatically the number of drug and alcohol rehab beds?

Joe FitzPatrick: As I said earlier, one of our areas of work is looking at the need and demand for residential rehabilitation services across Scotland, and at a range of different methods. The Government is looking at those things outwith the task force.

In our action plan on rehabilitation, there is a commitment to ensure that people have access to appropriate treatment. In many cases, rehabilitation is different from what it was 20 years ago, and there are, around Scotland, some fantastic models that are making a difference. We need to allow areas to consider what works for them. However, we need to ensure that, wherever the person lives, if they decide in discussion with their clinician that a particular route would work for them, there is appropriate access to that route. I am not dismissing Miles Briggs's suggestion, but I need to look at it within the context of funding across Scotland for ADPs and third sector organisations.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Bereaved families who are watching this meeting will be appalled that the minister and the Tory front bench are making this a proxy for a debate on the constitution. This is about people's lives—people are dying.

Safe injecting facilities are a small but important part of the big picture. I come to every meeting at which we discuss this serious issue. I am sick and tired of hearing the minister say lots of words that, accumulated, say almost nothing. There is an immediate crisis and people are losing faith in the minister's ability to lead on it. When will we see action that starts to reduce the number of people who are dying on the streets, only yards from Parliament?

Joe FitzPatrick: I am not sure how much time we have, but I can go through a range of actions that the task force has started to take, which will start to turn things around.

One big area of focus is naloxone. Over the winter months, we have done considerable work to make sure that crucial life-saving injections of naloxone are available at the point of need—in particular, for the most vulnerable members of society, such as people who use homelessness shelters. We are working with the Scottish Ambulance Service to get to the point at which its

staff are able not only to administer naloxone—thereby saving a life in an overdose situation, as they currently do—but also to issue the person who has had the non-fatal overdose with naloxone to take home, because a person who has had a non-fatal overdose remains at high risk of having another overdose. We are also in discussions with Police Scotland about police carriage of naloxone. I also hope that availability of naloxone in a nasal spray will help us to move in a positive direction.

We are tight for time, but I note that the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans will bring forward proposals for a debate in the coming weeks. That will be a good chance for us to examine more fully the issues and the work of the task force. Mr Findlay can be sure that, while he bangs on, accusing others of playing games, that work is a priority for me. Although we might have differences of opinion on particular aspects, I do not doubt the sincerity of the other members who have asked questions today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister, for cutting your remarks short.

Ferry Cancellations (Arran)

2. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the ferry cancellations that have led to visitors being stranded on the Isle of Arran. (S5T-01930)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): The weather caused challenges across the Clyde and Hebrides, and in particular with the Ardrossan to Brodick service, over the weekend. The decision to delay or cancel a sailing is never taken lightly by the operator. We and CalMac fully recognise the importance of ferry services to island and rural communities, and regret any inconvenience to passengers.

On Sunday, the moderate to strong winds forecast for the area and an increased swell height at Ardrossan harbour entrance made berthing in those conditions unsafe. The master of the ship will always put the safety of passengers, crew and the ship first, and his or her right to refuse to sail is enshrined in law under statutory instrument 1997/2886, the Merchant Shipping (Master's Discretion) Regulations 1997.

The Lochranza to Claonaig service normally operates only one sailing per day in winter. However, CalMac made the decision to operate increased sailings on a shuttle service on this route to help to move traffic displaced from the Brodick service and to provide another route off the island.

Operators appreciate the commercial impacts on businesses and take this matter very seriously.

Climate change is having an effect on our necessary lifeline ferry services, with masters experiencing severe, and at times prolonged, weather impacts in their operating areas.

The Ardrossan to Brodick service resumed mid-afternoon on Monday 6 January and no welfare issues were reported to CalMac. Due to deteriorating weather late on Monday afternoon a number of sailings had to be cancelled, but they resumed again and by early evening all traffic had been moved off the island.

As members will be aware, due to the severe wind strengths being experienced today, extensive disruption is being experienced across the Clyde and Hebrides network, with services liable to cancellation or disruption.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister for that helpful update. The weather is a significant challenge to those who use those routes, and we see that on days like today.

It is also important to pay tribute to those across Scotland who work on our ferries in such challenging conditions, including the masters of the ships who have to make difficult decisions at the time. I also accept, as many who live on islands do, that if you choose to live on one of our beautiful islands there is always an inherent risk that ferries may be cancelled due to weather.

However, my conversations over the weekend with people living on Arran focused instead on their concerns about the overall resilience of the service that they rely on. The most obvious questions that they want me to ask the Government are as follows. Why are there so many issues with the ageing ferry on this route and with Ardrossan harbour? What is being done to address the reliability of both? In this specific instance, which other nearby ports, such as Gourock or Troon, are available to be used as a back-up when conditions permit? If they are not available, why not?

Paul Wheelhouse: There are a number of points there. I will try in good faith to answer them as quickly as I can.

I welcome Jamie Greene's reference to staff. As we have discussed before, their work is exemplary and above reproach and I appreciate the point that he made in thanking them for everything that they do in such difficult conditions.

I turn to the points raised in conversation with people on Arran who were affected by the outage at the weekend. There are clearly issues with the ferry fleet, and the length of service of many of the vessels. We have acknowledged that a number of times in this chamber. The Government is taking steps to procure new ferries. We have heavily debated the future of Ferguson Marine in Port

Glasgow in this chamber. The Government has commissioned two vessels from that yard and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work, Derek Mackay, and the Government are fully committed to delivering those vessels for the communities that rely on them.

There is an issue with Peel Ports, which owns Ardrossan harbour, regarding the condition of the facilities there. We are working with Peel Ports and North Ayrshire Council, and with colleagues in this chamber and beyond in the Ardrossan task force, to deliver investment in Ardrossan and to ensure that that facility is fit for the future. During the construction period we will rely on the Irish berth as an alternative berth for the vessel on the Arran service.

Mr Greene mentioned alternative ports. Gourock is the port of refuge for the Ardrossan to Brodick service. I will look into what affected access to Gourock on this particular occasion. Obviously, wild weather in the Clyde can often affect more than one harbour simultaneously. Mr Greene will also be aware that we have recently been undertaking maintenance on the Gourock linkspan, with a view to improving its condition in advance of a longer-term master plan for Gourock.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister again for that comprehensive update. My understanding, however, is that there are long-term issues with the linkspan that mean that it is unsuitable for cars getting off ferries there. Clearly that situation is untenable and unacceptable.

The situation over the past few days is simply one of a long list of problems that islanders have faced and that have rightly been raised by members from many political parties in the Parliament. Does the minister understand why there is so much frustration in communities when they see an upgraded harbour on the island—many people still have reservations about its ability to handle easterly winds—a mainland port that is clearly long overdue for upgrade, no plan B on the mainland with regard to alternative ports, an ageing ferry that is frequently offline for repairs, and £100 million spent on a new ferry that will not be delivered for at least another year, if not longer?

Our islanders are resilient when it comes to the weather, but they do not have an abundance of patience when it comes to incompetence or mismanagement. What reassurances can the minister offer those who are living in our island communities that 2020 will not see a repeat of the avoidable disruption and chaos that they faced so often in 2019?

Paul Wheelhouse: That is a long list of points and I am very conscious of time. I repeat the point that the port at Ardrossan is not owned by

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, our own agency, but by Peel Ports; we cannot unilaterally take decisions around the future investment plans for the port. The situation is more complex than Jamie Greene presents. We are working closely with partners and with Kenneth Gibson, who is the constituency member, as part of the task force to ensure that we are developing a long-term plan for the facility. I hope that there will be good news on that front in the near future.

With regard to the investment in ferries, notwithstanding that there have been difficulties with the contract with Ferguson's, as we all know, I hope that Jamie Greene will welcome the Government's commitment to both the yard in Port Glasgow and to delivering a brand new ferry to provide services for communities on Arran and in Ardrossan. When the vessel is up and running, investment in ports and harbours will be needed, but we cannot do that simultaneously without having massive disruption to ferry services between Arran and the mainland.

Brodick has been upgraded and Ardrossan will be upgraded, and we are now procuring the new vessel for the route. I am confident that once we have the new vessel in place and the harbour investment at Ardrossan, we will have an excellent service for the community in Arran.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Minister, 63 cars and their occupants were left stranded on Arran on Sunday night. Many of them had waited hours without being told that the ferry service would terminate at 7.30 pm until I contacted CalMac and urged them to inform those who were waiting. One would have expected that to happen automatically.

The 7.30 pm finish was apparently due to crew hours, which could surely have been made up later in the week. Do the passengers not come first?

Foot passengers who reached Argyll had no public transport to take them onward. Does the minister agree that that disorganised shambles is totally unacceptable, regardless of the weather?

A major issue for Arran and Bute islanders is the Gourock linkspan, which is 48 years old. It is inoperable for vehicles and in urgent need of repair or replacement to allow Gourock to be used as a port of refuge in bad weather. When will the linkspan be repaired or replaced, and when will the Government produce a long-term infrastructure and vessel replacement plan—over 10 or 15 years—so that we know what vessels are coming down the line to ensure that we do not have this situation year in, year out as the years progress? *[Interruption.]*

Paul Wheelhouse: I hope that Kenneth Gibson will be sympathetic to the point that I am about to

make, even if colleagues on my left might not be. They may be sympathetic to Kenneth Gibson's question, but not necessarily to the point that I am about to make.

For 10 years now, we have been living through a period of austerity, with significant constraints on the Scottish Government budget. Despite that—*[Interruption.]* We are hearing disagreement from predictable quarters, but the fact remains that in the financial year to come, we will have £1.6 billion less to spend than we had in 2010, after accounting for inflation. Having said that, we have increased investment in ferries in areas such as road equivalent tariff implementation and in the Clyde and Hebrides contract, and we have invested more than £100 million in harbour facilities and, as Kenneth Gibson knows, we are committed to investing in Ardrrossan.

Mr Gibson made specific points about Gourock, which Jamie Greene also referenced. I will make the point categorically: over the past few months, CMAL, our agency, has carried out a series of repairs and maintenance to the linkspan at Gourock to maintain operations. A review is currently being undertaken by a consultant engineer on behalf of CMAL to identify the feasibility of returning the linkspan to accept vehicle loading capacity. We expect to receive the consultant engineer's report later this month, which I appreciate is not immediate, but it is relatively soon. We will take appropriate action thereafter, at which point Transport Scotland, in conjunction with CMAL, will consider the options and I commit to giving Kenneth Gibson and Jamie Greene an update when we have that information.

As Kenneth Gibson correctly stated, the linkspan is more than 48 years old and CMAL is in discussion with Transport Scotland about finalising a masterplan to enable the redevelopment of the Gourock ferry terminal as a whole to provide updated facilities for the Gourock to Dunoon passenger service and to continue its role as a port of refuge for services from Bute and Arran.

I commit to keeping members informed as soon as I can and I will spare the time just now.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Winter disruption is inevitable, but islanders are warning that they are living with disruption almost every week—disruption that they believe is damaging Arran's economy and reputation. We are aware that the Glen Sannox will not be ready for another two years, but Arran needs the Government to act now. Given that Transport Scotland's action plan is silent on many of the big issues facing the island, will the minister tell us when the plan will be updated to include suggestions made by islanders on issues such as the use of ports of refuge? Will he ensure that further investment will be made to make ferries and ports more resilient this year,

which is VisitScotland's year of coasts and waters?

Paul Wheelhouse: The member fairly raises points around the infrastructure investment plan, which is under development. He will be aware that the national transport strategy has been published and that the second strategic transport projects review is currently under way—the consultation process ends on Friday. I encourage any constituents who have issues that they wish to raise around ferry infrastructure, whether positive or negative, to feed in views while they have a chance, as the STPR 2 will inform future Government investment decisions.

The member makes a number of points and I hope to catch up with him to discuss them in more detail. We are investing in the facilities to serve the Arran community—I reassure him on that. Certainly, the investment in Brodick—a considerable investment of over £30 million by the Government—has made a difference to the facilities there. We are investing in vessels and, indeed, at Ardrrossan in partnership with Peel Ports and North Ayrshire Council. I will continue to inform the member and other colleagues of the details.

Automated Teller Machines (Charges)

3. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it can take in response to reports that ATMs are increasingly charging for taking out cash. (S5T-01934)

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): As the member will know, the regulation of banking services remains a reserved issue. However, I remain concerned both about the rapid reduction in ATMs and the increase in charging for their use. I will continue to press regulators, banking providers and the United Kingdom Government to ensure that the ability to freely and easily access cash is maintained, particularly for those in our most vulnerable communities.

John Mason: Which? tells us that, since January 2015, 403 bank branches have closed in Scotland—a reduction of 39 per cent. Between January 2018 and October 2019, Scotland lost 718 free-to-use ATMs—a reduction of 13 per cent.

Some of my constituents find that using cash helps them to budget and control their limited finances; they would rather use cash than rely purely on cards. They might want to take out £10, but the average cost of doing so using a pay-to-use machine is £1.45—that is 14 per cent of the money that they are taking out. What support can she offer vulnerable people in that regard?

Kate Forbes: It is the most vulnerable who are suffering from the rapid reduction in free-to-use ATMs. I have repeatedly urged the UK Government to appoint a regulator with sole responsibility for cash infrastructure, and I will write once again to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, emphasising the importance of free access to cash for all. The UK Government can intervene if it wants to—it has chosen not to intervene in a failing market. It is not just me calling on the UK Government to do more; organisations such as Which? have made it very clear that the Government should step in and protect the UK's ATM network before it is too late.

John Mason: If I understood the minister correctly, she said that she felt that the UK Government could intervene, but the UK Government is quoted as saying:

“Government cannot reverse the changes in the market.”

Is she convinced that the UK Government has chosen not to intervene, despite the fact that it says that it cannot do so?

Kate Forbes: Without a shadow of a doubt, it is a choice not to intervene: the UK Government has chosen not to intervene despite the fact that it is our poorest areas in this country that are suffering most from the lack of access to free-to-use cashpoints. I have written repeatedly to John Glen, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, in February and again in March. I have had meetings with Link and the Payment Systems Regulator to express my concerns. There are actions that can be taken—it is a political choice not to intervene. Once again, the UK Government leaves the most vulnerable behind.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A number of stakeholders across Scotland—including the Federation of Small Businesses, as part of its “Transforming Towns: Delivering a Sustainable Future For Local Places” blueprint—have called for the Scottish Government to create multi-use hubs on the high street. Such hubs would include free-to-use ATMs and mini bank branches. What steps has the Scottish Government taken to introduce multi-use hubs on our high streets?

Kate Forbes: I thank Dean Lockhart for his question. Anything that enables better access to free-to-use ATMs is to be supported, but it is important that we make clear that the priority is to ensure that people can access cash. For example, there has been an intervention in Sweden, which is seen as one of the most cashless societies, to encourage people to continue to use cash. The problem is that people are left behind when such hubs are used as though they provide the same services as ATMs do although they do not. Another means of accessing cash is provided

through the Post Office, for example. It is key that services are free to use. There should not be a cover-up or a pretence that they are free to use when, in fact, they are not.

Urgent Question

14:36

Scottish Government Budget

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of today's announcement that the United Kingdom budget will be published on 11 March, when it expects to publish its own budget.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): The UK Government gave no prior notice before announcing its budget date, showing complete disrespect for the Scottish Parliament and our budget process. I received no response to our repeated calls for clarity on the budget date, including my most recent letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer of just two weeks ago. The UK Government's approach to the Scottish budget is completely unacceptable. The delay of more than four months since the original planned budget date cannot be blamed on the general election, and it suggests a total disregard for devolution and a lack of fiscal responsibility.

Despite that, we remain focused on introducing a Scottish budget for 2020-21 at the earliest practical opportunity. We will continue to engage with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Fiscal Commission on how best to respond to what are exceptional circumstances. An announcement on the proposed date for the introduction of the Scottish budget will be made in due course.

Rhoda Grant: On 22 December, the finance secretary published his letter to the chancellor, in which he wrote:

"It is essential that the Scottish and UK Governments co-operate closely in order to enable a Scottish Budget to be in place by the beginning of the next fiscal year."

Will the cabinet secretary outline the risks relating to the timing of this year's UK budget, particularly the risks to local government budgets? Local government provides essential front-line services to our communities. What action is he taking to mitigate those risks?

Derek Mackay: Rhoda Grant has asked very fair questions. I confirm to the chamber that I have had no response from the chancellor to that letter, or to my previous letter, in which I raised some of those issues and particularly highlighted the risk to Scotland's public services of the UK budget being later.

My understanding is that the UK budget was ready in November, but the Tories chose not to go ahead with it. They did not go ahead with it after

the general election. They could go ahead now but—for whatever reason, and without explanation—they are choosing to hold the budget back until 11 March. That is a key date, because it is the final date by which councils must have set their budgets and council tax levels.

Clearly, the UK Government's decision to delay the UK budget once again will have profound consequences. Even with the clarity of now having a date—although, when it comes to Boris Johnson, we will believe it when we see it, because the Prime Minister told us that the budget would be in February but it is now to be in March—we need the detail on the block grant adjustment and the economic forecasts to determine the Scottish budget. I was able to share with Opposition spokespeople some of the risks and scenarios if there was such a delay to the UK budget.

I agree with Rhoda Grant that the UK Government's actions are disrespectful of devolution. The UK Government knows the consequences but does not care about them. It appears to me that, in not wanting to make our established processes work, the Tory UK Government has given up on the union altogether. Having wrecked their own processes, the Tories are trying to wreck the Scottish Parliament's processes, too, but we will not let that happen. I just wonder whether this is a sign of things to come from the Tory Government.

Without that certainty on the numbers, we will try to work with the UK Government, but it appears that it does not want to work with anyone. We will engage with Opposition parties, with Parliament, with the Finance and Constitution Committee and with the Fiscal Commission so that we can take forward a transparent, orderly, consensual and constructive approach, in order to give Scotland the certainty and confidence that it needs and deserves.

Rhoda Grant: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, and I share many of his concerns. He will be aware that the Scottish Parliament will have very little time to adequately scrutinise the Scottish budget this year, because of the timeline. How does he plan to maximise that scrutiny, and will he publish his current plans for the Scottish budget, as it would be prudent to understand any significant changes that are planned at this point?

Derek Mackay: Clearly, the traditional process that we were establishing—and, indeed, the most recent agreement that we have with the Parliament—will not be fit for purpose because of the UK Government's actions. We will need an exceptional, bespoke process for this year's budget approach.

Rather than my setting out a plan—by the way, I found out about the date like everyone else did, through the news, as I came into our nation's capital this morning—I will engage with the Finance and Constitution Committee, as I have said I would, so that we can set out in partnership a proposed way forward, rather than my presenting one as a *fait accompli*.

Of course, this was one of the scenarios of what could happen. It would have been more helpful if the UK Government had engaged with us so that we understood its budget timeline process. However, I will work constructively with Opposition parties on the process and, of course, the content of the budget.

Because the UK Tory party and the UK Government have acted irresponsibly, I think that there is a duty on all Opposition parties in this Parliament to act responsibly in terms of process, so that we can have confidence going forward. I will engage with parties on that process and on the timescale, but if there is a truncated scrutiny period, that will not be because of the actions of the Scottish Government; it will be because the actions of the reckless UK Tory Government have taken us to this position.

Clearly, because of the timelines that Rhoda Grant has raised, we will want to give local government and others as much certainty as possible. I welcome the letter that I just received from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local government, which said that they would be very happy to meet to discuss the implications of budget timing and what COSLA can do to support an earlier budget. I will engage with COSLA and Opposition parties to make the best of a bad situation, which was brought on us by the reckless approach of the UK Tories.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Six members wish to ask supplementaries, so I appeal for brevity.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Despite all the bluster that we have heard from the cabinet secretary, I am sure that he is well aware that the budget is delayed because we had a general election in December—a general election that Scottish National Party members in this chamber called for. They can hardly pin the blame elsewhere when they were demanding that general election.

More important than the timing of the budget is the question of how the finance secretary will spend the money. Given what we know already about the Barnett consequentials coming to Scotland as a result of UK spending plans that have already been announced, can the First Minister confirm that this year he will not be cutting local government's core budgets, unlike the

actions that he has taken in the past? Even when his own budget has increased, he has slashed local councils' budgets. Will he not do that this year?

Derek Mackay: Murdo Fraser inadvertently gave me a wee upgrade in the middle of his question. Just as he got my title wrong, he has probably got the figures wrong as well. As for Boris Johnson, if he cannot even get the month of his budget right, how am I expected to believe what he says when it comes to the detailed numbers in the budget?

I want to see the colour of the Tories' money. I want to see the detail of what is coming to Scotland. As Murdo Fraser knows only too well, it is not just the Barnett consequentials but the UK Government's tax proposition, the economic forecast, the position of the Office for Budget Responsibility and, in Scotland, the position of the SFC that determine the materially significant numbers that drive the budget. For many of those factors, we require the UK budget, which we now understand is to come on 11 March. We will look at the detail, we will engage constructively with parties and we will come up with a process that is the best that it can be in the circumstances.

Finally, on the general election, I understand that the UK budget was good to go in November last year. There is no reason why the UK Government cannot go ahead with its budget now, in January this year, particularly given that we know that it was pretty much good to go in November. If I remember correctly, the general election was in mid-December. The Tories could have got on with the budget, but for whatever reason they have been somewhat distracted from their day job.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has previously stated that, despite having written to the UK Government urging early dialogue, his requests have gone unanswered. Can he update the chamber on whether he has since received a response and provide a further update on his statement that his officials will continue to work with committee clerks and the Scottish Fiscal Commission on contingency options around the budget process and timetable?

Derek Mackay: The chancellor never writes, never calls and never reaches out.

Members: Aw!

Derek Mackay: I hear the sympathy of the Conservative members. However, the problem is that this is about not just respect for the Scottish National Party, which of course won the general election in Scotland, but respect for a nation and its Parliament and Government. It is about good governance and responsible fiscal policy and a

degree of honour in the established relationships, protocols and custom and practice, which the UK Government has totally disregarded. Although the UK Government shows no interest in working with anyone but itself, the Scottish Government will try to reach out and to work with parliamentary committees to ensure that we have an appropriate process and the best possible numbers in order to go forward.

I say again that it appears to me that the UK Tory party has given up on the union by not even supporting devolution in its working; it will pay the price for that disrespect for this country.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It scarcely matters any more whether what is being done by the UK Conservative Party is being done deliberately because it wants to cause chaos or because it simply does not care. The fact that so many Conservative MSPs have been laughing their way through this entire discussion suggests that it is the latter reason, but the effect is the same. I again urge all MSPs, from all political parties, to bring to the table constructive and workable ideas for improving the Scottish budget. In order that we have any time at all for discussion of the budget and to ensure that we achieve some degree of consensus on the budgetary choices, does the cabinet secretary accept that we will have to see, at least in draft form, a budget well before 11 March?

Derek Mackay: That is a very helpful approach. My door is open to all political parties to have discussions on constructive and workable ideas and solutions. I will, of course, continue to engage on the process and content of the budget.

On the timescales, I said that I want an orderly process that inspires confidence, achieves the ambitions set out in the programme for government and allows us to give certainty to our valued public services. The matter of timing also involves tax decisions. The budget has complexities, such as the Scottish rate resolution, which must be passed in order to raise any income tax revenue at all, which is a huge part of the Scottish budget, and the non-domestic rates resolution, which has to be passed to raise the necessary non-domestic rates to invest in our local services. There are so many areas of complexity that have to be considered. However, I will absolutely have that early engagement and, in terms of the timing, return to Parliament once we have a decision after having engaged with the Finance and Constitution Committee.

The important point, though, is that we have enough confidence to be able to proceed in a way that will put us on the strongest possible footing going forward. It will be for all parties to act responsibly to ensure that the position in which we find ourselves does not lead to a precarious

position for the budget. It is unthinkable for the budget in Scotland not to be passed, because such a situation would bring about terrible calamity for our public services and communities, and the people of Scotland. This is the year when, like never before, we should work together to ensure that, following the UK Government's irresponsibility, we have a consensus on the Scottish budget that shows responsibility.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): With the UK budget being delayed until 11 March, what impact will not knowing the level of the block grant from the Treasury have on setting Scottish income tax and thresholds?

Derek Mackay: That is about the interrelationship between UK tax rates and Scottish tax rates in relation to income tax. The block grant adjustment has a huge impact on how much income tax we can raise.

It would have been far better if the UK Government had gone first, as was expected. We could then have responded accordingly. However, we will look at the options and then return to Parliament. Income tax is now a massive part of Scotland's budget and therefore we take it very seriously.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is pretty shoddy and out of touch for the UK Government to hold back the budget until March—that is certainly true. It is not the inconvenience to the Scottish Parliament that really matters, though; it is the potential impact on public services that counts.

Will the Scottish Government be proposing a temporary amendment to section 93 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to allow local authorities to set their council tax rates after 11 March?

Derek Mackay: That is one of the options, but all of this is very complex. I am happy to engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which has just written to me today to suggest a meeting about how it can provide support following the UK Government's decision. I will engage with local government to find out whether that is the kind of thing that it wants to explore. It is one of the options that is on the table.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary has highlighted, without the UK budget we do not have clarity on the funding that is available for public services in Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government's approach shows not only a complete lack of respect for Scotland but for all devolved nations, and for the potential impact that its decisions can have on vital devolved public services?

Derek Mackay: Its failure to communicate and respond certainly does exhibit disrespect. I sometimes wonder why we engage so intensively with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and others if this is how they choose to treat us when it comes to such important matters. I hope that they learn a lesson from this.

Apart from the Conservatives—although possibly even the Conservatives, privately, agree—the rest of the Parliament shares concerns about how Scotland's devolved arrangements, public services and taxpayers have been treated through this shoddy process, at the hands of the chancellor. By the way, I have been advised that there might be a reshuffle of the UK cabinet in February, so who knows whether Sajid Javid will be the chancellor post-reshuffle and who knows who will deliver the UK budget on 11 March. The point is that the UK Government has shown a total lack of respect and has disregarded devolution and the usual custom and practice. Given the complexities in the budget process I thought that this year, with all the Brexit turmoil that we are going to face, it would have taken a more constructive and helpful approach. It is not too late for it to do that, but it has shown no sign of doing so. We will work through these issues to give Scotland the leadership and the competent Government that it deserves.

Empty Homes

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a Local Government and Communities Committee debate on motion S5M-20280, in the name of James Dornan, on empty homes in Scotland.

14:53

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I am pleased to open this debate on empty homes in Scotland, on behalf of the Local Government and Communities Committee.

Today's debate reflects on the findings of a short inquiry that we began in spring 2019, and on which we reported on 10 November 2019. I thank the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning for responding to our report in time for today's debate. I note that work is on-going in relation to some of our recommendations and that he has committed to providing updates as the work progresses. We look forward to receiving those updates over the course of the parliamentary session.

Communities face their own unique challenges when it comes to empty homes. In some areas—some of our small towns, for example—large numbers of empty homes can be symptomatic of industrial and population decline, with there being more homes than people who now want to live there. That can cause a downward spiral that leads to loss of amenities including schools and bus routes, which in turn can affect the health and wellbeing of communities. That often causes more people to move away because the community cannot support their increasing support needs, which further increases the number of empty homes in the community—and so the cycle can go on.

In other areas, the problem is very different: economic decline cannot explain the existence of empty homes in desirable places to live where there are housing shortages. In those cases, empty homes almost always have a back story that involves personal issues—for example, a bereavement or family problems. Someone might have purchased a property to renovate, but ran out of money before they could complete the repairs.

Whatever the cause, the common threads are that empty homes being left to decay can be a blight on communities and that there is strong public interest in bringing them back into use. In areas of high housing demand, empty homes are also a wasted resource.

The committee gathered information on the impact of empty homes and on potential solutions

using a number of means. The committee is always keen for our work to be largely informed by the views of people with lived experience, so we invited individuals with personal experience of the issue to chat with us over lunch in the Parliament. We thought that that provided a comfortable space in which people could speak to us freely about their experience of empty homes. We also travelled to East Ayrshire to see for ourselves the impact that large numbers of empty homes can have on communities and to speak directly to people who have been affected. Anonymised accounts of those discussions are available on the committee's website.

Following an open call for views, which attracted a number of interesting and informative responses, we followed up on issues that had been raised in public formal oral evidence sessions with Kevin Stewart, the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, and a number of experts—although I am not suggesting for a second that the minister is not an expert. On behalf of the committee, I thank everybody who engaged with us during our inquiry.

An early theme that emerged from our inquiry was the importance of every council having a dedicated empty homes officer, with local knowledge, to deal with the issue in their area. We heard strong evidence that having a dedicated officer leads to more empty homes being brought back into use. It is therefore extremely disappointing that some councils do not have an empty homes officer and that some of those do not appear to have plans to recruit one. We believe that all councils should have an empty homes officer and that the evidence suggests that that is the case.

A key role for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which is the lead agency in helping to bring private sector empty homes back into use, is in providing valuable training and support for empty homes officers. The partnership advocated strongly for every local authority to have, as standard practice, at least one dedicated EHO, so it is encouraging that its funding has been doubled until 2021.

It was also welcome to hear the minister's commitment to continuing to encourage councils to appoint empty homes officers and, through the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, to facilitate sharing of best practice in their empty homes work in order to achieve maximum benefits. We look forward to receiving an update from the minister on progress in that regard in just less than a year's time.

We recognise that each area has its own unique set of circumstances and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to tackling the problem. That is why having in each area an EHO who knows the

local issues and can build local relationships is crucial. That means that, in turn, solutions will be locally led by people who have on-the-ground knowledge. Those solutions should read across to local regeneration plans so that there is a joined-up strategy to regenerate areas that are blighted by empty homes.

Restoring some buzz to our town centres is sometimes as much about encouraging people to move back to and stay in them as it is about supporting local businesses. More people living in our town centres helps to create safe and vibrant places for people to live, shop, eat and drink in. Therefore, I am pleased that the minister will work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to encourage councils to adopt a more strategic approach to town centre regeneration and related policies. We will follow progress with interest.

The possibility that current datasets might not provide an accurate picture of the scale of the issue of empty homes was raised. It was therefore encouraging to hear that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is working on a method to map the locations of empty homes at granular level in order to provide a more detailed picture and to allow solutions to be targeted at meeting the needs of each area.

That was to be welcomed, but we heard that local recording of empty properties is largely reliant on a mixture of local council tax records and local knowledge, and that some people fail to disclose their empty property in order to avoid paying council tax surcharges. The assurance that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's new website will make it easier for members of the public to report empty homes in their neighbourhood, and to identify those who seek to abuse the system, is therefore welcome. The committee would be grateful to have updated figures on the scale of the problem once that work has concluded.

Councils have powers to apply an additional council tax levy on properties that have been empty for some time in order to encourage property owners to bring their empty homes back into use. In some cases, that involves removing council tax discounts and applying an increase of up to 100 per cent, where appropriate. We support the levy as a method for bringing empty homes back into use, so it is welcome that some councils have been using their discretion to delay application of the levy for house owners who have been taking active steps to bring their properties back into use.

However, it was extremely concerning to hear that some councils take a far less discretionary approach, and appear to be using the levy as a revenue-raising tool by taking a blanket approach to its application and, in some cases, penalising

people who are taking steps to bring their houses back into use. As members will appreciate, that is usually completely counterproductive. It is absolutely not what any council should be doing with the power, and it should stop.

I therefore welcome the fact that the Government will work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities to ensure that best practice is shared and that the levy is applied as intended. We look forward to hearing back from the Scottish Government on the outcome of the exercise.

We also heard about existing public funding or financial incentives for bringing empty homes back into use. Evidence indicated that such incentives do some good, but there is a degree of frustration that some aspects of their operation limit how useful they can be. It is encouraging that the Government will use the evidence and views that were given during the housing to 2040 consultation to reconsider the provision of financial incentives such as the rural and islands housing fund. I understand that discussions about empty homes loan funding and flexibility have already begun: again, the committee looks forward to receiving an update on those issues.

Councils have the power to bring empty homes back into use through compulsory purchase orders, which they can use to buy properties in their areas without owners' agreement. Obviously, that power should be used as a last resort for empty homes, such as when a property is a considerable blight on the community, the owner will not constructively engage, and weighing up whether there is a strong public interest in making such an order, taking into account the rights of the landowners and others with an interest in the land, is required.

We heard that there has been very low uptake of CPOs. Councils' reluctance to use them was put down to a number of factors, starting with the complexity of the CPO process and the time that is needed to do one. Other related factors that were mentioned included competing resources and councils' risk aversion to using court proceedings against private individuals.

We note that recent improvements have been made to the CPO process, but it is probably too soon to assess how they have impacted on bringing empty homes back into use. I note that the Government will continue with measures to promote their use while keeping them under review, identifying where there are barriers and producing additional guidance when required. I am interested to hear from the minister what the Scottish Government can do to encourage councils to be less risk averse when it comes to such court proceedings. The evidence suggested that some councils seem to find CPOs much

easier to use than other councils, which are not willing to take their chance in court.

The Government has also committed to longer-term measures to reform the CPO system as part of a wider package of proposals that will address how authorities can assemble land, tackle problem properties and capture land-value uplifts. However, we are a little disappointed to note that we are unlikely to see concrete proposals until the next session of Parliament.

A lot of the evidence called for the introduction of compulsory sale order powers. As an alternative to CPOs, they would force problem properties on to the open market and remove the requirement for councils to purchase them. The Government had committed to proposing such powers during the current parliamentary session, but we have heard from the minister that they will now be delayed because of other legislative priorities and Brexit. That is disappointing.

Although we recognise the increased workload that Brexit has created for the Scottish Parliament, our report calls for reconsideration of that point. The Government has not accepted our recommendation to introduce CSOs during the current parliamentary session, but the minister has clarified that the work will be rolled into the wider package of proposals that I mentioned a moment ago, including consideration of how councils can assemble land, tackle problem properties and capture land-value uplifts. I hope that the package can be implemented early in the next session.

To sum up, although there has been progress on tackling empty homes and their impact on Scotland's communities, it is clear that there is still some way to go. The committee will follow with interest how the problem is factored into the Government's wider housing strategy. I note that that is being consulted on as I speak.

I thank the committee's clerking team and my fellow committee members, as always, for their support. There is never a cross word on our committee.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Local Government and Communities Committee's 10th Report 2019 (Session 5), *Empty Homes in Scotland* (SP Paper 618).

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I call Kevin Stewart. You have about 10 minutes, minister.

15:04

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Happy new year to you and to everyone in the chamber.

I welcome the Local Government and Communities Committee's recent report on empty homes. I have considered it in detail and am pleased to accept the recommendations. My response to the committee sets out the actions that we are already taking and those to be progressed over the year.

I am pleased to say that the committee is generally supportive of our approach. I thank the committee for the useful evidence that has been gathered. I also thank the stakeholders who participated and took the time to respond.

The debate gives us a great opportunity to focus on the priority that we, in Parliament and in the Government, place on empty homes and the actions that we are taking to bring them back into use. We all, I think, agree that too many homes are empty. Empty homes can be a blight on communities and are a missed opportunity to increase the supply of safe, warm places to call home—this at a time when we need more homes across Scotland.

Homes become empty for a number of complex reasons. Privately owned homes are often inherited or transferred as a result of the owner's care needs. That can have an effect on the ability to take action to bring those homes back into use. It is a sad fact that homes will always become empty. The key for all of us is to prevent that from happening as much as we possibly can and to support owners to return them to good use as people's homes.

We have been engaging extensively with a variety of stakeholders to shape a draft vision and principles for housing in Scotland by 2040—that vision includes, of course, reducing the number of privately owned empty homes. I want to ensure that no homes are left empty for significant periods without good reason.

Stakeholders want existing stock to be better used. That point came through strongly in their responses to the committee. I want to maximise the number of homes that are occupied. However, it is equally important that we consider how empty homes can also help us to meet some of the other challenges that we face as a nation. A good example would be equipping them for the future by making them more energy efficient and adaptable. To help to achieve that, I want local authorities to take a more strategic, joined-up approach. I know that many members share that view.

I am very pleased that the Local Government and Communities Committee recognises the benefits of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership approach and that the committee shares my view that local authorities are best placed to deliver change on the ground. The Government's role is to retain overall policy responsibility and national

oversight, but delivery should always be done at the local level.

As a Government, we continue to invest in that successful partnership approach. As James Dornan outlined, in April 2018, we doubled funding to the partnership to more than £400,000 a year, enabling an expansion of the service. That is showing real results. Some 1,100 long-term empty homes were brought back into use in 2018-19, and a further 700 homes were brought back into use in the first half of 2019-20. That is an increase in the supply of good-quality homes at a rate of more than 100 a month. Over the course of the partnership, 5,000 homes have been brought back into use. What is the key to that success? The resounding answer has to be the network of dedicated empty homes officers. More than 90 per cent of the homes that are brought back into use are directly attributable to their work.

Committee members will recall the evidence that was given by South Lanarkshire Council, which homeowners had criticised for its lack of dedicated support and advice. I am very pleased to announce that the council has been working with the partnership to rectify that and will shortly be recruiting an empty homes officer.

There are now 24 empty homes officers in Scotland, working across 21 local authorities. That is good progress, but I want to see an increase in the pace of recruitment. I would like councils in the Lothians to follow in Edinburgh's footsteps. I want warm discussions in Highland and the Scottish Borders to come to fruition.

It is hard to believe, but we still have councils that do not consider empty homes to be a problem.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Has the minister had any discussions with the councils that are point-blank refusing to take on empty homes officers? Have they said why they will not do so?

Kevin Stewart: I have talked to many councils over the past wee while, and I will outline those discussions in some depth later. I have not spoken to every council on the issue, but I commit to Parliament and the committee that I will continue to endeavour to persuade all those councils to do what is right, which is to recruit empty homes officers.

Vacancies need to be filled quickly when they arise. I recently met with Orkney Islands Council and I am pleased that its post will soon be filled. Dundee City Council has also given me an assurance that recruitment to its vacant post will shortly proceed. That is important, because its award-winning service has been without an officer for too long.

I ask all members to join me in encouraging local authorities to recognise the benefits of that approach and bring empty homes officers to the communities that we all serve. The partnership stands ready and waiting to develop bespoke solutions that work for our constituents and for housing in our areas.

Great work is taking place across Scotland, but we cannot be complacent. It is widely acknowledged that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and no silver bullet. We must ensure that local authorities are making best use of existing levers and that officers working on the ground have access to the right tools for the job. That is why we are reviewing our empty homes policy. The evidence that was gathered during the committee's inquiry will usefully feed into the review and will inform our approach to housing to 2040.

I would like to touch on some of the issues that were raised in the committee's report. There are concerns about the application of the empty homes levy—we heard that again from Mr Dornan. A lack of flexibility hinders private home owners who are trying to bring their homes back into use. Those powers rightly lie with councils, and I have been clear that they are intended to act as an incentive and not simply as a revenue-raising tool. I often cite examples of councils with progressive policies. For example, Dumfries and Galloway Council has used levy money and other funds to invest in its town centre fund, in order to bring housing in Dumfries town centre back into use. Other local authorities can follow suit. They should look at the example that is being set in Dumfries and follow it, because that approach is good for all.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): It is not only residential properties that are a problem in town centres; commercial properties are a problem, too. Is the planning system too inflexible to allow those properties to be brought into residential use?

Kevin Stewart: I do not think that there is inflexibility in the planning system. Often, local planning policies do not take account of what is happening in particular communities. I would be interested to hear from Mr Findlay about where he thinks that there are difficulties in the areas that he represents.

Frankly, what we see in certain places is that inflexibility has been built in and that somebody needs to come in and crack that, which is what is happening in Dumfries at the moment.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): On empty homes and the council tax surcharge, concerns were raised in the committee that some councils do not even bother to inspect the situation on site. As well as being hugely discourteous to

the individuals concerned, that shows a really quite worrying approach to fairness. Will the minister comment on that?

Kevin Stewart: I agree with Annabelle Ewing that that is extremely discourteous. The councils that do such things look at the initiative as a revenue-raising tool, rather than what it was designed for. That is what we need to change, and we need to encourage local authorities. If they took up the advice that is available from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, they could get it right, and we would be able to see change in every part of the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you wind up in a minute or so, please?

Kevin Stewart: I am conscious that I have taken a lot of interventions, Presiding Officer, and there are a lot of areas to cover.

I would like to cover one point relating to compulsory sale orders and compulsory purchase orders. I know that the planned compulsory sale orders are greatly anticipated. However, I have said that, given Brexit and the pressures on the legislative programme, there is very little parliamentary time to bring legislation forward, and we cannot do so in the current parliamentary session. I remain committed to introducing compulsory sale orders for local authorities, and we are also committed to the long-term reform of the compulsory purchase order system. We will bring forward a package of proposals to show how we can address those issues—how authorities can assemble land, tackle problem properties and capture land value uplifts. Those proposals will be ready for the next Administration to consider legislating on early in the next parliamentary session.

I will leave it at that, Presiding Officer. I will cover some of the other issues in my summing up. I thank the committee again for the comprehensive inquiry that it undertook and the work that it has done on an extremely important issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Graham Simpson to speak for around nine minutes, please.

15:17

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I will do my best, Presiding Officer. I wish you and other members a very happy new year.

It gives me great pleasure to kick off for the Scottish Conservatives in the first debate after the recess. We have to be honest: there is a mountain of work still to do in this area before we get it right.

Just before we trotted off for our festive break, we learned that the number of empty properties

and second homes has increased to its second-highest level since 2005. The latest figures show that in 2019 there were just over 65,000 second homes and empty properties. If we strip out second homes, the number of properties that have been empty for over six months stands—as it has done for a number of years—at around 40,000. We are making very little impact on the number of properties that are not in use. When we have a homelessness crisis and young people struggling to get their foot on the housing ladder, that is not good enough.

Before I move on, I also thank the clerks for their work in steering the committee through an important topic, as well as my fellow committee members: our very fair convener, James Dornan; his deputy, Sarah Boyack; Annabelle Ewing, Andy Wightman, Alexander Stewart and my good friend Kenny Gibson.

Why is this an important topic? Well, as the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and Shelter said in their recent letter to the committee, investment in empty homes can prove an effective way to boost the local economy and support community regeneration. Bringing empty homes back into use can be a sustainable way of increasing the housing stock across the country, benefiting the local community as a consequence.

Empty homes work can help to sustain fragile communities, and bringing homes back into use brings value for money. The average cost of renovating an empty property is between £6,000 and £25,000 compared to an estimated average cost of £120,000 to build a new home.

I am going to talk about the committee's inquiry and report. For me, there are two key recommendations. The first is that every council should have a dedicated empty homes officer—we have heard about that already. The second is that the Scottish Government should meet its manifesto commitment to bring forward compulsory sale order powers in this parliamentary session.

On the first recommendation, I can report a local success that we have heard about already. South Lanarkshire Council came in for some criticism in our report, as it was one of 11 councils not to have an empty homes officer. Another council in the area that I represent—Falkirk Council, which is much smaller—has two officers, and it is to be commended for that.

Kevin Stewart: I, too, commend Falkirk Council for the efforts that it has made. I visited it recently in that regard.

Bringing in an empty homes officer can make a real difference very quickly. Murdo MacLeod is the new empty homes officer in the Western Isles, and he has been in post for a little over a year. He has

brought 94 homes back into use in that very short period. Does Mr Simpson agree that others should look to the Western Isles and South Lanarkshire, follow them accordingly and do what is right for their communities by bringing blighted homes back into use?

Graham Simpson: They should certainly look to the Western Isles, but not to South Lanarkshire—maybe to Falkirk, which has been ahead on this.

Kevin Stewart: Sorry—I meant Falkirk.

Graham Simpson: In our evidence taking, South Lanarkshire also stood out as a council that took a hard line on applying the empty homes surcharge, and it was rightly criticised for that. Scottish Land & Estates expressed its frustration at the inconsistent way that discretion was being applied to the levy. Its representative said that, in a number of local authorities, people with empty homes with active repair plans, some of whom are waiting for building warrants from the council, have had the 200 per cent levy applied without any discussion and, in some cases, without the council sending a representative to visit the property.

That view was echoed at an informal session that we held with people from South Lanarkshire, who said that the council applied the levy rigidly without sending anyone out to see properties. That meant that those struggling with repairs were put in an even worse position. There was a sense that some councils were using the levy as a revenue-raising tool.

I return to the local success that I mentioned. After our report was published, I commented in the local press and—I will take some credit for this—South Lanarkshire Council is now looking to take on an empty homes officer. It will be good if it does. I also hope that it will reconsider its approach to the levy, because that is not helping.

The council has a very poor track record. For example, in East Kilbride, which is in the area that I used to represent as a councillor, there is a house that is boarded up. It is fire damaged and has been empty for about 10 years. That is an example of the kind of thing that should be tackled.

Kevin Stewart's response to our recommendation on compulsory sale orders was disappointing. We said:

“Given the strength of support for the development of CSO powers, the low uptake of CPO powers and a manifesto commitment to bring CSO powers forward in the current Parliamentary session, it is disappointing that draft proposals or legislation pertaining to CSO powers have not emerged.

Whilst acknowledging the Minister's views on legislative priorities and the impact of Brexit, the Committee recommends that the Scottish Government brings forward

strong proposals for the introduction of these powers and fulfils its manifesto commitment to bring them forward in this Parliamentary Session.

In view of the commonly cited issues associated with CPOs, the Committee would welcome an update from the Scottish Government on the development of CSO powers and how it will ensure that CSOs are less complicated, less resource intensive and less financially risky for Councils to use as an alternative to CPOs."

The minister responded only to that last point and his response was, sadly, rather woolly. He said:

"We will bring forward a package of proposals that addresses how authorities can assemble land, tackle problem properties and capture land value uplifts ready for the next administration to consider legislating on these matters. This requires careful consideration and we will keep the Committee updated as this work progresses."

Members should note the lack of any real timescale. That is not what we asked for, so perhaps the minister could flesh out the issue when he makes his closing speech. The proposal could be game changing with regard to getting empty homes back into use. I can see the issues and how it could be controversial, but, so long as there are checks and balances built into the legislation, councils should not be able to get ahead of themselves and order everyone to sell up. As we heard, there are lots of reasons why homes are empty. We deliberately did not look at second or holiday homes. An owner could be in hospital or in prison, or they could be abroad for a long period or mentally incapable and unable to sell.

The issue is a complex one that requires different solutions. That is why the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is so important, why having empty homes officers in every council matters and why giving councils more powers, to use with discretion and wisely, matters. Other members will focus on other parts of the report, and I look forward to hearing their contributions.

15:25

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I join others in wishing members a happy new year. It is 7 January, but it still feels a bit like a new year to me—so far, anyway.

I congratulate the Local Government and Communities Committee on its report "Empty Homes in Scotland", which is an excellent piece of work. As Graham Simpson said, to bring 40,000 homes back into use would be a game changer. Of course, the issue is much wider than that. Empty homes are often an indicator of decline and they help to drag neighbourhoods down, particularly when they are allowed to fall into disrepair. I say "allowed to" but, as has been

highlighted, in many cases owners are simply struggling to find the time and resources to act.

I also pay tribute to Andy Wightman, who is a member of the committee and who has written on the subject. His report on the issue in 2018 states:

"it is apparent that the greatest number of empty homes can be found in areas of high multiple social and economic deprivation".

The committee also highlighted that important point.

The committee's report clearly and helpfully sets out the diverse reasons why we have so many empty homes. As the committee says, it is worth noting that there is a very human element to that, with depopulation, market decline and bereavement all playing a part in the reasons why people do not want to sell property. Emotional attachment can also be a factor, and there can be legal issues. An owner may have plans to renovate their property but might unexpectedly suffer the loss of their employment. Homes over shops seem to be a particular problem requiring a particular solution, so perhaps the minister will address that in his closing speech.

As we know, rural areas face acute and specific challenges, with historically declining populations and a possible shortage of jobs affecting the vibrancy of communities. There are huge connections between empty homes and the vibrancy of communities.

I put on record my thanks to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership for its work and to the empty homes officers, who have helped to bring 4,000 homes back into use over the past decade. There is a consensus that those officers are absolutely key to bringing more homes back into use, not simply because they manage the empty homes in local authorities but because they are excellently placed to use their knowledge of the local housing environment and market to establish good relationships with local developers, solicitors and property owners in a holistic way that helps decisions to be made about how to bring homes back into use.

Reports about the use of empty homes officers show that there are positive experiences. As we have heard from the minister, 21 local authorities have an empty homes officer, although perhaps we now have 22, thanks to Graham Simpson. It is clear to me, from reading the report and listening to the debate, that those officers are a critical aspect of making a bigger difference. The local authorities that have not appointed such an officer need to do so.

There is a housing context. More than 130,000 people—probably a lot more—are on housing waiting lists. We are already in a housing crisis, with homelessness on the rise. Local authorities

are the key driver and they must be adequately resourced to carry out the role. They are the lifeblood of regeneration.

Kevin Stewart: Ms McNeill mentioned resources. My argument—the argument of the partnership and of many other stakeholders—is that, by employing an empty homes officer, local authorities will make a saving. In some cases, they will make big savings and, by bringing those properties back into use, they will bring in more income.

Pauline McNeill: That is a valid point. I am interested to know why the other local authorities have not made such an appointment. Perhaps the case for that needs to be made to them, too. Throughout the report, it is clear that the connection between empty homes and the regeneration of communities becomes a vital aspect of the work. Bringing empty homes back into use is a much wider issue.

I found it useful to read the committee's report about its members' visits, particularly to Newmilns, where they spoke to a couple who had inherited a home in the area but had trouble in selling it. The members also spoke to an owner in South Ayrshire who had a home that was unoccupied because, for four years, the flat above had serious recurring issues with water ingress, making their home uninhabitable. Those people were charged the council tax empty property levy, which indicates that there needs to be a rethink around that policy, because they had a problem to overcome. Property can be an asset but, in many cases, it can be a burden. Owners need the assistance of experts in local authorities to manage themselves out of those types of problems. That is the human element of empty homes.

The council tax levy is a crucial tool in the box, but it must be used for the purpose for which it was intended. We need a more consistent approach to its application. Councils can apply it with discretion but the current approach does not seem to be consistent. It might be deterring investment in empty properties. Scottish Land & Estates briefed the members before the debate. Some members, including Graham Simpson, have expressed concern that, although owners have on-going repair plans, the 200 per cent council tax levy was applied without any discussion. I am at a loss to understand why any local authority thinks that that is acceptable. Perhaps more work needs to be done with local authorities to make it clear that the levy is there to help bring homes back into use and is not a revenue-raising power. That does not apply to every local authority, but some of them seem to lack common sense.

Compulsory purchase orders are an essential tool in the regeneration of communities. In the

previous parliamentary session, which I was not part of, the Government introduced the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015—a specific act on regenerating communities, with additional powers. It was a good piece of legislation. However, it is disappointing that, despite that commitment and a commitment in the manifesto this time round, we hear that that work will probably not be done in this parliamentary session. Indeed, we do not know whether or when it will be done under the next Administration. That point was also made by Graham Simpson. Using a compulsory purchase order is a significant legal issue for authorities, and rightly so. There should be a high bar for authorities that wish to remove property mandatorily from an owner. However, at present, the process of setting the bar is too difficult or expensive. There are clear blockages to the use of the tool.

James Dornan: Does the member accept that the evidence from some local authorities was that it is not as complicated as some other authorities made out? Often, just the fear of taking owners to court causes the problem.

Pauline McNeill: Yes. I noted that, in his opening remarks, the convener made the point that local authorities fear an adverse risk in going through a legal process.

I have some experience of the process in my constituency. The bar is high for obvious reasons, particularly when we are regenerating communities in which there is a split decision and it can be controversial.

Kevin Stewart: Glasgow City Council is a good example of an authority that is doing very well, with an increase in the number of CPOs being obtained. It is working well with developers and registered social landlords, back to back, to ensure that compulsory purchase orders are progressed. I do not have the relevant statistic, but I have been told that the council now has a dedicated solicitor to deal with CPOs. I think that other local authorities should follow suit. Does Ms McNeill agree?

Pauline McNeill: I agree that local authorities require legal expertise to inform them about and talk them through the risks, which might not be as adverse to their positions as they think they are.

I will conclude on this point. Last September, the minister confirmed that there had been only nine CPOs in three years, but that figure seems rather low. Notwithstanding that there are possibly misapprehensions or misunderstandings about the use of compulsory purchase orders—and, of course, the fact that compulsory sale orders are a good alternative to them—it is possible that we will see out this parliamentary session before there will be a chance to legislate on them. That is

disappointing, because CPOs are such an important tool in our toolbox.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Andy Wightman, for a generous six minutes.

15:36

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I beg your pardon—was your request for a short six minutes?

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): A generous six minutes.

Andy Wightman: A generous six minutes—excellent.

I thank members who have already spoken in the debate. The committee's work on this subject has provided a fascinating insight into a problem that continues to bedevil Scotland. I was particularly pleased to hear in detail about and to pay attention to the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which has done vital work in this area.

As other members have said, given the housing crisis that we face—people with no homes; others paying too much for housing; people living in unsuitable accommodation; the extent of second home ownership; and the rise of unlawful short-term letting—we should be seeking to use our existing housing stock, including empty homes, as efficiently as possible.

I note from the statistics on homelessness that, in 2018-19, 36,465 homeless applications were made across Scotland and 29,894 households were assessed as being homeless. Those figures equate to one household losing its home approximately every 17 minutes. There are more than enough empty homes to meet the housing needs of those families but, of course, they will not always be matched up. Kevin Stewart mentioned the 1,128 empty homes that were brought into use last year, but I note that, since 2016, we have had a 33 per cent increase in the number of empty homes. At that rate, 35 years will pass before they are all brought into use.

Last year, I was also intrigued to read Shelter Scotland's empty homes value report, which managed to highlight very well the range of benefits that would accrue if we were to make better use of our housing stock. It includes a useful overview of the costs and benefits that are associated with taking action.

As other members have said, there are many reasons for houses lying empty. As our convener James Dornan mentioned, hearing direct testimony from home owners as well as case studies from professionals was particularly illuminating for the committee.

From the evidence that we took, it is clear that there is real value in councils having dedicated empty homes officers. I agree that all councils should have officers with such a function, but it is important not to get too hung up on their job titles: some of them do such work but are not called empty homes officers.

The committee also paid attention to the idea of council tax being raised. Our investigation has revealed mixed views on the powers that are available to local authorities to vary the levels of council tax that they impose. As the minister and others have said, a discount is provided with the intention that such homes should be brought back into use. The committee heard widespread criticism of the levy being applied in ways that did not take account of people's individual circumstances. However, we also heard from authorities such as Perth and Kinross Council, which did recognise such variations. I welcome the minister's commitment to review, in a year's time, how the guidance in relation to this power is working. Ultimately, the council tax is a tax base that belongs to local government. Neither this Parliament nor ministers should interfere in the freedom of councils either to set tax rates as they see fit or to implement statutory variance powers.

In his intervention, Neil Findlay mentioned non-domestic properties. Councils can increase the council tax on empty homes by up to 200 per cent, but the owners of empty listed buildings or derelict land with no buildings pay no rates at all. Nor are rates paid if the owner is a trustee or a company that has been wound up. The owners of non-domestic properties that are empty in the long term enjoy a 10 per cent reduction in rates, which seems disproportionate in the relationship between the non-domestic and domestic sectors.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Andy Wightman: I will, if it is brief.

Neil Findlay: Andy Wightman is knowledgeable on the subject, so I wonder whether he thinks that there are any planning barriers to commercial properties coming back into residential use.

Andy Wightman: I thank Neil Findlay for his intervention, because it reminds me that I asked the minister during a committee evidence session about the town centre review and I think that he committed to go and look at it again. That review was conducted in 2013 by Malcolm Fraser and others; Pauline McNeill mentioned it, too. One of the problems that was identified by the review was that there is a 20-year limit on residential leases. A lot of commercial owners of property happily lease the commercial property and would like to lease the property above the shops and businesses for residential use, but they want to lease it for longer

than 20 years and they are prohibited in law from doing so. I think that it is time to look again at that legal limitation.

Other powers, such as compulsory purchase and sale orders, have been mentioned. I was intrigued when the minister told us in committee that 13 empty homes had been purchased using CPOs. That is welcome and there is a widespread understanding that the figure could be much greater.

I will briefly mention compulsory sale orders, because they were a recommendation of the land reform review group in 2014. The Government consulted on compulsory sale orders in the summer of 2015, and in its 2016 manifesto it committed to:

“bring forward proposals to modernise and improve powers for compulsory sales orders.”

It is disappointing that the minister has dropped that commitment. He said in committee that that was due to pressures of Brexit on Government time. He said in his remarks in this debate that it was due to a lack of “parliamentary time”. I cannot comment on the timescales—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Andy Wightman: I will complete my point and then perhaps the intervention will be more meaningful.

I cannot comment on the lack of time in Government—that is a matter for Government—but there is no lack of time in Parliament as we have a five-year session. The manifesto commitment was to “bring forward proposals”, not necessarily to introduce legislation. I and other members of the committee would be keen to see the proposals in this parliamentary session. We would perhaps be quite relaxed if the legislation followed in subsequent years.

Kevin Stewart: There is no lack of will on the part of the Government to change the situation, but there is a lack of time and resource, because civil servants and others have been working very hard on Brexit and other matters. As Andy Wightman is well aware, more so than many others, compulsory sale orders relate to a particularly complex piece of law and would involve unpicking mid-19th century legislation to ensure that we get the CPO and CSO powers absolutely right. I am quite sure that no-one in the Parliament wants to introduce legislation that will not work. The issue is complex and it requires time. There is no lack of will, but there is a lack of time.

Andy Wightman: I understand the lack of Government time and I am not seeking legislation during this session. We would like to see a paper

that outlines the proposals and the problems that have been identified by the Government—that would be useful to us, so that we can interrogate them. I encourage the minister to put forward proposals before this parliamentary session is over.

The inquiry deliberately did not look at second homes. As we know, the impact of second homes on local markets is a long-standing issue in rural areas and also in some urban areas. In our view, all second homes should be subject to planning consent.

More fundamentally, we need to re-orientate how we conceptualise housing. It is in the public interest to make sure that there is investment in the long term, well beyond the period of occupancy or ownership of anyone’s private interest. Such a perspective lies at the root of issues that we have seen during our work on the maintenance of tenements. Housing is not simply private property; it is part of public infrastructure. When we see it in that light, we might eventually sort the problem of empty homes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will move to the open debate. I have been generous with interventions in the opening speeches and we have a little time left, but nothing too lengthy, thank you.

15:44

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): We all see empty homes in our communities, with houses sometimes lying empty for months or even years on end. The Local Government and Communities Committee set out to discover how many homes are empty in Scotland and the reasons why, and it worked collegiately and in a collaborative way to realise the answers.

It is deeply frustrating that, while people are homeless, tens of thousands of homes in Scotland lie empty and unused. Changes in the law that have allowed councils to increase council tax on certain types of empty properties do not appear to have helped in many local authority areas—of which, more later. The impact on neighbouring homes can also be significant. Just one empty home can bring down the overall image of an area and make other properties harder to sell. Such a problem grows when more and more homes in an area are empty.

According to recent figures, as is outlined in our report, 83,435 of the 2.62 million homes in Scotland lie empty and, of those, 39,110 had been empty for six months and 24,471 had been empty for 12 months or more. The problem is particularly bad in parts of rural and island Scotland with, for

example, 5.8 per cent of homes in west Arran, in my constituency, lying empty.

As this is a problem for all of Scotland, it is in everyone's interests to resolve it. Before we can deliver solutions, it is best to try to understand why we have empty homes. That has been touched on already by a number of members. An obvious reason is bereavement. Perhaps someone has passed away and their family is too attached to the property to sell it, or there is no family. The property owner may be unwell and in hospital or a care home. They could be abroad for long periods, or in prison, and therefore physically unable to do anything about their house lying empty. It is clear that there can be no simple answer to such varied and complicated problems. I believe that James Dornan put it best when he said that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

The Scottish National Party Government has funded the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership since 2010, through Shelter Scotland. In evidence to the committee, the minister confirmed that the Government had recently doubled funding for the partnership to more than £400,000 a year until 2021. The initiative gives advice to home owners and works with councils to develop empty homes services that help to put empty private sector homes into use. It also provides training services and guidance for empty homes officers, support for local projects that bring empty homes back into use and support for councils to develop empty homes strategies.

During the committee's inquiry, many witnesses commented on the valuable work that the partnership has carried out and the high quality of the advice, guidance and workshops that it has provided to the officers.

One of our recommendations is that every council in Scotland should have an empty homes officer who is responsible for identifying empty houses in their area and bringing them back into use. As we have heard, 24 of Scotland's 32 councils have empty homes officers, but I hope that they will all have them by the end of the year. I think that any local authority that is listening to the debate and that does not have such officers will find that the evidence that is presented on the matter today and in our report is compelling.

The committee heard first-hand evidence from people who have had direct support from empty homes officers, and most stressed the benefits that can be brought, not only to those with an empty home, but also through the officers dealing with and acting as a go-between for other council departments, solicitors and bodies such as community regeneration organisations. The minister outlined their success in returning empty homes to habitation.

I will expand a little on council tax. The "Empty Homes in Scotland" report states:

"Some empty homes can be exempt from council tax ... for example where the owner has to move out of the house to receive long term care or ... where a house has been legally re-possessed by a mortgage lender."

It also states:

"On homes which would normally be eligible for council tax, such as those which become unoccupied and unfurnished, there is an initial exemption on council tax for up to six months".

If the house remains empty for six to 12 months, the local authority may offer a discount on council tax of between 10 and 50 per cent. The extra revenue must then be used by the authority to support the provision of new housing.

Since April 2013, local authorities have also had the power to remove the discount or increase the council tax by up to 100 per cent for certain properties that have been lying empty for 12 months or more. That is known as a council tax levy. If the owner is attempting to sell the property, the surcharge can be applied only after 24 months. The extra money can then be dedicated to whatever project the local authority chooses, and not just the provision of new housing.

As colleagues have mentioned, some authorities that have not had empty homes officers have taken a blanket approach to the application of the levy and have charged it immediately as soon as a property has been empty for 12 months, in some cases with no discussion and no council representative being sent to assess the situation. That has caused considerable distress to those who are struggling to refurbish, who have been hampered by that additional taxation. Owners of empty homes who gave evidence to the committee echoed that. They explained that the levy had been applied to their homes automatically and that they were struggling to complete repairs on the empty property so that it could be habitable while also trying to pay the council tax bill. Surely councils should be more flexible when it comes to such varied and complicated individual cases, rather than automatically applying double taxation.

The Scottish Government certainly has much to consider following the report's findings and recommendations. As we have heard, all committee members are disappointed that we are not progressing compulsory sales orders. Admittedly, it is a complex matter, but such orders could certainly bring many homes and buildings back into productive use. I am glad that the minister has reiterated his personal commitment to such legislation. I believe that it is possible, as colleagues have mentioned, for proposals to be introduced within this parliamentary session. If we are talking about the time that is taken up by civil servants working on legislation, I can certainly

think of some legislation that is progressing at the moment that a CSO bill should be prioritised over.

Overall, the minister's response was encouraging. He focused on the need for continued partnership working. This November, a year after the report was published, committee colleagues and I look forward to discussing with the minister how things have improved and what more can and will be done in the light of those improvements.

15:50

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest as a councillor at Aberdeen City Council.

It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate, because finding a solution to the problem of empty homes is so important in helping us to improve the housing situation in Scotland. The report that was recently published by the Local Government and Communities Committee has given us a good insight into the current situation. It makes two very clear recommendations. It says that each local authority should have at least one dedicated empty homes officer and that the Scottish Government should meet its manifesto commitment to introduce powers relating to compulsory sales orders in this parliamentary session. I live in hope. The report recognises very clearly that each empty home has a unique set of circumstances. Each needs to be handled individually in order to break any logjams that can interrupt the reoccupation of many private and public properties.

I will not repeat the statistics, many of which have been outlined by Graham Simpson and other members. However, I will elaborate on a number of issues that are familiar to me, and give examples of why the report's recommendations are pertinent to current housing issues.

An example that typifies the complex situations that can occur involves a block of 1970s apartments in central Aberdeen. The block is in an area that is not the best in Aberdeen but certainly not the worst. It is in an area with good landscaping, green areas and some trees. The immediate area consists of three and four-storey apartment blocks and some two-storey semi-detached dwellings, which are from about the same time. However, being in the centre of Aberdeen, the block is prone to habitation by many single residents, students and temporary residents, and it is often subject to vandalism and drug and alcohol culture.

The block consists of six relatively well-maintained two-room apartments. Four of the flats were purchased quite sensibly under the right to buy, as they represented a good proposition and

were then in relatively good condition. Regrettably, three of the flats are now empty and have been so for some time. On the top floor, there remains one privately occupied flat and one of the two council flats.

On the middle floor, there is a further council tenant, who is described by the remaining residents as the neighbour from hell. The list of problems includes parties, drug taking and dealing, excessive noise all through the night, smells, debris on the landings, damage to the front doors and repeated fire emergencies. The disruption has been going on for months, despite other occupants having made protests to the council. The disruption in the block and the culture in the surrounding area have led to all but one of the private occupants leaving the block. They hoped to sell the properties—or, at the very least, to rent them—but, given the situation with the neighbour and the reputation of the address, they have been unsuccessful in finding either tenants or purchasers. They have simply had to walk away, so three potential city centre homes lie vacant, unused and unusable.

Obviously, the current economic situation in relation to housing in the city is a contributing factor, but the disruptive neighbour was undoubtedly a major factor in the situation. It is clear, as the committee's report says, that such a situation has a unique set of circumstances and can be resolved only with a lot of individual attention and housing officers being given the correct powers to use. It is certainly undesirable that such properties remain empty, given their quality and situation.

It is not surprising that, in the north-east, there are many empty properties waiting for sale, as workers have found it necessary to move away from Aberdeen because of the oil downturn. As members may well know, until recently, property prices in the north-east were excessively high, and a major readjustment has been taking place.

The previous high prices have encouraged many new developments. Those developments are still being built; in fact, many of them are only partially completed. In order to survive, developers are drip-feeding properties on to the market one by one, so older properties for sale are competing with new properties and their many advantages and incentives. Existing properties remain available for sale and unoccupied for many months while their owners or buy-to-let landlords try to move on. Unfortunately, that situation shows no sign of abating. Affordable social housing, built as part of those new developments, is similarly involved. That new affordable housing is far more attractive than older social housing. Potential tenants decline older accommodation or those in

remote and difficult locations in favour of new properties, leaving the older ones empty.

Properties in the north-east that are remote and have poor transportation connections—which get poorer as the transport infrastructure declines—are also underoccupied. Individual identification of problems in each case is required. It is vital that empty property officers are in place and have the right tools available to assist them to deal with each case.

There is an issue regarding permanent second homes. I declare an interest, as I have a small share in an old wooden cottage near Nairn. In some areas, second homes affect the local housing availability because they inflate the market. In other areas, they are rented out regularly to tourists as an essential part of the tourism infrastructure, and they provide opportunities for Scottish tourism rather than overseas carbon-expensive holidays. In many cases, second-home owners have provided capital for the reconstruction of isolated properties, which are inconvenient, remote and not suitable for modern residents. Here, tools should be available for local authorities to make their own decisions within their areas about how those properties are best dealt with.

Significant issues remain when dealing with the problem of empty homes. However, with the committee's report, its recommendations and the political will, we can make the changes needed to improve the situation across Scotland.

15:57

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Local Government and Communities Committee's recent report on empty homes in Scotland, which was published on 10 November last year. As we have heard, the report followed a number of very useful evidence sessions with relevant stakeholders, affected property owners and the minister, and it highlights the key issues that emerged from those evidence sessions. Before I turn to a few of those issues, I thank the committee clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre for the excellent support and research that they provided.

The first key issue that emerged is that we have no way of knowing with any exactitude the scale of the problem. Figures for the number of empty properties in Scotland vary from 64,000 to 83,000. That is because neither of the main sources of data on empty homes in Scotland provides an accurate reflection of the position. On the one hand, the data emerging from the National Records of Scotland almost certainly inflates the scale of the problem, as the data collected includes unoccupied new builds and dwellings

awaiting demolition. On the other hand, the data collected by the Scottish Government almost certainly underrepresents the scale of the problem. Indeed, the data that the Scottish Government collects is linked to how each local authority reports empty properties, as per the local council tax records, and that varies per authority and does not include undeclared empty properties. That lack of accurate data is far from satisfactory, which is why I am pleased to note that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which is funded by the Scottish Government, is working with the Scottish Government and independent researchers to undertake a geographic information system mapping exercise of empty homes throughout Scotland. When completed, the map will go a considerable way to providing a more accurate picture of the number of empty homes in Scotland, which is vital to ensuring that we can tailor the solutions to meet the needs of each local area.

Another key issue that emerged was the way in which some local authorities are deploying the council tax levy. We have heard about that already this afternoon. The levy, which was introduced in 2013, allows local authorities not only to remove the empty property reliefs available but to charge a council tax increase of up to 100 per cent for certain properties that have been empty for 12 months or more.

Although that tool was to incentivise bringing empty homes back into use, what we have seen in some local authorities is recourse to it as a surcharge and a pure and simple revenue-raising instrument. It is clear from the evidence that the committee took that some local authorities simply apply a blanket approach to the deployment of the council tax levy and immediately proceed to the 100 per cent levy at the 12-month cut-off point rather than use some discretion, flexibility and, indeed, common sense. In fact, that commonsense approach was directed in the applicable Scottish guidance.

In some cases, as I highlighted in an intervention to the minister earlier, the local authorities concerned do not even bother to arrange for any on-site inspection to determine on the ground whether works are progressing and in what way and whether active interventions are being made to move matters on. It is difficult to understand how such an unfair bureaucratic approach could ever be justified. Moreover, such an approach is, in any event, entirely counterproductive as it impacts negatively on householders' ability to complete outstanding works and thereby shorten delays. It can also lead to indefinite delays in getting empty homes back into use as money dries up, householders get into a ghastly spiral of further debt and no money is available to continue the works to upgrade the property.

Graham Simpson: Does Annabelle Ewing agree that councils should have to visit, or at least engage with, property owners before applying the levy?

Annabelle Ewing: It would be difficult to understand why councils would not do that. Perhaps each local authority chief executive in Scotland could set the record straight on how they will now approach the matter, with fairness at the heart of their approach. I am pleased to note that the minister indicated in his response to my earlier intervention, as he has indicated previously, that he understands the problems around the use of the levy and has again encouraged local authorities to sharpen their act on it. I hope that he will undertake to keep the pressure up in that regard.

There is also the important issue of appointing dedicated empty homes officers. We have heard a lot in the debate about how the appointment of such officers can make a key difference. It is not simply a case of rebadging an existing role; it is about creating a role that then works out of the silo with building standards officials, legal officials, environmental health officials and town centre regeneration officials. That can make a key difference. It is vital that each local authority now goes ahead and appoints empty homes officers, working in partnership with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. I am pleased to note that the committee called on every local authority to do that very thing.

The problem of empty homes is, sadly, a fact of life across both urban and rural Scotland. Apart from any other consideration, the empty homes are a wasted asset. In my constituency of Cowdenbeath, one can clearly see the negative impacts of that: the blight on high streets, the problems for neighbours living next to an empty property, and so on. We have heard that there are varied reasons for having empty homes, but it is clear that, if we start to take the actions identified in the committee's report and the committee's recommendations are duly taken on board, we will start to see a major decrease in the number of empty homes in Scotland.

16:03

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): While walking from Waverley station to this building every day, and visiting some of our towns and cities over the Christmas period, I have, increasingly, been struck by the extent and human impact of homelessness. We see increasing numbers of people sleeping on the streets—our fellow human beings reduced to sleeping on cardboard boxes or pallets in the depths of winter, with all the implications that that has for their health and wellbeing, and for our society, our economy and our communities and

their cohesion. We cannot claim to be a civilised country when we tolerate someone being made homeless every 17 or 18 minutes and when 36 more children every day have no home.

Landlords and hotel owners make significant money from provision of temporary accommodation. Many provide a room that has no cooking facilities for residents other than a kettle. Those properties are always full, such is the demand that is placed on Scotland's councils. Homelessness is a profitable business for the owners: for example, £2.25 million was spent on temporary accommodation in West Lothian last year. Of course, they provide an immediate sticking-plaster solution, but they suck huge amounts of money out of the system, with no long-term benefit.

In Glasgow, Shelter, the housing charity, has been forced to take a four-page advert in *The Herald* newspaper to highlight its impending legal action on Glasgow City Council's failure to house homeless people. That is an unprecedented act for a national charity, and it is a dreadful situation. As members have mentioned, across Scotland in tourism hotspots such as Edinburgh, parts of Fife and the Highlands and Islands, local people are unable to buy or rent a home because the Airbnb and holiday-let market has driven up prices and taken housing stock out of the reach of local people. The average cost of a house in Edinburgh is now an astonishing £253,000, which is way out of the reach of most working people, and by a very long way. It was a huge mistake that Parliament failed to take action on that during the process of the Planning (Scotland) Bill.

On our high streets and industrial estates, towns are blighted by a combination of empty homes and empty shops and units. While, on the one hand, there are empty properties of various types, on the other, homeless people are sleeping in doorways. Surely we can find the wherewithal to bring those two issues together in order to address economic blight and the housing crisis—although doing so will need real financial and political commitment.

The committee report identifies good practice and the good work of empty homes officers. I commend those public servants for the progress that has been made, but we cannot expect councils to take on staff and new responsibilities while budgets are cut year on year. The minister says that the budget for the initiative has been increased, but if an empty homes officer is appointed—

Kevin Stewart rose—

Neil Findlay: I ask the minister to wait until I have finished my point. An empty homes officer who is appointed in a local authority will inevitably have to liaise with many departments and officials

in the council. Council officers across the piece have lost so many staff in departments, and they operate on a shoestring. People will tell the minister that, if he speaks to them.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Findlay heard me say earlier that many folks have said that employing empty homes officers makes massive savings for councils. They deal with a huge amount of the problems that exist when there are empty homes in a community.

I am disappointed that some local authorities have chosen not to listen to others that have the good news stories happening in their places. One authority that has failed thus far to appoint an empty homes officer is West Lothian Council. I hope that it and the other Lothian councils will follow the City of Edinburgh Council's recent road-to-Damascus conversion in appointing empty homes officers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): This is a long intervention, minister.

Kevin Stewart: EHOs can bring a sense of reality about what is required.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Neil Findlay the time back.

Neil Findlay: The same applies in respect of enforcement officers in planning departments: many departments cannot enforce conditions on abandoned or derelict properties, or take forward legal action or CPOs, because they do not have the personnel or the cash to do so. I know that about my area from my constituency case load. You can shake your head all you like, minister, but will you come with me to meet West Lothian Council? We could discuss the resourcing issues that mean that it cannot prosecute and progress enforcement cases. That is an open invitation to the minister. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, do not appeal to me for interventions. Ask the member.

Kevin Stewart: I am always happy to meet local authorities. My difficulty in visiting West Lothian Council is that it often does not allow ministers to visit projects in its area. I hope that Mr Findlay can persuade it to change its mind on that front as well.

Neil Findlay: The minister is scraping the barrel, now.

I know that the motivation behind the report is the desire to provide more homes. I want councils and housing organisations to look innovatively at how to provide more housing. We should be repopulating town centres by bringing empty commercial and retail properties into the residential property sector. That would give an economic boost to areas that are affected and

would provide new, interesting and vibrant residential spaces. What is the point of leaving properties to decline over time just because they have been allocated to commercial or retail use in the local plan? The minister said that there are no planning barriers to doing that, so why are so many commercial and retail properties on our high streets empty?

We see huge industrial units lying empty for years in some of our bigger towns, such as Livingston. With some imagination, they could be developed into new and exciting living spaces. None of that can be done without money and taking risks, but the reward could be great.

I stress that I am not advocating a planning free-for-all or houses being thrown up just anywhere. Houses have to be in the right place, but we have to look innovatively at how we can provide homes for all.

I welcome the report, but we really need to take a much bolder approach if we are to address the pressing housing needs that exist across the entire country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members not to use the word "you" when they speak. I know that I fight use of that word in vain, but the only "you" sitting here is moi.

16:11

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Bliadhna mhath ùr, dhuibh. Happy new year.

On the islands, as in many other parts of the country, housing represents a major challenge in many communities. Bringing empty homes back into use is a significant part of dealing with that challenge. The committee report is a very welcome addition to the debate.

First, I want to say something about the context in the islands, and why bringing empty homes into use in the islands has particular importance.

I make no apology for stressing the seemingly obvious fact that a person who gets a job in the Western Isles cannot commute to it daily from somewhere else. What is perhaps less obvious to many people, unless they have looked at a map, is that when a person gets a job at one end of my constituency, they cannot commute every day from it to the other end of my constituency.

The shortage of affordable houses across the islands therefore has social consequences and economic consequences. Good jobs that are advertised in those parts of Scotland regularly go unfilled. The reason that many employers give for that is the lack of affordable places for people to live. Many people are amazed to discover that

there are nearly 600 people on the waiting list for the Hebridean Housing Partnership, which is the only housing association in the Western Isles and which inherited all of what was formerly the council's housing stock. About 450 of those people are new applicants.

The Scottish Government has made the very important offer to the HHP and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar of £25 million to invest in new rented housing if that money can be spent by next year. The biggest challenge for all involved will be in ensuring that the money benefits housing projects in rural areas as well as in the town of Stornoway. Although there is an admitted tendency towards urbanisation even in the islands, that is driven by historical lack of supply in the rural areas as much as by demand. Addressing that means that we must continue to be brave more generally about building houses in rural Scotland in areas where there is no recorded demand for them. That is because we cannot record demand for affordable rented houses in areas where there have been no such houses for which people can apply.

The Scottish Government's support for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership seeks to address some of the issues. Practical support has included provision of an advice service for the owners of empty homes and for affected communities, in order to help to bring empty homes back into use.

There are, in the Western Isles, just over 500 empty homes that have been uninhabited for six months or more. Some 8.3 per cent of dwellings in the islands were vacant in 2017, compared with the Scottish average of 3.1 per cent. The similarity between the number of empty houses and the number of people who are waiting for a house is probably coincidental, and nobody pretends that all those houses are fit to be brought back into use, but many could be, and the sooner a house can be used, the less chance there is of its falling into a ruinous condition.

The minister has rather beaten me to this point, but I will make it anyway. It is worth recognising, as he has done, the work that has been done by the local authority, Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar, on the matter. I want to acknowledge in particular the work that is being done by one local government officer. Murdo MacLeod, who is the empty homes officer with the council, was given the "outstanding individual" title at the Howdens Scottish empty homes champions of the year awards. Mr MacLeod is the first person to hold the post for the comhairle and has far exceeded expectations, through having brought 61 properties back into use in only 12 months.

Kevin Stewart: I do not want to correct Dr Allan, but my latest figures show that Mr MacLeod has brought 94 properties on the islands back into

use. That is one third more than Dr Allan said. Mr MacLeod deserves plaudits for that figure.

Dr Allan: He certainly does, and I am more than prepared to go with the minister's figure rather than the one that I gave.

The empty homes officer in the Western Isles has traced the owners of many houses in order to find out their intentions. If my figures are correct, approximately 60 per cent of the owners live in the Outer Hebrides.

Nationally, since 2010 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has continued to bring an increasing number of privately owned homes back into use, with almost 700 homes being brought back into use in the past six months alone.

I conclude by mentioning something else that is relevant to the debate. Interventions will need to be made in housing on the islands on a range of fronts. The Scottish Parliament is, I hope, going to give local authorities new powers to place limits on certain areas being used for short-term lets—a problem that was rightly raised by Neil Findlay. I repeat my plea to local authorities, that they consider using such powers strategically in specific places. We need holiday homes for our tourism economy, but we also need the powers to be used, because otherwise the biggest problem with empty houses that some parts of the Highlands and Islands will face in the future is that whole villages will be full in the summer and empty for the other six months of the year. We need to ensure that villages are not transformed from communities into resorts in the space of just a few years.

On that note, I warmly welcome the committee's report and commend the hard work that is being done across Scotland—not least in the Western Isles—to bring much-needed houses back into use.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jeremy Balfour, to be followed by John Mason. Mr Balfour is the penultimate speaker in the open debate.

16:17

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and I wish you and others in the chamber a happy new year. I also congratulate the convener and the committee on their report.

I have found the debate interesting to listen to, although I was not on the committee. It has given me food for thought. The subject is important because, as Mr Findlay pointed out, there are far too many homeless people on our streets across Scotland, and one of the solutions to that is more housing for individuals to live in.

I also agree with the minister in congratulating Edinburgh—better late than never—on appointing an appropriate empty homes officer. I suspect that the issue in Edinburgh is bigger than the council appreciates, and there will be more empty homes out there than are on the record. Like the minister, I encourage others in the Lothians to go down the same road.

We have heard interesting points from a number of members on compulsory sales orders and compulsory purchase orders. The committee's report points out that compulsory purchase orders have been used by local authorities in Scotland only 13 times in the past three years. As Pauline McNeill said, part of the reason for that are the legal complications, with local authorities not taking that route.

Kevin Stewart: The Government has refreshed all the guidance on compulsory purchase orders in recent times. We have also told every single local authority that, if they want to access the expertise in the Government to help them move CPOs along, we will provide that help. We cannot do a CPO for them, but we will help as much as we possibly can. I urge members, including Jeremy Balfour, to evangelise to local authorities that that help is available.

Jeremy Balfour: I hope that COSLA and local authorities not only hear but act on that helpful comment.

I am slightly confused about where we are on compulsory sale orders. Perhaps the minister can clarify the situation in his closing speech. I fully understand that the Government takes the view that there is no time in this parliamentary session to introduce primary legislation on the subject. Andy Wightman made a useful point in that regard, but I am still slightly unsure about whether draft legislation will be consulted on before 2021. Will that legislation be ready to go for any incoming Government, should it want to introduce it? Can the other related work be done—for example, consultations and speaking to stakeholders—so that it is all ready to pick up off the shelf? I am genuinely unsure about the Government's position on that.

Andy Wightman and Neil Findlay raised an important point about buildings other than homes that are empty in our cities and towns. Before becoming an MSP, I had the privilege of working for Scottish Churches Housing Action. My role was to transform derelict churches into affordable homes. I can point members to a number of examples across Scotland where that has happened.

To solve the housing crisis, we need to look at all empty properties and encourage the owners to consider whether they can be developed into

affordable housing. That would be good for our communities and our country.

I again thank the committee for securing this helpful debate. I look forward to the minister's engagement with the committee towards the end of this year, to see where we are on the subject and where we can go with it.

16:22

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Presiding Officer, you said that Jeremy Balfour was the penultimate speaker, so I guess that I am the ultimate speaker.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but were you trying to correct me?

John Mason: No—I would not dare correct the Presiding Officer. I was trying to be slightly humorous, but I have obviously failed.

I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in today's debate. I have not been a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee, but housing, homelessness and empty homes are high on my agenda, given my constituency in the east end of Glasgow.

It seems to me that there is a lot in the Local Government and Communities Committee's report that almost everyone agrees with. That includes, for example, our wanting empty homes to be brought back into use as soon as possible; our acceptance that there can be good reasons for a home being empty on a temporary basis; our belief in the centrality of local government, together with the advantages of each council having an empty homes officer leading on the topic; and our wanting compulsory purchase orders to be used more.

I was particularly struck by the figures in Shelter Scotland's briefing, which I think that Graham Simpson has already referred to and which show that the average cost of renovating an empty property is between £6,000 and £25,000, whereas a new build has an average cost of £120,000. It clearly makes economic sense to make better use of the housing that we already have.

I accept that, as others have said, the committee inquiry was inevitably limited in scope and could not possibly cover every aspect of the subject. Specifically, paragraph 6 says that

"The Committee decided not to include second or holiday homes".

That is fair enough. However, I want to raise a couple of points that are perhaps particularly relevant to a city such as Glasgow, both of which relate to buildings that may not have been housing in the past but which could well be housing in the

future. Andy Wightman, Neil Findlay and Jeremy Balfour also touched on these points.

The first point concerns shops on the ground floor of tenements. Clearly, with the growth of supermarkets and shopping centres, not to mention online shopping, it seems unlikely that we will ever need as many small shops under tenements as we have traditionally had. Many have become hot food shops and cafes, but I see that many are still sitting empty after long periods of time. That is despite the efforts of Glasgow City Council and, in my local area, Parkhead Housing Association, which have sought to refurbish those properties and make them more attractive to let—not always successfully. There has been some success in turning empty shops into flats, but there is scope to roll that out on a larger scale. To touch on some of the points that Mr Findlay made, the issue is not just a planning one; ownership is part of the issue, too. Glasgow City Council might be reluctant to lose shops in a street such as Saltmarket, which is quite central, yet there is not the demand in that area for the premises that are currently sitting empty.

The second point—the reverse of that situation, in a way—concerns the five or six-storey buildings in the city centre where only the ground floor is occupied by shops, with the levels above seeming to be largely empty. Those floors might have been used by department stores, or they might have been storage space or office space that no longer meets modern requirements. As others have said, such buildings are not empty homes as such, as they were not used as homes previously, but they are spaces that are suitable to be converted into housing. That would fit well with the desire of Glasgow and other cities to increase the city-centre population again.

Another fair point that the report makes is that there can be good reasons for a house to be empty for a period. The executive summary makes a point about the council tax levy on empty homes and says that councils should use those powers flexibly. I am dealing with a case involving a tenement that was gutted by fire. It has taken about 18 months to restore the flats. Although council tax was waived to start with, it was charged again after a year, which helps no one. I am still trying to establish whether Glasgow City Council is applying the rules too harshly, or whether the rules are binding the council's freedom to be flexible.

In its submission to the committee, Glasgow City Council makes the point that it feels that it has limited powers to deal with empty properties and says that it will generally act only if there is a public health nuisance or if there are concerns regarding the safety of the building. It also makes the point that compulsory sales orders will be an

attractive tool only if they are simpler and more straightforward than compulsory purchase orders, which might be the council's preferred option, even if CSOs are available.

I suppose that that all raises the question of how long it is reasonable to expect a house to remain empty. Again, the report touches on that subject, and says that families have many reasons, including emotional ones, for being reluctant to sell the family home. Last January, my mother went into a care home. As a family, we were a bit reluctant to say that she would never return home, although that was probably what we were all thinking. At the start of the summer, I encouraged my brother and sister—and my mother—to agree that we should sell the house. It sold fairly quickly, and the new people moved in just before Christmas, which means that it was empty for just under a year. However, as is touched on in paragraph 14, some families can face a much longer process than that, due to a variety of reasons. For example, families might disagree among themselves; there might be no power of attorney in place; the house might be in an area where homes do not sell easily; or families could be holding out for an unrealistic price—we got less for my mother's house than I had hoped.

Like others, I have some good areas in my constituency. In Mount Vernon, I can see a bungalow—usually a popular type of property—sitting empty and deteriorating. There is always a story behind each home, although we do not always know what it is.

I close by mentioning a topic that is related to empty homes. If housing generally and tenements specifically are not properly maintained, the likelihood of their becoming empty increases. Therefore, the tenement maintenance report that a parliamentary working group produced last year is important, and I welcome the Scottish Government's positive response to it, which came out on 20 December. If we can maintain our tenements better than we have done, we increase the chance that they will not gradually become empty.

I commend the committee for its work on the topic, and I hope that we can keep it on the Parliament's agenda in the coming months and years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. I call Pauline McNeill to close for Labour.

16:29

Pauline McNeill: In opening the debate, the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee, James Dornan, said that there is a strong public interest in dealing with

empty homes and that a joined-up approach is necessary. He pointed out that local authorities might be taking an unnecessarily risk-averse approach to using the powers that are available to them.

Neil Findlay set the scene: homelessness and rough sleeping are rising, and there is a need to increase the supply of affordable homes to deal with our housing crisis. Andy Wightman rightly said that housing is part of our public infrastructure and that how we conceptualise housing is what matters. I agree.

Annabelle Ewing made an important point about the figure for the number of empty homes that we should use and how that is calculated, which is an issue that I was confused about as I prepared for the debate. Graham Simpson provided updated figures. It is important to have data collection so that we have accurate information and can all agree on the figure that we want to use. In that way, we will know how many empty homes there are across Scotland.

It has emerged from the debate that what needs to be sorted above all else is the issue of how local authorities apply the range of tools that are available to them to deal with empty homes. It is clear to me that the application of the council tax levy is too crude and that there needs to be more guidance on, or more discussion with local authorities about, what is expected of them regarding the use of that power. After all, it was provided so that local authorities could tackle the blight that empty homes were creating across our communities and so that those homes could be brought back into use. We might need to revisit the issue and to reset the use of that power.

On compulsory sale orders, which the minister confirmed have been used only nine times in three years—

Kevin Stewart: No, I did not.

Pauline McNeill: I thought that he had confirmed that figure. It is clear that the use of compulsory sale orders as an alternative to compulsory purchase orders does not seem to have been common; nevertheless, CSOs are another way of ensuring that we do not have vacant homes unnecessarily causing blight in our communities.

I have thought more about what James Dornan had to say about the use of CPOs and the question of whether local authorities are risk averse. In my experience, it might be the case that the process of using CPOs to acquire empty homes is much simpler than their use to mandatorily acquire other properties, in relation to which there might be wider resistance to the use of CPOs. In such circumstances, we are talking about a much more difficult legal process.

It is clear that the appointment of empty homes officers is a critical factor. I cannot remember who it was—it might have been Andy Wightman—who pointed out that some council officers have that function contained within their role, so they might have to be counted when we look at who is doing what across Scotland. It is clear that the success of the programme is down to those officers who have that function.

I was struck by what John Mason said about how Glasgow City Council has used its powers to remove empty homes from communities. It is clear that the issue is faced in both urban and rural areas.

I must express disappointment that opportunities have been missed to legislate in this area in the current session of Parliament. The minister explained why that is the case—we have run out of Government time. That is a pity. As Kenneth Gibson said in his excellent speech, there is other legislation that is being progressed that such legislation could be prioritised over. The Parliament has a proud record on land reform, and empty homes are part of the land reform agenda, because we are talking about regenerating communities. The Parliament has a good reputation in that area, and it would have boosted its reputation if legislation to address empty homes had been introduced in this session of Parliament.

I echo Andy Wightman's suggestion. He said that, if anything is to come of this debate and legislation is to be progressed in the next session of Parliament, it would be helpful to have sight of any proposals that have been drawn up by ministers and for them to be handed over to the next Administration. In that way, there would be a chance of such legislation being introduced early in the next session.

I was also struck by Alasdair Allan's speech, in which there was a lot to consider about the impact on an island that he represents. He talked about the size of the waiting list, which seems pretty large, and about having the right supply at the right location. An important point is that we cannot record demand in areas where there has not been an opportunity to test the demand for houses.

As Alasdair Allan said, in relation to second homes, whole villages will be empty for half the year. I have not really touched on second homes, but that is an important point.

The committee has done a serious piece of work. I hope that the minister will make a commitment and let us see what reform we can make by the end of this parliamentary session. There is a clear need for reform of compulsory purchase orders and the use of the council tax levy. We need to ensure that we have the right legislation to regenerate our communities and

bring empty homes back into use to help solve the housing crisis. We need a radical overhaul to make as big a dent as we can in the 40,000 houses that people should be living in.

16:36

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close for the Scottish Conservatives in this debate on empty homes and the committee's report. As a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee, I thank all those who made submissions and provided briefings to the committee during the inquiry.

As we have heard, bringing empty homes back into use provides a myriad of benefits, and the committee's report went into that concisely.

We were pleased that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which is hosted by Shelter Scotland, agreed with many of the report's recommendations. With the rising level of homelessness that we have, it is crucial that we make use of existing housing stock. Every empty property matters in every community that we represent. Committee members understand that working solely on empty homes cannot solve the current situation, but it will help. By bringing vacant properties back into use, we will start to have an impact that will be part of the solution.

I agree that investment in empty homes can be an effective way to boost local economies and support community regeneration. Work on empty homes can help us to sustain fragile communities.

We know that just one empty home can be seen as a nuisance, an irritation or even a blight on a location. If that becomes a larger number of empty homes, that leads to a spiral of decline. We are aware of situations across our regions and constituencies where that has become the case. When a number of properties become empty, everything else seems to spiral, which creates even more difficulties.

This debate is important because it focuses on the idea that this is everybody's issue: it is a council issue, a housing association issue, a landlord issue and a contractor issue. It is important that we recognise the value of bringing derelict or empty properties back into use as homes.

The committee identified a variety of reasons why empty homes exist, some of which we have touched on this afternoon. Those can include socioeconomic factors, a lack of resources to complete housing renovations, economic downturn, housing market decline and increasing levels of antisocial behaviour.

Empty homes are often a problem in rural areas, and many members have touched on the issues in

their own areas. People can face a distinct challenge that involves isolation and remoteness, which can be created by a lack of jobs and economic activity.

One thing that we have all talked about, which makes a huge difference, is the employment of empty homes officers, who work across specific council areas to tackle the issue. I commend and congratulate those councils that have grasped that opportunity, because that has paid dividends in communities across Scotland, as we have heard this afternoon. We have also heard that some local authorities have yet to take up that challenge. Like others, I insist that they do, because having one or two individuals who are dedicated to ensuring that that takes place, where it can, has had a real impact.

I will move on to some of the speeches that we have heard this afternoon. Our convener, James Dornan, started off by talking about data. The way in which data is collected, whether that be through local council records or through local knowledge, is vital.

We have also talked about the council tax levy and the delays in applications that some councils are using to generate income. We have covered that issue today, and I do not think that anybody believes that that is what councils should be doing. We should be trying to ensure that councils support individuals so that they can move forward.

The minister talked about the focus being on the priority of tackling empty properties, which are a "blight on communities"—that is certainly the case. Yes, we need more homes—the minister talked about the arrangements that have been made and the engagement that will take place between now and 2040—but, like others, I am concerned that some of the recommendations will not be embraced in the 17 months that we have left in this parliamentary session but will need to be moved to the next session. Many members have touched on that point this afternoon, and it would be quite good to see whether we can progress that.

My colleague Graham Simpson talked about compulsory sale orders and the inconsistency in their being issued to individuals who are struggling with repairs, along with the levy that comes with that. That has a part to play.

Pauline McNeill touched on town problems and problems in city centres, and she spoke of the need for access to address that. Shop owners have a responsibility to support their communities.

We also heard from Andy Wightman about the difficulties that may arise in that respect and the legislation that might have an impact. He talked about the lack of time that the minister has in which to ensure that legislation is passed. As

others have said, I would welcome a paper explaining the lack of time and whether there are any opportunities to address the problem in the last 17 months of this parliamentary session.

Annabelle Ewing made a very good point about the problems with the data and the difference between 64,000 and 83,000 empty homes. We do not yet know exactly where the number lies, because there is no consistency in reporting across local authorities, but we know that we can manage the process by working in partnership.

It is crucial that we look at the records and identify where we are. We know that—astonishingly—about 3 or 4 per cent of our properties are unoccupied, and even the most recent statistics show worrying trends. There are many reasons for that, but there is no doubt that long-term empty homes can have an effect on where we go. Much work has been done to date—I recognise that, and the committee indicated that lots of work is taking place—but the Government has a vital role to play, and kicking things into the long grass is not the way forward. We must work together, with partnerships that will ensure that our communities thrive and survive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kevin Stewart to close for the Government.

Kevin Stewart: How long have I got, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Seven minutes.

16:43

Kevin Stewart: This Government has a proud record in delivering affordable housing. Since coming to power in 2007, we have delivered 89,000 affordable homes, compared to 38,015 delivered by the previous Administration. However, existing homes continue to form the majority of our housing stock. That is why empty homes are seen as part of the housing solution, not only to increase supply and end homelessness, but to create and support vibrant communities. The committee witnessed the need for that first hand when it visited Newmilns.

I welcome the committee's support for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and the empty homes officer model. I pay tribute to Shaheena Din, who has headed up the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership—she is some power, and she wants to do even more.

The dedicated resource of an empty homes officer assists people to bring their homes back into use. It is a model that works and I want to see it operating in every part of the country.

One area of our support for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and the empty homes officers

includes the ability of the partnership to provide up to 50 per cent funding for new officers in the first two years. Every local authority that has yet to put in place empty homes officers can take that up. It is a good deal.

I will pay tribute to some of the officers who are on the front line. I have already spoken about Murdo MacLeod, who is new to the job and is doing a brilliant job in the Western Isles. In various years, Allyson Allison has won the officer of the year award. We are also about to see the outstanding empty homes service feature in a BBC documentary, which includes a home that has been returned to use after 24 years. Everything is possible. I could go on at length, but those examples give us an idea of some of the work that is taking place.

As the committee requested, I will continue to press local authorities to adopt wholesale that successful model. I will also continue to press authorities that adopt a blanket approach to policy and the council tax levy to consider better approaches and to learn from their colleagues in local government across Scotland. I know how frustrated Annabelle Ewing is about that issue. I am also frustrated about it and I want to ensure that our £400,000 per year investment continues to deliver benefits on the ground. Over the past wee while, that investment has brought new empty homes officers to Edinburgh, Aberdeen and the Western Isles, and additional data to supplement our council tax statistics and help inform discussions with local authorities.

Data has been mentioned a number of times today, including by Ms Ewing and Alexander Stewart. Our data is supplied by each local authority. Any variation from the reality on the ground is only where people seek to avoid tax, which I am sure that none of us would condone. Our investment also provides an enhanced empty homes advice service and a new website that provides tailored support and an easy way to report empty homes 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Those are just some of the partnership's most recent achievements.

Although my ambition is to have empty homes officers in every area across Scotland, it is also important that we consider opportunities to widen our reach, particularly within the third sector. Later this month, I will visit the YMCA in Glenrothes to do just that. The YMCA brings empty homes back into use as move-on accommodation for homeless people and is a great example of partnership working. It works with the local empty homes officer to identify suitable properties; accesses grant funding to help fund the purchase; and provides construction students with valuable work experience during the refurbishment. I hope that

that great work can be replicated in many parts of the country.

As I said in my opening remarks, I welcome the recommendations of the Local Government and Communities Committee. The committee can be assured that I will continue to co-operate with its members on all those issues. We share the same views on how we must progress in ensuring that we remove the blight of empty homes from our communities.

Graham Simpson: I do not know whether the minister is about to come to it—

Kevin Stewart: I am.

Graham Simpson: He is. [*Laughter.*] He will have heard comments from across the chamber, including from Kenneth Gibson, about compulsory sales orders. Can he not at least commit to start work on that—

Kevin Stewart: As I—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister. Wait until Mr Simpson has finished.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I knew exactly what he was going to ask.

As I said earlier, there is not a lack of will on the Government's part to move that agenda forward, but there is a lack of time and resource within Government to deal with all that at the moment.

I want to ensure that we move forward in reforming compulsory purchase orders, and that is why we have done some of the work already during the course of this parliamentary session. I also want to go much further in the introduction of compulsory sale orders, and to look at other uplifts that can come from land value. It will take a huge amount of effort to unpick previous legislation and to ensure that we have the balance right between what we want to do and the human rights aspect of that. We will continue to work on that.

I will not be bound by a timescale, because I do not want to come up with one that may be unworkable because of the other work that is going on. I will continue to let the committee, and Parliament, know how we are progressing on those issues, and I know from some of the folk who have been involved in the debate that if I do not do that, I will face many questions. I will commit to continuing to update Parliament on how we progress on the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude.

Kevin Stewart: This has been a very good debate, and I thank all those across Scotland who are working on the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank you, too. I call Sarah Boyack to close for the committee.

16:51

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): This has been a good start to 2020. It is important that this was our first debate, and what an interesting debate it has been. There has been disagreement, analysis and research, and there is also pretty strong agreement from right across the chamber that the empty homes problem needs to be tackled, that that work has started by the Scottish Government collaborating with and funding local authorities and organisations like Shelter, but that much more needs to be done and that we need faster and more concerted action.

It is good that in the committee, as Kenny Gibson said, we had a collegiate and collaborative work programme on the issue. I was not here for that—I am praising a report that I saw at the very end, once the hard work had been done. It is a good report.

I want to highlight one or two things that James Dornan, our committee convener, highlighted at the start of the debate. Different communities face unique challenges when it comes to empty homes, but the common thread is that empty homes, when left to decay, cause a blight on communities, and there is a strong public interest in bringing them back into use. We have agreed on that across the chamber; the key thing now is how we make that happen. The examples that Annabelle Ewing and Tom Mason gave concentrate the mind on the damage that is caused to the neighbours who live next door to empty homes. That should make us move into action.

Neil Findlay spoke passionately about homelessness and Pauline McNeill talked about waiting lists. That highlighted the benefit in bringing existing homes that are not being used, back into use. Huge numbers of people across the country are waiting for affordable, accessible houses. As members have said, that is happening not just in our town and city centres; it is in some of our smaller towns as well and, crucially, in our rural communities, where the addition of two to four houses can be absolutely transformative. We need to push for that and we need to make sure that all our local authorities have not just empty homes officers, but local partnerships that join up housing, planning and regeneration so that there is a pressure to deliver on not just one part of the council, but right across the council.

I also want to highlight what John Mason mentioned. Look at the numbers in the research done by Shelter. It usually costs about £120,000 to build a new home, but it can cost just £6,000 to

£25,000 to regenerate an existing home and bring it back into use. Surely that must be a political priority as part of the housing programme. We must look at how private owners can be brought into that picture so that they can be supported, cajoled and given advice. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Boyack, please sit down.

This was a very important and interesting debate on homelessness and empty houses. There are too many casual conversations going on during this very important debate. You should be listening to Ms Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. I will take a note of that for future reference; it has not happened to me before.

For those colleagues who have joined us, it has been a constructive debate. There has been political agreement across the chamber and there is a mood that, right across our communities, we need to do more. On the town centre regeneration issue in particular, several colleagues mentioned the importance of councils taking a much more strategic approach to restoring town centres by joining up their policy approach and their investment and making sure that we look at town centre regeneration not only in terms of retail and offices, but also in terms of bringing people back into our town and city centres.

I agree with Andy Wightman that we should take a look at the Malcolm Fraser town centre review of 2013 with the benefit of six years' hindsight and ask what we could do with the report and what more needs to be done now. Housing is a good way to refresh town centres and it also gives people access to employment for which they do not have to make lengthy commuting journeys. A couple of members made that point.

A point about the accessibility of homes was made towards the end of the debate. If we are talking about having homes above shops, obviously stairs and lifts will be involved, but the properties to convert are those on the ground floor, because they are key to giving people in our ageing population accessible homes. Surely, we should be looking at that.

There has been agreement about a couple of areas in which work needs to be done. For example, data sets are not sufficiently accurate and there were some good comments about how that might be dealt with. There was discussion about looking at the location of empty homes at a much more granular level so that local authorities can target solutions in order to meet the needs of each area. We all mentioned the human and economic need to get our houses back into use.

The council tax levy is a good tool, but it must be used appropriately. It should not be used only as a revenue-raising tool; it has got to be used to incentivise people to bring their houses back into use. Support and advice from both the Scottish Government to local authorities and from local authorities to housing owners is absolutely crucial and must be followed through. The points that were made by James Dornan, Pauline McNeill, Graham Simpson and Annabelle Ewing show that there is agreement across the chamber for action.

It would be good to have a refresh of financial incentives from the minister in the future. He pointed out that the Government's £400,000 investment has delivered, but what more could be done to accelerate the process and put more homes back into use, or even prevent them from becoming empty in the first place?

There was a lot of discussion about compulsory purchase orders and compulsory sale orders. I took part in the debate on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill in 2015, when we debated compulsory sale orders and the need for a basket of mechanisms to both encourage and push owners to act. We also debated that in relation to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016. There is cross-party agreement across the chamber that we would like the minister to reflect on the issue and we would like the minister to be given support by his colleagues to prioritise the matter. It should not be only the housing minister who says that he wants it to happen—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: I will, very briefly.

Kevin Stewart: It is not about my colleagues; it is about capacity in the civil service to deal with the legal aspects of the issue. I cannot stress enough that unpicking mid-19th century legislation—the previous compulsory purchase order legislation—is not an easy task.

Sarah Boyack: That is true, and it is why the Scottish Land Commission prepared a report and published it in August 2018. We are not starting from scratch. We have had the land reform debate, the community empowerment debate and the expert groups that were set up by the Scottish Land Commission—work has been done. We are not now demanding that the minister introduce the finished legislation before 2021, but we would like to see work in progress. Work has been done on human rights, the rights of owners and site identification. The work of the experts has been built on and the issue of vacant and derelict land has been looked at, so we are not starting from scratch.

The issue is complex, but Parliament has legislated before on land reform and the legislation

has worked. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 has enabled communities to buy land or sometimes get owners to work with them without even selling the land. There is work in progress. We get the fact that there is not infinite resource, but we would like to see more resource and political priority being attached to the matter. Everybody has agreed that the powers make sense: they avoid blight on our communities, avoid economic disruption and enable houses to be brought back into use so that people can afford houses where they need them and they can access work. That is something on which we all agree.

There has been agreement, so we would like to put pressure on the minister to make progress. It is not an issue for after 2021; some progress can be made before then, and the minister has collaborative and constructive support across the chamber to help him in that work.

Committee Announcement (Ferry Vessels in Scotland)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a committee announcement. I call Edward Mountain, convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, to make an announcement on the committee's inquiry into the construction and procurement of ferry vessels in Scotland.

17:01

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I am pleased to announce that we have launched an inquiry into the construction and procurement of ferry vessels in Scotland. On 18 December 2019, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work announced the publication of the final report of the Ferguson Marine programme review board. That sets out an updated timetable and outstanding costs for the fulfilment of the contract to build two hybrid ferries to serve the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network, which was originally placed with Ferguson Marine in October 2015. The report indicates a delayed delivery range for the vessel 801, MV Glen Sannox, of October to December 2021, a new delivery range for the vessel 802 of July to October 2022, and an estimated outstanding cost for the delivery of the two vessels of £110.3 million, over and above the moneys that have already been paid.

As part of our inquiry, we will consider the key findings and recommendations of the Ferguson Marine programme review board and the impact of the repeated delays to the completion of those two vessels on the specific routes and the island communities that are awaiting their delivery. We will also consider the related matter of the Scottish Government taking public ownership of Ferguson Marine in October 2019. Those matters have important implications for the future procurement of maritime vessels to serve the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network, and for the on-going development and updating of the Scottish Government's ferries plan and its vessel replacement and deployment programme.

Our intention in launching this inquiry is to explore the implications in some detail and, above all, to ensure that the appropriate lessons are learnt for the future. We plan to take oral and written evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, and I encourage all interested parties to contribute to our call for written evidence, which runs until 7 February. We also plan to visit Ferguson Marine's shipyard to view at first hand the current state of progress on the hybrid vessels contract and to talk to members of

the workforce and management on site. We look forward to reporting back to the Parliament with our findings and recommendations once the committee has completed its inquiry, later this year.

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is just one question to be put this evening.

The question is, that motion S5M-20280, in the name of James Dornan, on empty homes in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Local Government and Communities Committee's 10th Report 2019 (Session 5), *Empty Homes in Scotland* (SP Paper 618).

Levern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-19268, in the name of Tom Arthur, on celebrating the work of the Levern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Levern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership (LVDCP) on its ongoing efforts to install public access defibrillators (PAD) across Barrhead; understands that, after discovering that Barrhead had no PADs in August 2019, Barrhead Rotary Club spearheaded the community partnership and now, thanks to the partnerships forged with local businesses and East Renfrewshire Council, which has invested £25,000 in equipment, 23 devices have been put in place and are now available round the clock; notes that members of LVDCP also offer free Heart Start Defibrillator Awareness courses to anyone in the local area who wishes to learn how to perform CPR and operate a PAD device; recognises that this project feeds into wider local commitments to improve first-aid training, including the recent announcement that every school pupil is set to be taught CPR in the classroom through the British Heart Foundation's Nation of Lifesavers campaign; believes that PADs, as well as first-aid and CPR training, are vital life-saving resources that should be universally accessible, and commends all those involved in promoting their importance in Barrhead and the surrounding area.

17:05

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am very grateful that time has been made available to recognise and celebrate the work of the Levern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership. I thank members from across the chamber who have supported my motion.

The area that is known as the Levern Valley is located in the western part of East Renfrewshire and takes in the communities of Uplawmoor, Neilston and Barrhead, which is the largest town in my Renfrewshire South constituency.

The aim of the partnership is to bring together groups and organisations from across the community to install public access defibrillators—PADs—across the area. A defibrillator is, to give the British Heart Foundation's definition, a

“device that gives a high energy electric shock to the heart of someone who is in cardiac arrest. The high energy shock is called defibrillation, and it's an essential part in trying to save the life of someone who's in cardiac arrest.”

Cardiac arrest is a medical emergency in which there is a sudden loss of blood flow due to the heart failing to pump effectively. It is not normally preceded by symptoms but, without immediate treatment, it will be fatal.

The Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership was established by Barrhead community stalwart Douglas Yates in 2018, and it received registered charity status in October of that year. Key partners to date include East Renfrewshire Council, Barrhead Housing Association, Auchenback Active, Barrhead rotary club and Field Electrical Services Ltd, from Neilston, which has generously installed the PADs.

So far, a total of 18 PADs have been installed in Barrhead, with the most recent being unveiled at Fereneze Golf Club, Shanks bowling club and St John's church last month. Those latest installations expand the geographic spread of the PADs and follow on from the devices that were installed last year in a number of locations, including Barrhead community museum, Tesco Barrhead and Glen halls in Neilston.

Financial support for the partnership has come via a number of sources, including from East Renfrewshire Council as part of a wider £25,000 investment to install 23 PADs across the wider local authority area. Funds have also been received from the Scottish Government via the community choices fund, with £4,000 being allocated following support from Barrhead residents in March last year. Further fundraising, including community concerts and table-top sales, has been on-going. Opportunities are also available for organisations to adopt a PAD by paying £200 annually for maintenance costs.

The work of the partnership has demonstrated the vibrancy of community spirit in the area, and it is work that will save lives. Out-of-hospital cardiac arrests are and remain a killer. Each year in Scotland, roughly 3,000 people will have out-of-hospital cardiac arrests in which resuscitation is attempted. Sadly, only 6 per cent will survive to hospital discharge. However, we know that, in cases of cardiac arrest in which a shockable rhythm is present, an automated external defibrillator of the kind that is being installed across the Lavern Valley can have a positive impact on the chances of survival.

The devices are straightforward to use, require no previous training and can deliver a shock only to an individual who is experiencing cardiac arrest, which removes the possibility of accidental harm. Key to the success of the devices is their rapid use following the onset of cardiac arrest. For every passing minute without medical intervention, the chances of survival decrease, with there being a minimal likelihood of recovery after 10 minutes. That is why the work of the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership in increasing access to, and the availability of, PADs is so important.

To maximise their benefit, it is vital that the location of PADs be clearly signposted. To that end, I welcome the partnership's work to publicise the location of the devices.

Further, I welcome the launch by Anas Sarwar of a consultation on the mandatory registration of PADs. I look forward to studying the consultation results and any proposals that are brought forward. I am also keen to hear views on how the installation of PADs could be encouraged, through such avenues as procurement and planning.

It is also worth noting that the work of the partnership demonstrates the positive results that can be achieved with effective collaboration between community organisations, local authorities and national Government.

Through its effective engagement with key community stakeholders, the partnership has been able to deliver PADs in a way that is cost effective and that empowers the local community.

I would also like to recognise the work of others in Renfrewshire South, beyond the Lavern Valley, in securing the installation of PADs. They include the Neilston and Uplawmoor first responders, Howwood community council, Renfrewshire Council and, of course, the Scottish Ambulance Service.

Before concluding, I will say a few words about Douglas Yates. I have known Douglas for over a decade. I doubt that there are many people in Barrhead who have not worked with him at some point.

Douglas has been involved in community activism in Barrhead for over 45 years. He has served as a chair of Barrhead community council, helped establish and chaired what was then Barrhead and district victim support, founded the East Renfrewshire University of the Third Age, served as a vice-chair of Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire, chaired the Barrhead gala committee, and was a local councillor and deputy leader of East Renfrewshire Council. After a lifetime of service to Barrhead and the wider community, and in his 70s, he has been instrumental in setting up the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership.

I thank Douglas Yates and all who have supported the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership over the past two years. They represent the best of Barrhead, and their work will save lives. I look forward to the contributions from other members and the minister, and I ask that everyone here join me in celebrating the outstanding work of the partnership.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We turn to the open debate. Speeches should be four minutes, please.

17:11

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Tom Arthur for the motion, congratulate him on securing this important debate and join him in celebrating Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership. I, too, congratulate Douglas Yates and all the partners involved, including the rotary club, local businesses and the local authority, in the fantastic achievement of raising £25,000 and installing 23 devices, which will literally save the lives of local people.

That project follows on from the successful British Heart Foundation aim of building a nation of lifesavers through its campaign to have cardiopulmonary resuscitation taught in schools across the country. I am pleased to be working with the British Heart Foundation on its next big national campaign, which is to ensure the mandatory registration of defibrillators across the country, so that we can save lives here and be an example to other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the rest of the world.

The issue is so important because, every year in Scotland, there are approximately 9,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests. Of those, there are approximately 3,500 cases where resuscitation is attempted. Sadly, in only one in 12 of those cases will the person survive. The use of automated external defibrillators is a big part of improving those numbers. Tom Arthur rightly mentioned my intention to introduce a member's bill on the mandatory registration of AEDs. I hope to launch a public consultation in due course and that the bill will receive support from members throughout the chamber—and, indeed, from communities throughout the country. I also hope to work alongside the Scottish Ambulance Service, the British Heart Foundation, MSPs and community groups throughout the country so that we can have mandatory registration of defibrillators and direct bystander support to help save lives across Scotland.

Failure to register an AED with the Scottish Ambulance Service can have devastating consequences. Community groups do the hard work and raise the money, and businesses make a commitment and install the AED, but the failure to register AEDs means that when an incident occurs, the Ambulance Service may fail to direct someone to a nearby AED that can be used before the ambulance arrives, which can lead to loss of life. Every second of every minute is crucial, because each minute of delay is found to reduce the probability of survival by 10 per cent.

We know that if we used defibrillators, we could increase the survival rate by as much as 70 per cent. That is why registration is so important. International evidence is clear that registered AEDs are 15 more times likely to be used than unregistered ones and that someone is 70 per cent more likely to survive if defibrillation is used. That is why it is important that we collect data, monitor the use of AEDs and share that information with the Scottish Ambulance Service.

I ask the minister what further steps the Government is taking to ensure that we have mandatory registration of AEDs and encourage more people to register them with the Scottish Ambulance Service, so that we can have that national database and use the fantastic dedication of community organisations and local businesses to help save lives across our country. What resources, if any, is the Government willing to put in to ensure that we have not just a public interest campaign to try to get more people who already have an AED to register it, but identify where the gaps are and encourage people to install AEDs in those places and make them available for public use?

If we have that campaign and the mandatory registration of AEDs, we can save hundreds of lives every year and thousands of lives over a number of years, and Scotland can be an example to the rest of the UK and the rest of the world.

Again, I thank Tom Arthur for bringing forward this very important debate.

17:16

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I echo colleagues' comments on Tom Arthur securing this important members' business debate and on the work of the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership. I also put on record my congratulations and thanks to Douglas Yates, whom I have known for some years. I do not know him as well as Tom Arthur does, but I have had some dealings with him in the past. The work that Douglas Yates has undertaken on the defibrillator community partnership has been remarkable, and I congratulate him on it.

The partnership's achievement in raising finance and awareness as well as in purchasing 23 devices in such a short space of time is incredible. Further, the heartstart training and the support of the British Heart Foundation and its nation of lifesavers campaign are pivotal in making people in our society feel safer about using a defibrillator. A challenge for many people is the fear of using a defib in case they cause harm. Breaking down that fear will help save lives, and training on using a defib is crucial not only to make communities feel safer but to actually make them safer.

Members will recall a members' business debate that I held on 24 April 2018 on show some heart, the Jayden Orr campaign. I highlighted in that debate how the tragic passing of 10-year-old Jayden became the catalyst for the campaign. The Orr family have shown a strength and determination that will not exist in many people, and the respect and support that they have been shown by the Inverclyde community have been incredible. The campaign has been fully supported from the outset by the local newspaper—the *Greenock Telegraph*—and me.

The campaign has had a few twists and turns along the way, as every campaign does, but its results have been hugely positive. First, public awareness of the importance of defibs has increased hugely, with more and more people aware of the machines and how they can help. Secondly, local heartstart and BHF training sessions have seen an increase in uptake. I obtained my heartstart certificate in September 2018 and I encourage members across the chamber to sign up to training in their own areas. Thirdly, Kathleen Orr and her family have raised thousands of pounds, purchasing defibs with the money, many of which have been placed in local schools and other locations. As of last December, the number of defibs registered in Inverclyde has increased from three to 52. That huge increase is primarily a result of the fundraising to purchase more defibs and the awareness-raising campaign to get defibs registered.

The charity St Andrews First Aid was so moved by the Orr family and their actions after Jayden's passing that it has become an integral partner in the campaign to ensure that Inverclyde will be the best-covered area in Scotland—and probably the UK—for defibs, as it is donating 30 defibs to my community. Stuart Callison and the team at St Andrews First Aid deserve huge credit for their support and I put on record my sincere thanks and that of everyone associated with the Jayden Orr campaign for their generous donation. The roll-out of those defibs in my community has already started, with the first being installed in November, in Larkfield in Greenock. Debbie Scobie was so moved by the campaign that she wanted to help, so she offered her house as the location of the first of the 30 defibs.

Yesterday, the *Greenock Telegraph* reported that Pat Dunn, who is an employee of local shipyard Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd, has offered to have a defib placed outside his house. Pat's work colleagues helped to fundraise for the exterior box at his house, and in doing so the shipyard and its workforce showed their support for a community that has shown so much support for the yard.

I am immensely proud of my community and how it has continued to rally round the Jayden Orr campaign and the Orr family. Kathleen Orr won the prestigious Douglas Bremner special commendation award at the Scottish first aid awards ceremony on 15 November 2019. It was a privilege to be there to witness that. I am sure that the success of the campaign, which is making Inverclyde safer as a result, will be equally acknowledged by Kathleen and her family. Nothing will ever bring Jayden back, but placing defibs strategically across the community and helping to increase training are two ways to ensure that other families will not need to endure the loss of their child.

17:21

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague Tom Arthur for bringing an important matter to the attention of Parliament. It is a great opportunity to celebrate and recognise wonderful work that is going on across Scotland.

According to the Scottish Ambulance Service, every year in Scotland more than 3,500 people are treated by defibs after having a cardiac arrest. Unfortunately, only about one in 12 of those individuals survives. However, prompt bystander CPR and early defibrillation can significantly increase the chances of survival. So, I was delighted to be asked just over a year ago, with my colleague Alan Brown MP, to open a life-saving public access defibrillator in the village of Lugton in my constituency. That installation was a marvellous response from Dunlop and Lugton community council to the sad death of one of its residents.

Using a defibrillator alongside CPR can greatly increase survival rates, but to be most effective a defibrillator should be used within the first three to five minutes after a person has collapsed. When someone has a cardiac arrest and both CPR and a defibrillator are used within three minutes, the chance of survival could be as high as 70 per cent, or even 80 per cent. That is why it was great to see that life-saving device being put in place so that it can be used 24/7, in such emergencies.

Using an old British Telecom phone box to house the defib was innovative and creative, and many local people and businesses were involved in its restoration and fitting out. In particular, my constituent Martha Brindley spent much of her time renovating the telephone kiosk by removing glass, stripping back old paint and repainting it bright red. Local businesses and residents were equally generous with their time, donations and handiwork. It was great to see a small community

pulling together for the benefit of its residents, who might need the equipment to help to save a life.

As there are in Tom Arthur's constituency, in my constituency there are other great examples that are worthy of mention. One of Kilmarnock's popular pubs, the Brass and Granite, is on a mission to create a community of life-savers by placing a number of defibrillators around the town, as well as offering CPR training. So far, it has provided 14 automated external defibrillators in schools, community centres and housing estates. Its target is to provide about 20.

The pub's owner, David Little, summed it up really well when he said that people should overcome their fear of hurting someone with a defibrillator. The pub's internal training sessions are designed to overcome that and to build confidence among the community. The sessions have been a great success and have attracted younger people who want to find out more about the equipment and how to put it to good use in an emergency: you do not need to be an adult to save a life. Mr Little and his staff are to be congratulated for that amazing effort. Their quest goes on to identify more locations in the district where access to defibs could help to save more lives.

Not to be outdone, Stewarton has managed to get in on the act. St John Scotland and the local Boys Brigade have joined forces to raise funds through coffee and breakfast mornings. An AED is now proudly situated just outside John Knox parish church on Stewarton's High Street, and is available 24/7, should it be needed.

There are many fine examples of such work going on across Scotland, and we are bound to hear about more of them this afternoon. I do not know whether Ayrshire is leading the way on the work, but it seems that a large number of defibrillators are in place across the county. One of the more recently installed defibrillators is in Prestwick, just outside the 65 club on Main Street. Although Prestwick is not in my constituency, I know it very well. Great credit goes to John and Tracy Wallace, who are local people, for being the driving force behind that particular defibrillator.

There is no doubt that defibrillators are saving lives throughout Scotland. There is growing interest from communities and businesses in taking the lead, which is very welcome for communities and people whose lives might yet be saved because of the generosity and determination of many people in their communities.

I again thank Tom Arthur for bringing this important business to the attention of Parliament.

17:26

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I apologise to the Presiding Officer and to Tom Arthur for missing the first couple of minutes of Tom Arthur's speech. During decision time, I realised that I had left my notes in my office, and I sprinted—I stress that I sprinted—all the way to the third floor to get them, and sprinted back down again. As I approached the chamber and my vision blurred, I had never been so relieved to be involved in a debate and to recognise that there are more defibrillators in the vicinity now than there were when we previously debated the subject.

I add my thanks and congratulations to Tom Arthur for securing time in the chamber for the debate. We often say that members' business debates give MSPs the opportunity to highlight some of the good things that are happening in our constituencies and around the country without the shackles of party politics. This is certainly one such opportunity.

I acknowledge that Stuart McMillan has been a big supporter of and campaigner for installation of defibrillators in public places, following the harrowing experiences of Jayden Orr's family in his constituency, and that he has had strong support from across the chamber in his efforts on behalf of his constituents. I am happy to include myself in that support.

The motion, which is on the fantastic efforts of the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership, which is spearheaded by the Rotary Club of Barrhead, gives me the added opportunity to highlight the importance of the third sector in our communities. Members will know that I am a great advocate of increased support for the third sector. The work is a great example of how the third sector is able to take positive action, where it is needed, without the red tape of legislation and without politics. The partnership saw a community issue and just went about solving it by collaborating with local businesses and East Renfrewshire Council.

From having no public access defibrillators across Barrhead, the partnership has raised and invested £25,000, and has installed 23 devices, which are now available 24 hours a day. Moreover—and just as important—LVDCP is offering free "Heartstart" defibrillator awareness courses to any people in the local area who would like to learn CPR and how to operate PADs.

That relates to a petition that was recently lodged with the Public Petitions Committee calling for CPR to be taught in the classroom to all pupils. It is great news that that will become a reality, with the support of the British Heart Foundation Scotland's "Nation of lifesavers" campaign. The

confidence that being able to save a life will give school pupils cannot be overstated. That skill and the achievement of passing the course are valuable. Members have heard me say that there are skills that are learned outside the classroom that are invaluable in academic achievement: that is one such skill. To have that sense of achievement, and confidence in that achievement, can have a positive impact on a pupil's outlook.

I am not saying that learning how to save a life through CPR or how to operate a PAD could help a person to pass their maths exam. Actually, that is exactly what I am saying, because overcoming fear and grasping the opportunity—a colleague mentioned fear earlier on—is a learned mindset that can be applied across life. We can and should encourage that. All that we have to do is offer such opportunities.

The work is a great example of a community coming together for the betterment of people in it, and the people involved should be very proud of what they have achieved so far. It also speaks to the desire to bring healthcare closer to communities and to the drive for more personal responsibility in community health. People did it without help from Parliament. Perhaps there is a lesson there for all of us.

Once again, I thank Tom Arthur for bringing the debate to the chamber and for giving us the opportunity to congratulate a community on stepping up and making the change.

17:30

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I am delighted to contribute and respond to this important debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. I thank Tom Arthur for lodging the motion and I thank members for their contributions and for supporting the motion so that it could be debated tonight.

I also take the opportunity to join Tom Arthur and others in thanking Douglas Yates and the Lavern Valley Defibrillator Community Partnership for its hard work to raise funds for PADs across Barrhead, and for arranging life-saving CPR and PAD training courses.

Stuart McMillan made an important point about the practical use of PADs and the fear of using them. That little bit of training that can be added can give people the confidence to use a piece of technology that is far safer than they imagine. That is part of what we need to do and why it is important to have debates such as this to make that point and to encourage people to take action that will save a life.

The Lavern Valley partnership is going above and beyond to ensure that its community can

identify the signs of a cardiac arrest and act appropriately. Thanks must also go to those who have donated to the cause and to everyone who has attended the training courses. Their hard work will save lives.

We know that prompt intervention by a bystander can increase the likelihood of survival after cardiac arrest by two or three times. Calling 999, starting CPR and using an available defibrillator in the minutes immediately following a cardiac arrest is where the greatest gains in survival are achieved.

In 2015, we launched the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy, with a commitment to improving survival and outcomes from out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. That required improvements to all six elements in the chain of survival: readiness, early recognition and call for help, CPR, defibrillation and pre-hospital resuscitation, post-resuscitation care, and aftercare.

Members will recall that we had two debates on these issues last year. Stuart McMillan mentioned the debate on show some heart, the Jayden Orr campaign; he is a great advocate for that campaign in his local area. We also had a debate on Scotland, a nation of life-savers. Both debates highlighted the importance of defibrillators and CPR and those points remain valid today.

The out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy recognises the importance of defibrillators and aims to make the most effective use of those that are available, including funding the University of Edinburgh resuscitation research group to carry out modelling work to inform advice on where defibrillators are best located to save lives. I am grateful to all the communities, voluntary organisations, individuals and businesses across Scotland that have fundraised to purchase defibrillators, often making them publicly accessible.

Anas Sarwar asked about registration to support communities, voluntary organisations and businesses that wish to purchase defibrillators for their premises. In March 2018, we published our guide to public access defibrillators. It provides practical advice to those who are considering purchasing and installing a PAD, including how to register it.

It is great that the British Heart Foundation's national defibrillator network database, the circuit, is now live in Scotland. The circuit integrates its own PAD register with the existing Scottish Ambulance Service defibrillator database and allows 999 call handlers to direct a bystander or emergency service to a nearby defibrillator during an emergency. BHF aims to increase the use of defibrillators by ensuring that emergency services can quickly locate their nearest PAD, even if it is

out of their jurisdiction. I urge everyone who is responsible for a PAD and who has not registered it on the circuit to do so as soon as possible.

Tom Arthur, Stuart McMillan and others talked eloquently about why it is so important that we know where the defibs are, as that can really make a difference in saving a life. My thanks go to the British Heart Foundation for its exemplary work on the circuit project.

As, I think, everyone knows, Save A Life For Scotland is a partnership of public and third sector organisations, including the British Heart Foundation, St Andrew's First Aid, the British Red Cross, the Royal Life Saving Society UK and Lucky2BHere. The partnership, which includes the Scottish Government, formed after the publication of our out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy in 2015 and works to improve cardiac arrest outcomes. It is a unique model, building on a strong foundation of existing work by services, communities and individuals across Scotland.

As Anas Sarwar mentioned, in October 2019, the partnership announced that it had met the strategy's aim of equipping 500,000 people across Scotland with CPR skills, thereby increasing the number of bystanders able to step in during an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest emergency. That is a fantastic achievement and highlights how we can all work together to improve a person's chance of survival, and I congratulate all those who have worked incredibly hard to meet that aim.

Members are also, no doubt, aware that the strategy finishes in 2020. The Scottish Government is working with key stakeholders to look at what the next steps should be, and I would be happy to discuss with Anas Sarwar how some of his proposals might feed into that.

We recognise the importance of children and young people engaging positively with health and wellbeing issues at school. As Brian Whittle said, a young person being trained in CPR can help them to develop the skills that they may need in an emergency situation. He is also right to say that such training goes beyond gaining those skills and can help improve attainment more widely.

We welcome the British Heart Foundation's nation of lifesavers campaign, which secured the commitment of all 32 local authorities to teach CPR in their secondary schools. We know that CPR awareness and skills development are already embedded in many primary and secondary schools

To assist education professionals, Save a Life for Scotland has worked with Education Scotland to develop resources for schools, which are available on Education Scotland's glow website. That is delivering our aim of making learning about CPR easy, accessible and free.

Before I conclude, it is good to reflect that, when the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy was launched in 2015, about one in 20 people survived to leave hospital after an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. Since the introduction of the strategy, that has increased to one in 12, as Willie Coffey mentioned. That is a fantastic achievement. Clearly, we can go beyond that, which is what we all want, and making defibrillators more accessible across Scotland is a major part of achieving that.

I thank all the members in the chamber, especially those with a particular interest in this area, and everyone across Scotland for their hard work in improving the outcomes for out-of-hospital cardiac arrest.

Meeting closed at 17:38.

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