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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 November 2021

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is general questions. In order to get in as many people as possible, I would be grateful for short, succinct questions and answers to match.

Local Government Reform (Highland Council Boundaries)

1. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I declare that I am a sitting councillor.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider local government reform in relation to the redrawing of local authority areas, in light of the reported issues associated with new boundaries for the Highland Council area. (S6O-00361)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): Boundaries Scotland recently conducted a review of the ward boundaries for Highland Council. As required under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, all the local authority areas with inhabited islands were reviewed. The proposal for Highland Council was not approved by the Scottish Parliament. There are currently no plans to review boundaries for local authority areas.

Emma Roddick: Does the minister believe that, given its size, the Highland Council area can be described as “local” government? Would he see benefits in having an Inverness city council, both for our fastest-growing city and for the rest of the Highlands area, which has very different interests?

George Adam: We currently have no plans to change the council’s area. I understand that the geographic challenges for Highland Council were recognised when it was first created. Unfortunately, those challenges, which have not changed, did not allow for a practical solution that would have enabled the area to be split up.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 was not lodged.

Colposcopy Appointment Waiting Times

3. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce waiting times for colposcopy appointments. (S6O-00363)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): When the cervical screening programme restarted last year, we invested around £1 million to increase capacity in both sample-taking and colposcopy services. More recently, and to coincide with the Scottish Government’s national cervical screening awareness campaign, we have provided £660,000 to health boards that are experiencing longer waiting times for colposcopy, which includes NHS Highland, to help to reduce those waits.

The national health service recovery plan, which is backed by more than £1 billion of additional investment, sets out how the Scottish Government will increase NHS capacity by 10 per cent as quickly as possible. We have already invested more than £80 million to support health boards in achieving that.

Donald Cameron: A constituent from Argyll and Bute recently contacted me, describing her experience in seeking such an appointment. Following the detection of abnormal cells during cervical screening, she received a letter from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde notifying her that not only would she be unable to get a colposcopy appointment within the eight-week limit, but would have to wait for up to 30 weeks. That was, clearly, highly distressing. Will the cabinet secretary explain what action can be taken to reduce waiting times, and will he look into that specific case if I provide further details privately?

Humza Yousaf: On Donald Cameron’s latter point, I will be happy to look at the individual case if he passes on the details.

I note that, during the summer, it was claimed that some patients were waiting up to 30 weeks for a colposcopy appointment. That is why we decided to invest additional money in some of the health boards where the waiting times were far longer than we would like them to be. The health boards including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Highland, NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside.

I have looked at the most recent figures on waiting times for colposcopy. If an appointment is routine, in terms of the suspicion of cancer, the waits have gone down to 10 weeks nationally, which is still above our eight-week target. However, there is incredible variation across health boards. The waiting times are still far too high in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, so I would be happy to look at the individual case that Mr Cameron raises.

Locally-sourced Food

4. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to encourage the consumption of locally sourced food. (S6O-00364)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): On 20 August, we published a draft local food strategy, which sets out the wealth of actions that we are taking to encourage local food consumption. They include launching the Scotland brings so much to the table campaign to drive increased sales and awareness of Scottish produce; raising the profile of producer and farmer markets around Scotland and promoting access to local produce from butchers, fishmongers, bakers and farm shops through the food and drink recovery plan; and the food for life programme, which supports the provision of more locally sourced, healthier food in schools. In 2021-22, we will target all 32 local authorities with £400,000 of funding.

We are currently consulting on the draft strategy to ensure that the public and relevant organisations have the chance to shape further Government action to encourage the consumption of local food.

Collette Stevenson: Could the cabinet secretary outline how lowland deer managers can get a voice in the on-going discussions? How can we ensure that more local produce is available in public sector catering, such as school and hospital canteens?

Mairi Gougeon: I encourage lowland deer managers and anyone who has an interest in the strategy, which will be wide ranging, to make sure that they share their views through the local food consultation. The consultation is open for responses until 26 November, giving people the chance to shape further Government action to encourage local food consumption.

We are absolutely committed to increasing the local sourcing of food and drink in the public sector. Glasgow City Council recently became the 17th local authority to achieve food for life status in its primary schools. Our support for that programme continues and we are in discussion with the Soil Association about options for expanding it into other settings in the public sector.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I recently met representatives of Scottish Tenant Farmers Association, who emphasised the health benefits and sustainability of the locally sourced, high-quality meat and dairy products that its members produce. What is the Scottish Government doing to support a culture change when it comes to information about locally sourced food, including the health and environmental benefits?

Mairi Gougeon: The Scottish Government agrees that locally sourced food has many benefits. That is why, in addition to the actions that we set out in the local food strategy, we recently introduced the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which will place duties on Scottish ministers and other public authorities to produce plans for their food policies and to set out what they will do to ensure that those plans are made real.

We are also undertaking scoping work on a single marketing brand—sustainably Scottish—for all Scottish food and drink produce. The brand will be available to all Scotland-based producers, manufacturers and suppliers who can satisfy stringent criteria around provenance and low-carbon operations. That will allow many Scottish businesses that have a strong story to tell about sustainability to capitalise on demand.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Public procurement is one of the Government's main levers to ensure that we support our farmers and local food producers. However, they continue to tell us that red tape is preventing them from accessing the central Excel contract. That has been the case for years, and I have spoken about it in the chamber many times. What is the Government doing to ensure that farmers have access to the Excel contract?

Mairi Gougeon: The member is absolutely right, and I know that he has raised the issue in the chamber a number of times. That is why the food strategy and the consultation on it are so important. There are three overarching pillars in the strategy: how we can better connect people with food; how local producers can connect with buyers; and how we can better harness the public sector's buying power through procurement. I encourage Mr Whittle and other members to respond to the consultation and to encourage others to do so, because we really want to tackle and get to grips with the issue.

Infrastructure Investment (Coatbridge and Chryston)

5. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for infrastructure investment in the Coatbridge and Chryston constituency. (S6O-00365)

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): The Coatbridge and Chryston constituency will benefit from Scottish Government-supported national infrastructure programmes such as the investment of £3.4 billion in affordable housing, £600 million in superfast broadband and more than £550 million in active travel. In addition, with NHS Lanarkshire, we have plans to build a new hospital that will replace the existing University hospital Monklands,

as well as a new national treatment centre project, which is in the early stage of planning. We are also investing more than £500 million in the Glasgow city region deal, in which North Lanarkshire Council is a partner.

Fulton MacGregor: The minister will be aware of the Gartcosh business interchange in my constituency, which has been developed by Scottish Enterprise and already includes the very impressive Scottish crime campus. He might also be aware that the site was shortlisted as one of the proposed sites for the new Monklands hospital, to which he referred. The consultation on the hospital was lengthy and thorough, and, ultimately, an alternative site in Airdrie was chosen. I very much welcome the new hospital, as it will greatly benefit my constituency.

However, inevitably, that process has stalled further investment in the Gartcosh site, which is strategically well placed and crying out for future infrastructure development. I have had some helpful discussions with Scottish Enterprise, and I know that it is commissioning work around the said site. Would the minister be open to having a meeting with Scottish Enterprise and me to consider what more can be done to bring about development at the site that will benefit Coatbridge and Chryston and, indeed, the wider area?

Ivan McKee: Yes. I know the site, and I would be happy to meet Fulton MacGregor and Scottish Enterprise.

As Mr MacGregor will be aware, through our investment in the Glasgow city region deal, we have unlocked the development potential at Gartcosh business park. In addition, through our vacant and derelict land fund awards to North Lanarkshire Council, we have supported its local property development and regeneration company, Fusion Assets Ltd, to undertake site preparation works for new business and industrial use on more than 9 acres, and the first 18,000 square foot unit has now been completed. That investment will address market failure on the site, attract new businesses to the area and create associated local employment opportunities.

Fly-tipping

6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle fly-tipping, in light of reports of there being just three prosecutions from 32 reported cases of fly-tipping in the 2019-20 financial year. (S6O-00366)

The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I thank the member for his question, because it gives me the opportunity to restate that fly-tipping is a criminal

offence and an activity that has no place in Scotland.

We take the matter very seriously and are developing a new litter and fly-tipping strategy, which will be ready for consultation by the end of this year and will be published in early 2022. The issue of enforcement, which the member raised, is one of the key themes of the strategy. We will review current processes and legislation, including where they may need to be strengthened or where new legislation may be required. I absolutely welcome views and encourage participation in the upcoming consultation.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the minister for her positive response. I think that she will appreciate the frustration that is felt in local government about the fact that a huge amount of time and effort goes into preparing cases against people who are caught fly-tipping, but when those cases are sent to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, only a tiny percentage of them are taken forward for action. As the minister might know, I am currently working on a member's bill consultation on how we might strengthen the law in this area. Will the minister agree to meet me to discuss how we might work together to resolve the problem?

Màiri McAllan: Yes, I understand the frustrations of local authorities, the police, the Procurator Fiscal Service and, of course, those people who are unfortunate enough to have to deal with fly-tipping on their land. I live in a rural area and I have had personal experience of the issue, so I know how frustrating it is.

I am aware of the bill that the member is developing. I have not seen the content of it yet, but I would be glad to meet him to discuss it.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Of course, fly-tipping goes way beyond the ubiquitous street mattress. I understand that serious organised crime is involved in commercial fly-tipping. Will that be factored into the Government's consultation?

Màiri McAllan: I thank the member for raising that important point. Organised crime and criminal activity is a key part of one of the many challenges that we face as regards litter and fly-tipping. In my answer to the previous question, I mentioned that we are engaging with Police Scotland and the Procurator Fiscal Service—crucially, we are also engaging with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency—to look at those very issues.

CalMac Summer Timetable

7. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what consultation is being undertaken with communities

regarding next year's summer timetable for ferry routes within the CalMac network. (S6O-00367)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): CalMac Ferries is currently consulting local stakeholders on summer 2022 timetables. The results of the consultation will be considered before any decisions are taken. Community views are crucial to the process, so I encourage stakeholders to engage constructively with CalMac, and I encourage CalMac to reflect carefully on any implementable asks that come out of the process.

Dr Allan: I thank the minister for his very helpful reply. He will be aware of concern in my constituency over proposed changes that would result in an overall reduction in the number of sailings from Lochmaddy and Tarbert. Will he comment on that and on why the consultation period for the issue was, apparently, so short?

Graeme Dey: Increasing demand on the route has led to CalMac deploying the mezzanine deck more frequently, which has led to challenges in the current timetable with loading and offloading. Any delays to sailings have knock-on effects, often requiring later sailings to be cancelled to ensure that crews get the required number of hours of rest. An option is therefore being developed to allow the mezzanine deck to be fully deployed with some amendments to timetables, resulting in the removal of the shoulder off-peak season and having a consistent timetable for the whole summer period. However, if the community does not want that, the summer 2021 timetable will remain in place, although the mezz deck will not be in operation in order to avoid delays and cancellations.

CalMac continues to engage on the proposals with the council, which is the agreed consultation group for Western Isles services, and Transport Scotland officials are liaising closely with CalMac on the matter. I hope that that offers Alasdair Allan some reassurance.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Graeme Dey will be aware that one of the services that are being cut runs on Saturdays, which is traditionally a changeover day for tourism businesses, meaning that changeovers will not take place. If the issue is crewing, will he allow CalMac to employ more crews so that the ferry can run more often, allowing changeovers to happen?

Graeme Dey: As I said, these are options that are being considered. We are aware that CalMac continues to engage, along with the local council, on these matters. I encourage the council to involve the local transport forum in discussions to see whether we can arrive at a satisfactory conclusion.

Net Zero (Argyll and Bute)

8. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will support Argyll and Bute to benefit from the transition to net zero. (S6O-00368)

The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): The climate crisis is, quite simply, the greatest long-term challenge that we face. The risks of inaction are huge, but there are also opportunities. The Scottish Government provides a range of support to ensure that communities and businesses in Argyll and Bute and across Scotland benefit from a just transition to net zero.

To give just two examples of our work, the Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust has received £52,000 through the climate challenge fund, and we have committed up to £25 million to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth through the Argyll and Bute rural growth deal over 10 years. Combined with investment from partners, the deal will be worth at least £70 million.

Jenni Minto: Argyll and Bute is central to Scotland's journey to net zero; it has onshore and offshore wind and renewable supply chain businesses and marine research at the Scottish Association for Marine Science, and it is home to Scotland's Celtic rainforests. How will the Scottish Government listen to communities and balance their needs with those of the wider country?

Màiri McAllan: Jenni Minto touches on an important point about balance. A just transition is at the heart of our climate action. The transition must deliver on our economic and social as well as our climate goals, and it will work only if it is shaped by communities, businesses and workers alike.

We have committed to producing regional just transition plans, and we are identifying where regions will be best placed to act as facilitators for planning processes, bringing parties together and ensuring that voices are heard.

Our draft fourth national planning framework was laid before the Parliament yesterday. We will be carrying out extensive consultation and engagement on it.

At the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—just last week, on a visit to the RSPB Scotland exhibition at Glasgow botanic gardens, as countries around the world committed to ending deforestation, I was pleased to make clear our commitment to continue creating up to 80 per cent of the United Kingdom's woodlands and, crucially, to support and expand our precious rainforest in the west of the Scotland.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Scottish Ambulance Service (Waiting Times)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): On this day, 11 November, we pay tribute to those who gave so much and sacrificed their lives to protect us, and we thank those who are currently serving in our armed forces and all the veterans across our country for everything that they have done to keep us safe. [*Applause.*]

For months, we have seen tragic cases of people waiting far too long for emergency help. We heard this week of 55-year-old Richard Brown, who lost his life after waiting five hours for an ambulance. In his final moments, he was alone in the stairwell of his tenement building, struggling to breathe. A neighbour repeatedly called for an ambulance, and the final time they checked on Richard, they saw that his ears had turned white and he had stopped breathing.

Deputy First Minister, why is this happening in Scotland today?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Before I come to the substance of Mr Ross's question, I say that, as a Parliament and as a country, today we fell silent to mark armistice day. In doing so, we pay tribute to armed services personnel both past and present, and we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

This year marks 100 years of the Royal British Legion Scotland and the Scottish poppy appeal. In that time, the appeal has supported countless servicemen and women, veterans and their families. I know that I speak for everyone in the chamber in offering our thanks and our continued support for the efforts of the Scottish poppy appeal and the important work that it and the Royal British Legion Scotland do for us all, and especially for services personnel.

Today, I am answering questions on the First Minister's behalf as she is at the conference of the parties in Glasgow.

Mr Ross raises a serious issue in relation to Richard Brown. First, I want to express my sympathy to Mr Brown's family, because he should not have had the experience that he had, and I am very sorry that his family are enduring the extra agony that they are having to endure in addition to the loss of Mr Brown. An investigation into the circumstances relating to the delay in reaching Mr Brown has been launched, and all findings and lessons will be shared with his family as part of that process.

To move to the general question, first of all, I recognise the enormous pressures faced by the Scottish Ambulance Service. The Government has been clear in that recognition. I think that part of the explanation, perhaps, is the level of demand that is being placed on the Scottish Ambulance Service as a consequence of the pressures that there are on the whole healthcare system in Scotland. As an illustration of that, I note that, in August 2018, the Scottish Ambulance Service responded to 5,788 immediately life-threatening incidents. By October 2021, that figure had reached 10,733—it had almost doubled. I say that simply to explain and quantify the pressures that the Scottish Ambulance Service is under.

The Government has provided increased investment of £20 million to support the staff, and staff recruitment is under way. We will continue to invest in the work of the Scottish Ambulance Service to make sure that it has the capacity to undertake the tasks that it needs to undertake, and to ensure that other families do not have the experience of Mr Brown's family.

Douglas Ross: The problem is, Deputy First Minister, that other families are having that experience. This is not the first time that I have raised in the chamber a distressing case like Richard Brown's. We have raised several cases where lives have been unnecessarily lost.

This week, Dr John Thomson of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine told a Scottish Parliament committee that excessive waiting times are resulting in avoidable deaths. He laid out the grim facts. For every 67 people who wait at accident and emergency for more than eight hours, somebody dies. If we look at just the past two months, according to Dr Thomson's estimate, there will have been more than 200 avoidable deaths. Lives are being lost that could have been saved.

Will the Deputy First Minister therefore accept that the Scottish Government simply is not doing enough to support our emergency health services in their time of greatest need?

John Swinney: The research that Mr Ross cites is based on data and experience within the ambulance service and experience within England. We are engaging with Mr Thomson to establish the comparability issues that will arise out of that information.

I say to Mr Ross that, first of all, I do not want it to be suggested in any way that I do not recognise the pressures on the health service generally and the Scottish Ambulance Service in particular. I acknowledged that at the outset of my answers, and that is why the Government has put in place increased investment of £20 million. Over the past two months, we have already seen 179 new staff

join the Scottish Ambulance Service, and that will rise to 356 by the spring.

Under this Government, the Scottish Ambulance Service budget has risen—it has received sustained investment over our period in office—but we must take forward a series of measures at every stage of the national health service to reduce the immediate burden on it. That means that we must have whole-systems solutions in place to boost social care capacity so that people are better supported in their homes and, therefore, have less need to use the Scottish Ambulance Service; to ensure that there are improvements in the level of delayed discharges, which are the focus of great attention from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, so that our hospitals are less congested; and, crucially, to ensure that people have a swift journey through accident and emergency departments, when they require to be there.

Those issues are all the subject of on-going attention from the health secretary and ministers. The health secretary met the Scottish Ambulance Service yesterday to discuss these questions, and that dialogue will continue.

Douglas Ross: The dialogue has to continue, but we need action as a result of that dialogue. This morning, there are worrying reports from paramedics and ambulance staff that they are at breaking point. A survey found that more than half of ambulance staff in Scotland have seen patients die or become seriously ill because of long waiting times. Pat Rafferty, secretary of Unite Scotland, said:

“The workers at the Scottish Ambulance Service are sending out their own 999 call to the Scottish Government saying that they are undervalued, stressed, and exhausted.”

How will the Scottish Government answer that emergency call?

John Swinney: That is very important, given the fact that ambulance personnel—as is the case for many people who work in the health service—are dealing with trauma on a constant basis. Over the past 18 months, our health service professionals’ experience of trauma has been even greater because of the significant burden of Covid. That is why the Government has invested £12 million in supporting the wellbeing of members of staff, as we must have healthy staff if we want to have a healthy population. Those individuals must be able to exercise their functions and responsibilities and be supported in so doing.

I have seen the survey evidence that Mr Ross cites. I am troubled by it because, clearly, I want staff to feel valued. I can say that from this podium, and we can reinforce that with the

investment that we make. Over this Government’s period in office, investment in the Scottish Ambulance Service has risen by 74 per cent and staffing has increased by 62 per cent. However, I acknowledge that there are significant demands on the service. We have put in place that investment and staff numbers are rising. Staff are doing a magnificent job in really difficult circumstances, and I give them the assurance that the Government is not looking at the challenges of the Scottish Ambulance Service alone, because the selfsame staff who completed the survey to which Mr Ross refers will be aware that meeting the challenges that they face requires a whole-health-service-system solution, which is about social care, accident and emergency services and tackling delayed discharges, and those are all the issues that the Government is prioritising.

Douglas Ross: The Deputy First Minister is right: this is about not just ambulance staff but workers across the NHS—including nurses, who are considering strike action. It is about doctors, medical students, paramedics and nurses—everyone in the NHS is desperately trying to save lives, but they do not have the resources that they need. They are crying out for help. Front-line staff have sent out their own 999 call to the Government. Scotland’s NHS needs more support. This winter will be its toughest ever test. There is an extra £605 million coming to the Scottish Government this year. How much of that money will the Deputy First Minister’s Government commit to Scotland’s NHS right now?

John Swinney: Mr Ross will appreciate that, although I used to be close to decision making on financial issues, I am no longer the finance secretary. I will leave those questions for the budget debate, which will take place on 9 December.

What I can say to Mr Ross is this: employment in the national health service has never been higher than it is today. There has been a consistent increase in employment in the national health service in all areas of responsibility. I talked about Scottish Ambulance Service personnel a moment ago, but in every area of the national health service—for example, consultants and nurses—there has been growth in the number of staff recruited and employed.

On the question of pay, our nurses are the best paid in the United Kingdom and we have given them the best offer of an increase.

I appreciate that there are many strains on the national health service and that those strains are being felt by many members of staff, but I want to make it absolutely clear that the Scottish Government values every individual who contributes to the operation of the national health service. We applaud what they are doing in very

difficult circumstances and assure them that we will resource them to enable them to continue to do that work. In that way, together as a country, we can overcome the enormous burdens that we have faced as a result of Covid and ensure that we support the population to health. We need the national health service to deliver on that objective.

Scottish Ambulance Service (Funding)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Today, 11 November, we honour and remember those who have served and serve in our armed forces. We pause to reflect on their duty and courage, and to make it clear that we will always remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. We should also thank our armed forces for all their incredible contributions throughout the Covid pandemic.

I want to go back to the national health service because, to be frank, the Deputy First Minister's previous answers were not good enough. They were just words; what we need is action.

Last Saturday, a 55-year-old man, Richard Brown, died on the stairs of his tenement in Glasgow. Mr Brown had waited five hours for an ambulance that did not arrive. Our NHS is in crisis. Mr Brown's is not the first avoidable death this winter and, if action is not taken, his death will not be the last. People are dying—not because we do not have the treatments to help them, but because help is not coming fast enough. Even when an ambulance does arrive, people are spending hours sitting outside hospitals, waiting to be seen.

The support that was announced by the Government in September is not good enough and is not making a difference. When will the Government come forward with a sufficient package of support, so that we can prevent unnecessary suffering and deaths this winter?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):

I will, of necessity, reiterate some of the points that I made in my answer to Douglas Ross, because they relate directly to Mr Brown. The circumstances of Mr Brown's death and what his family has experienced are unacceptable, and the matter is being investigated. I extend my sympathies to Mr Brown's family.

The Scottish Ambulance Service is under so much pressure partly because of the significant increase in demand for its services resulting from the increase in demand in general for healthcare services, as a consequence of the pandemic. The pandemic has put enormous strain on the NHS workforce, which has performed magnificently throughout an incredibly difficult 18 months. Demands will continue to be placed on the workforce because we are going into winter.

The Government responded to that in September by putting in place £20 million of increased investment. New staff have been recruited and are now operating within the Scottish Ambulance Service. There have been consistent increases in the budget of the Scottish Ambulance Service over the period in which this Government has been in office. We will continue to have dialogue with the Scottish Ambulance Service about how we can support its efforts. We have secured some military assistance—for which Mr Sarwar properly paid tribute—to assist us in that task.

The Government is taking the necessary action to address the circumstances. We want to ensure that every individual is able to receive the healthcare that they require, in the appropriate circumstances. That is the focus of the investments that the Government is making.

Anas Sarwar: Given that answer from the Deputy First Minister, we can understand why 88 per cent of staff say that they do not feel valued by the Scottish Government. We can understand why 98 per cent of staff say that the support that was announced in September is insufficient. We hear all the talk about record numbers of staff, but the fact is that 79 per cent of staff believe that the NHS is understaffed. I ask the Deputy First Minister to listen to NHS staff—do not ignore them.

I am sorry to say to the Deputy First Minister that Covid cannot be the cover. The pressures existed in the national health service even before Covid. Although Covid has exacerbated the problems, let us not pretend that they started with it.

The survey that Unite the union has released this morning outlines the challenges that Scottish Ambulance Service staff face, the pressures that they are under, and the risks that those factors mean for patients. More than 70 per cent of staff said that their calls had taken more than six hours to complete. A shocking 16 per cent of staff said that at least one of their calls had taken more than 20 hours to complete, and more than half said that delays had led to an adverse clinical event—for example, a patient having a cardiac arrest in an ambulance when they could have been in a hospital.

The Deputy First Minister pointed at the Government's announcement from September, but 98 per cent of staff say that what was announced is insufficient. Paramedics have made it clear that a commitment to a maximum 30-minute turnaround is needed so that ambulance staff are saving lives and not queuing outside hospitals. If he is sincere about actions and not words, will the Deputy First Minister make that commitment today?

John Swinney: It is abundantly clear that the Government and I want to ensure that ambulance time and capacity are used as efficiently as possible. Ambulances that are waiting at accident and emergency departments and not out collecting patients and providing support in the community are not in the right place. With the Scottish Ambulance Service, the Government is intensely focused on ensuring that ambulances are operating effectively so that congestion in accident and emergency departments does not delay them.

As I said to Mr Ross a moment ago, the issue is all tied up with the fact that a whole-system solution is required. We need to ensure that patients are able to leave hospital to go into the community with social care packages, and that accident and emergency departments have the capacity to ensure that patients can, if it is needed, be moved from A and E into hospital wards, or discharged as efficiently as possible.

That is why the Government put in place a £300 million NHS and winter care package in September. The package allows for recruitment of an extra 1,000 NHS staff. There is £40 million for step-down care, £60 million to maximise the capacity of care-at-home services, £48 million to boost the pay of social care staff to ensure that we can deliver more social care packages, and £28 million to support primary care and community solutions. That investment has been made across the health service in order to ensure that the Scottish Ambulance Service can make its contribution as efficiently as possible.

I assure Mr Sarwar and the public that the Government is determined to use all available resources to ensure that individuals receive the care that they require.

Anas Sarwar: The Deputy First Minister said that the system is broken, but who has been in charge of the system? The Scottish National Party has been in Government for 14 years, so let us not pretend that the problem has just appeared.

The Deputy First Minister listed all the actions that the Government announced in September. I repeat that 98 per cent of Ambulance Service staff say that that response is insufficient. Let us be clear that people are dying because of those choices and that NHS staff had warned about them long before Covid.

There is a pattern. The Royal College of Nurses tells us that there are not enough nurses, but the Government denies it. Emergency medicine doctors say that delays are causing deaths, but the Government does not acknowledge that. Consultants tell us that hospitals need at least 1,000 more beds to keep up with demand, but the Government has cut the number of beds by 1,300 over the past decade. Patients tell us of long

delays in A and E, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care's answer is to tell patients not to go to A and E.

The problem is not patients or staff, but the out-of-touch and hopeless Government that is presiding over a crisis in our NHS. Again, what will it take for the Government to act? Why does the Government believe that it, rather than the nurses and paramedics who are on the front line in our NHS, knows best?

John Swinney: The problem in this exchange is that Mr Sarwar is absolutely in denial about the impact of Covid on our national health service. He seems to think that the challenges that we face in our NHS today are somehow unique to Scotland, but every single healthcare system in the western world faces the same problems. However, according to Mr Sarwar, the impact of Covid is apparently irrelevant in that. I am not going to accept that skating past the impact that Covid has had on the situation that we face.

The Government has made the investment and we continue to engage in discussion with trade unions, employees, health boards and the Scottish Ambulance Service to make sure that we have all the capacity in place to deliver services.

However, what we have to recognise is that that is why the Government is taking the cautious steps that we are taking on Covid—some of which members of this Parliament have told us not to take. Although some members are not prepared to support us when we take those steps, we take them in order to protect the people of this country, and will make no apology for that.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move on to supplementary questions.

Climate Action Towns

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the fact that Annan, in Dumfries and Galloway, has been selected for the climate action towns programme, which will empower communities to engage in collective climate action, taking account of the unique challenges and opportunities that each town faces.

Given the flooding that Annan experienced just last week, which washed away two of the town's footbridges in unprecedented levels of water, will the Deputy First Minister give further detail on how the climate action towns programme will work to tackle the global climate emergency?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The climate action towns programme will work to support communities so that they can influence the steps that are taken to create better resilience against the climate.

I saw at first hand last week the damage that had taken place in Annan. There was a tremendous community resolve to address those issues, just as there had been a tremendous community resilience operation to protect households and businesses, as a consequence of the flooding.

Fundamentally, the climate action towns programme will empower local communities to take more of those decisions and resource them to undertake that activity.

A96 (Dualling)

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): At the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 31 August, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy gave the following commitment:

“The A9 is still going to be dualled, and the A96 is referred to in the co-operation agreement in terms of the priorities for the next few years.”—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 31 August 2021; c 40-41.]

However, in the chamber yesterday, the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth, Tom Arthur, when questioned by Fergus Ewing and Jamie Halcro Johnston, could not give any such commitment. Will the A96 be fully dualled by the 2030 commitment date—yes or no, Deputy First Minister?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The member referred to the A9 and the A96. The A9 programme continues apace. I was delighted that the latest stage of the dualling of the A9 was opened recently in my constituency, between Luncarty and the pass of Birnam, and it has made a huge difference to the local community.

The issues in relation to the A96 are covered in the partnership agreement, which sets out transport enhancements on the A96 corridor, including dualling from Inverness to Nairn; the bypassing of Nairn, Keith, Elgin and Inverurie, accompanied by measures to remove through traffic from bypassed town centres; and targeted road safety improvements, where needed, between Fochabers and Huntly and between Inverurie and Aberdeen. The current plan is to fully dual the A96 route between Inverness and Aberdeen, but we agreed to conduct a transparent, evidence-based review that is to include a climate compatibility assessment to assess direct and indirect impacts on the climate and the environment. That review will report by the end of 2022.

Breast Cancer Services (Dundee)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): In February, after the chief executive of NHS Tayside cast doubt on the future viability of breast cancer services in Dundee, the First Minister promised Parliament that she would act on the unfolding crisis. Instead, as was reported in *The Courier* this morning, a further resignation of a senior consultant has left the service on the brink of collapse and in urgent need of external support.

This has been a catastrophic failure of leadership by the board and the SNP Government. What has to happen—how many lives will be put at risk—before the Government steps up with a plan that guarantees the future of what is a vital service?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): I honestly do not think that Mr Marra is serving the people whom he represents well by expressing the issue in that fashion.

After February, a new consultant was appointed in NHS Tayside to provide that service. There is on-going recruitment for a further post, and on-going clinical support is provided by NHS Grampian. I hope that that provides the reassurance to members of the public in the Tayside area that Mr Marra’s unfortunate expression of his question certainly did not.

Covid-19 Certificates (Scams)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): A constituent received this text:

“NHS: You are now eligible to apply for your NHS COVID Pass. Failure to apply may result in a fine. Please apply for your COVID Pass via”.

There was then an address that was made to look like a national health service address.

My constituent had the good sense not to click on the link. However, since my office advised NHS Borders and the police of the text, there have been further instances. What is the Scottish Government doing to alert the public to this recent spate of scams?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Christine Grahame is right to raise the issue. There have been some reports of scam calls and texts related to Covid-19. Let me be absolutely clear: neither the Scottish Government nor any other agency will text individuals to invite them to apply for a Covid-19 pass or certificate. Ofcom, which is the United Kingdom’s communications regulator, has published information on its website on how to be vigilant against such activity. Any suspicious emails can be forwarded to the

National Cyber Security Centre, and suspicious texts can be reported. I encourage members of the public to be vigilant and to follow the fact that neither the Scottish Government nor any other agency will text individuals to invite them to apply for a Covid-19 pass or certificate.

Covid-19 Booster Vaccination Scheme (Lothians)

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): A constituent of mine—Norma from Dirleton—received her booster vaccination some time ago. However, yesterday, she received a fourth letter calling her for a jab and she has been unable to cancel the appointment. Her 88-year-old neighbour has received no booster vaccination correspondence, and she, too, has faced problems in getting through on the appointment line. Despite attending a mobile vaccination bus in Gullane twice last Thursday, she had to leave because of the length of the queues. Will the Deputy First Minister urgently look into the ongoing problems with the booster vaccination scheme across the Lothians?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The vaccination programme in general has been rolled out very effectively, and the booster programme is being rolled out across the country very successfully. Scotland is the highest-performing part of the United Kingdom in relation to the rolling out of the booster programme. However, there have been a number of issues in connection with the appointments system in NHS Lothian, with which we are familiar.

We are in discussion with NHS Lothian. Earlier this week, our officials met its chief executive to discuss the very practical issues that Mr Hoy has raised. If he wishes to provide me with specific details, I will look into that case and try to resolve it. I am sorry for the inconvenience that his constituent has experienced—they should not have experienced that.

In general, the programme is being rolled out well, but there are some challenges with the appointments system in NHS Lothian. We expect those to be resolved very shortly. However, if there are particular details that Mr Hoy wishes to share with us, we will act to resolve them.

Carers (Pay Increase)

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): In Mid Scotland and Fife—and throughout Scotland, I think—the number of people who have been assessed as needing care packages but who have been unable to access them is growing by the day. In the COVID-19 Recovery Committee meeting this morning, Dr Donald Macaskill from Scottish Care made it clear that pay is the key factor in

recruitment and retention. Although he welcomed the increase to £10.02 per hour, he said that it is not enough and that it will not fix the problem. In the same meeting, Dr Andrew Buist of the British Medical Association's general practitioner committee said that the key issue that has to be resolved for this winter is the social care backlog and social care problems. Will the Government, which is putting hundreds of millions of pounds into that area, listen to all the professionals from that sector and bring forward in the budget a wage increase for all carers in Scotland?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Mr Rowley has made a number of contributions on that question in Parliament. I have handled a number of those, and we have discussed the question in the COVID-19 Recovery Committee. I acknowledge the significance of the point that he has made.

In my answers to the questions from Anas Sarwar and Douglas Ross, I said that, if we can address and build the capacity of the social care workforce, that will give us some ability to withstand some of the other pressures that the national health service experiences. The Government has already put in place an increase in the salary of the social care workforce to assist in resolving those issues.

One of the other issues is the availability of people in our community. I am sure that Mr Rowley would accept that the ending of the free movement of individuals from the European Union has diminished the size of the workforce that is available to us in Scotland. That has a real and practical effect in a number of sectors, one of which is social care. That is why we are encouraging the United Kingdom Government to arrive at a more sensible position on free movement than it currently occupies.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On armistice day, it is incumbent on us all to pay respect to people who paid the ultimate price to protect our country and our freedoms.

To ask the Deputy First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-00427)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): It will meet on Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: There is a muscle memory to the exchanges at First Minister's questions: week after week, Opposition members ask the Government about the crisis in emergency care and, week after week, the Government responds by blaming the pandemic. The Deputy First Minister has doubled down on that today by

accusing Anas Sarwar of being in denial, but the former chief executive of NHS Scotland has said that the crisis has been years in the making and the pandemic has only hastened the date.

I ask the Deputy First Minister to put himself in the shoes of our hard-working emergency care staff—the call handlers who answer repeated calls asking again and again when an ambulance will come, and the paramedics who attend calls knowing that, behind the door, there is somebody who has been waiting in pain for hours on end, which must be traumatic.

I have with me a response to a freedom of information request, through which we learned that the number of ambulance staff hours lost to mental ill health is up 300 per cent since 2017 and represented 40,000 hours between July and September alone. One paramedic told the *Daily Record* today:

“We feel as if we are failing the public even though it’s not our fault.”

It is not their fault, so I ask the Deputy First Minister to stop grasping at straws, stop blaming the pandemic and accept that his Government is letting down those vital staff.

John Swinney: I value the contribution that all healthcare staff make to all the component parts of our national health service. We recognise the pressure on the wellbeing of members of staff. That is why we put in place the £12 million investment to ensure that staff wellbeing was supported and that individuals could be enabled to continue their activities.

I also have to recognise, as members of staff do, the significant impact that Covid has on the national health service’s operation. Anybody who comes to Parliament and seeks to diminish Covid’s enormous impact on our national health service is not recognising the reality of the situation that we face. It is why we have put in place the extra winter care package, strengthened the resources that are available to the Scottish Ambulance Service and will continue to invest as assiduously in the national health service as we have done since the minute the Government came to office, significantly increasing its budget over the Government’s term in office.

Under2 Coalition

4. Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): To ask the Deputy First Minister whether he will provide an update on the work of the under2 coalition at the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. (S6F-00445)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The under2 coalition, of which the First Minister is

the European co-chair, launched a new memorandum of understanding at the general assembly this week, which set out a higher level of ambition for the coalition and committed it to achieving net zero by 2050. The First Minister signed the MOU at the general assembly and 27 Governments also signed up.

We endorse the new “Further, Faster, Together: Under2 Leaders Action at COP26” statement, which outlines the actions that coalition members are already taking to meet their ambitious 2030 targets. Forty-one Governments endorsed the statement, which demonstrates their leadership on that important objective.

Fiona Hyslop: I welcome the announcement that was made today on the trebling of support for climate justice. What plans does the Scottish Government have to continue beyond COP26 the discussions and networking established by the Glasgow climate dialogues, which we will discuss in our lunchtime members’ business debate? In particular, will the Scottish Government use its role as the European co-chair of the under2 coalition of sub-states, cities and regions to promote a similar dialogue among all the coalition members? In doing so, will the Scottish Government advance issues such as loss and damage funds, following the First Minister’s announcement that the Scottish loss and damage fund will increase to £2 million? That is small in amount but significant in terms of leadership on the issue.

John Swinney: I am happy to confirm the Government’s support for the objectives that Fiona Hyslop has set out. As European co-chair, Scotland is committed to promoting values of justice and inclusivity. We hope to build a lasting legacy from COP26 by building a just transition alliance with members of the under2 coalition. We are also championing issues of global importance to mobilise increased action from our fellow members.

I recognise that there is a members’ business debate today that will be initiated by Fiona Hyslop. It will focus on ensuring that the global south is heard and understood, and the Scottish Government and the Stop Climate Chaos coalition have co-convened the Glasgow dialogues to enable that to be the case.

Today’s debate is, of course, the first members’ business debate in 14 years that Fiona Hyslop has been able to lead in the chamber, because of her service as a minister, and I cannot think of a more formidable parliamentary voice to be leading on this topic than hers. I wish her well for the debate.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The International Energy Agency says that the development of new oil and gas fields must stop this year if we are to reach net zero by

2050, as advocated by the under2 coalition. That alone should rule out development of the Cambo oil field off the coast of Shetland. However, Cambo would not only be bad for the climate, it would be devastating for biodiversity. Sixteen marine and climate groups recently highlighted that the pipeline would cut through 22 miles of United Kingdom marine protected area and threaten hundreds of rare and ancient species in the Faroe-Shetland sponge belt. Will the Deputy First Minister raise that issue with the UK Government in order to uphold the MPA designation for that important area?

John Swinney: Decisions on the issues in relation to Cambo are, obviously, for the United Kingdom Government, and Ariane Burgess will be familiar with the fact that the Scottish Government has made clear our desire for the UK Government to subject that particular development to a climate compatibility assessment, given the length of time that has passed since its original consent.

Specific issues in relation to marine protected areas will have to be the subject of statutory dialogue, were that development to take its course. However, of course, the Scottish Government's stance is to ask for a climate compatibility assessment to be undertaken before we get to that stage.

Electric Car Charging Points

5. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government plans to meet the requirement for electric car charging points by 2030. (S6F-00434)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Over the past decade, the Scottish Government has invested more than £50 million in public charging points, creating one of the largest networks in the United Kingdom. We are working with industry, local authorities and technology suppliers to expand the network and, through a partnership approach, create opportunities for Scottish business, industry and communities. At the core of our approach is making sure that no one and no part of Scotland is left behind as we switch to electric vehicles.

Liam Kerr: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his answer but I am not sure that it will give people much confidence, because latest figures show that the number of faulty charging points that were recorded this year far exceeds the number recorded in 2020. Nearly 40 charging units a week are registered as broken.

The Press and Journal recently made an electric vehicle trip from John O'Groats to Glasgow ahead of COP26 and it found that, particularly in Aberdeenshire, significant numbers of charging

points were broken or inaccessible, leaving EV motorists stranded. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce says that the situation is "nowhere near" good enough. Will the Deputy First Minister address those issues with ChargePlace Scotland to ensure that Scotland has working infrastructure to support the roll-out of electric vehicles and meet our net zero targets?

John Swinney: This is an important issue—the transition has to be made and made effectively. In the UK, Scotland has the second-highest number of public charge points for electric vehicles per 100,000 people, which is second only to London. Of course, those charge points have to be operational and, if Mr Kerr furnishes me with information about the particular examples that he is concerned about, I will ensure that they are addressed.

In relation to our dialogue with ChargePlace Scotland, we will ensure that the issues that have been raised today will be raised with it to ensure that we have an effective network.

In terms of the investment, the Government is making sustained investment, which has put us in a position in which Scotland has the highest number of public charge points for electric vehicles in any part of the UK other than London.

Scottish Ambulance Service (Turnaround Times)

6. **Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking in response to reports of an increase in turnaround times for ambulances offloading patients at accident and emergency departments. (S6F-00433)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The Scottish Government recently announced a package of support for the Scottish Ambulance Service, backed by an additional £20 million, which will help increase capacity and improve response and turnaround times and staff wellbeing. It includes the recruitment of additional hospital ambulance liaison officers, who provide targeted support to ambulances at our busiest A and E departments to reduce turnaround times.

We are working with health boards to reduce handover times within A and E departments by putting in place a range of measures, including decompressing the A and E department by focusing on flow, implementing Scottish Ambulance Service arrival screens and opening additional capacity for ambulances to safely and timeously offload patients. That will support our improvement journey and aim of preventing ambulances being delayed at A and E departments.

Paul O’Kane: In all his answers on the subject, the Deputy First Minister has pointed to increased demand due to the pandemic. However, I have statistics from the Scottish Ambulance Service showing that turnaround times in A and E departments have been increasing going back to 2014. In my region, ambulance turnaround times at the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley have doubled from 22 minutes in 2014 to 43 minutes in 2021. That is simply unacceptable.

Those statistics clearly demonstrate that the crisis in ambulance wait times began well before the pandemic; they were growing year on year. In answer to Anas Sarwar, the Deputy First Minister would not commit to the maximum 30-minute turnaround time called for by ambulance staff. Will he therefore tell the chamber what he thinks is an acceptable turnaround time for ambulances at A and E? When will he listen to staff and get a grip of this crisis?

John Swinney: I set out in my answers to Douglas Ross and Anas Sarwar some of the substance of the issues, so I will not rehearse that again in answer to Paul O’Kane. However, one of the important investments that we have made is the investment in the hospital ambulance liaison officer service. It has proven to be effective in improving the turnaround of patients who have been brought to hospital by ambulances in a number of parts of the country. We are also expanding the capacity of the Scottish Ambulance Service through the investment that we have made.

The Government is taking those practical steps, in discussion with staff, to ensure that we have in place steps to ensure that people are supported when they need access to ambulance services and that they do not spend any longer in the ambulance than they require to. Obviously, that will vary depending on the condition and circumstances of individual patients as they arrive and are presented to hospital. I trust and rely on the clinical judgments that are made by staff in the national health service to ensure that patients get the treatment and care that they require.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The Deputy First Minister just gave a list of things that he is looking to do; however, clearly, they are not working. Ambulance turnaround times are rising. Will he accept that the plans that he has put in place are not working, and look to improve and make tangible differences to ambulance turnaround times right now?

John Swinney: The investment has been made. We are seeing an expansion in the number of staff and personnel working in the Scottish Ambulance Service. We are also seeing recruitment of individuals that is designed to support the flow of patients from ambulances into

accident and emergency departments and on, either to destinations in the hospital or to a return home.

I would have thought that Dr Gulhane would accept that this is a whole-systems issue. It involves the roles and responsibilities of general practitioners, social care, hospitals and accident and emergency departments, as well as delayed discharges. The Government is taking sustained action in a number of areas to ensure that we deal with that in the context of a national health service that is under colossal pressure because of the impact of the pandemic. We are working our way through those challenges to ensure that we meet the needs of patients in all circumstances.

Drug Consumption Rooms

7. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister what his response is to the comments by the Lord Advocate to the Criminal Justice Committee on the potential for new proposals regarding the use of drug consumption rooms and whether non-prosecution is in the public interest. (S6F-00449)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): The Lord Advocate’s statement confirms a new opportunity for new proposals to be considered regarding safer drug consumption facilities. We have been clear on the benefits that safer drug consumption facilities would bring to reducing drug-related deaths in Scotland, and we are actively exploring how we can overcome the existing legal barriers that will allow us to progress the use of those facilities. There is clear evidence that those facilities mitigate the chances of a fatal overdose, provide additional support—including the reduction of harm-related injection practices—and allow for connection with wider treatment services. We see problem substance use as a public health issue, and there is a growing recognition of the harms that punitive drug policies cause. Providing individuals with options for treatment, rather than a route into the criminal justice system, is our priority.

Claire Baker: The statement from the Lord Advocate is very welcome, and I also welcome the Government’s commitment to look at a way to address the issue. We all recognise the significant problems that Scotland has with drug fatalities. We have been critical of the Government’s approach to that so far, but we are looking to work constructively, and I hope that the Lord Advocate will be able to move forward on that.

The Deputy First Minister is aware that Glasgow city health and social care partnership’s previous plan was rejected by the then Lord Advocate, although Mr Swinney was not involved in that. This time, I am looking for assurances that a proposal

from the Government will be robust, and for an indication of when we will have some conclusions, so that a proposal can be brought forward.

John Swinney: I am happy to give Claire Baker the assurance that the Government is taking forward active discussions to establish an acceptable route to enable the appropriate use of drug consumption rooms, as part of a public health strategy to tackle the drugs problems that we face in Scottish society. That involves a great deal of dialogue with a range of organisations, including Police Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and the Crown Office, to ensure that we establish and propose an appropriate and sustainable route. That work is under way. If Claire Baker will forgive me, I cannot give a definitive timescale today, but I assure her that that work is being actively pursued as a consequence of the Lord Advocate's remarks.

Glasgow Climate Dialogues Communiqué

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01490, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on publication of the communiqué setting out the conclusions of the Glasgow climate dialogues. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the communiqué setting out the conclusions of the Glasgow Climate Dialogues, hosted by the Scottish Government and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland; understands that these dialogues were a series of online discussions, which took place between 6 and 9 September 2021, providing a forum for civil society and Government departments from impacted countries in the Global South to discuss and share their positions on some of the key priorities for action at and beyond COP26, while developing a shared understanding of these key issues and identifying where collective action can advance United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) goals and objectives; notes that the communiqué includes recommendations related to ensuring equitable access, participation and voice at the talks, the need for developed countries to significantly increase the financial support available to help impacted communities adapt to spiralling climate impacts, the need to address the losses and damages created by climate impacts that go beyond the limits of adaptation, and the need to ensure a global Just Transition based on the UNFCCC principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and the right to development; commends the Scottish Government and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland for facilitating these dialogues, and notes the calls for ministers to respond positively, including by placing these priorities at the heart of the Scottish Government's own activities for COP26 and encouraging support for them from other UNFCCC participants.

12:49

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): It is a privilege to bring this incredibly important debate to the chamber. Now is such a timely moment for this debate, as the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—draws to a conclusion and the gaping absence of a deal for vulnerable countries still urgently needs to be addressed. I thank all colleagues who have supported the motion and those who will speak in the debate.

The effects of climate change are not equal, fair or just. The publication of the communiqué setting out the conclusions of the Glasgow climate dialogues is a positive step in the right direction by amplifying the voices of the global south. Those

who caused the least damage are those who suffer the most from the climate emergency.

The dialogues were co-convened by the Scottish Government and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, which is an alliance of Scottish civil society. The dialogues were a series of online discussions that took place between 6 and 9 September 2021. They provided a forum in which civil society and Government departments from impacted countries in the global south could discuss and share their positions on some of the key priorities for action at and beyond COP26.

The communiqué covered four key areas: access, participation and voice; adaptation; loss and damage; and a just transition. In line with what the dialogues set out to do, I want to use my speech to further highlight and amplify the voices of the global south. To do that, we must hear their stories.

During a Stop Climate Chaos Scotland event, I met Marinel Ubbo, a youth climate justice advocate from the Philippines who wants justice for the lives that were lost in her community because of climate change. Marinel sadly lost relatives and friends because of super typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest and deadliest typhoons ever recorded. She was a graduating high school student when super typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in November 2013, killing more than 6,000 people and displacing thousands of families. She told me that they lost their houses and their livelihoods. She said:

“We have seen death. We were eating what we could find on the water, we were just all wet and cold without any water or food.”

Even now, Marinel told me, heavy rains bring back the fears and anxieties that she felt eight years ago during the onslaught of the super typhoon. She told me that she still does not know what happened to members of her family.

At the code red for parliamentarians event in the Scottish Parliament, I also spoke with Hassan Hulufu, member of Parliament from Kenya, who sat in this very chair on Saturday morning. He told me that in his constituency of Isiolo North, water sources have completely dried up, pasture and browse for livestock have depleted, and more 100,000 people face starvation and rely on food relief and cash transfers from the national Government. He said:

“This in turn means livestock markets have collapsed, that children are missing schools because of hunger and lack of water and the burden on women had increased as distance to water points has increased. It means local health facilities cannot function because of a lack of water despite an upsurge in diseases associated with poor hygiene due to compromised immunity caused by hunger.”

The suffering and desperation in the global south are real, now and present, and COP26 must deliver.

When the Scottish climate justice fund was introduced in 2012, as a minister I insisted that it be separate from our international development fund. The introduction of the climate justice fund followed a call by the UN for such funds to be created, and it was the first in the world. From this morning, it has been further increased, trebling support from Scotland to the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities in their efforts to tackle climate change.

I welcome the announcement at COP that the Scottish Government is also the first Government in the world to introduce a loss and damage fund. Today it has been increased to a total of £2 million, using a portion of the additional funding that I mentioned. The loss and damage fund is small in amount, but its introduction is recognised by the UN as showing significant leadership.

However, in all aspects of the climate emergency we must do more, we must go further and we must move faster. Innovation and green technologies are critical, but we need finance, climate justice and, above all, global leadership, commitment and action.

The Bangladeshi poet Shehzar Doja, who studies at the University of Glasgow, has seen the devastating impacts of climate change on his home country at first hand. We also heard from the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, when she addressed members of the Scottish Parliament in a historic moment.

Shehzar Doja's poem “No Fresh Soil Left to Plant”, which marked the start of COP26, warns us:

“When seasons quiver together in subservience
assortments which once grew in temperate calm
repeals any further invitations.”

It is not enough to make plans to tackle climate change in the future. It is not enough to create ambitious goals to help the planet. It is not enough for Governments at COP26 to promise help for the global south but offer no financial means to fulfil those promises.

We must listen to the people of Scotland. They want climate justice now, as shown during the global day of action last Saturday. From Glasgow to smaller towns and cities, people took to the streets to support global action for climate justice. They included people in my own constituency, who gathered in the rain at Linlithgow Cross to peacefully demonstrate for quicker change. The Scottish people want to end the era of injustice, and the leaders must listen.

We must act now, decisively and in partnership with the global south. We are one world with one chance. I call on the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom Government and all the leaders in the global north to listen to and understand the voices of people in the global south who are living with the impact of climate change now.

I end by quoting what the Prime Minister of Barbados said in her outstanding global leader speech last week:

“For those who have eyes to see, for those who have ears to listen, and for those who have a heart to feel, 1.5 is what we need to survive; 2 degrees ... is a death sentence”.

We must try harder, we must go further and we must get there faster. Our one world, and our one people who need to survive on that one world, depend on it.

12:56

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am glad that Fiona Hyslop’s motion is being debated and welcome the publication of the communiqué following the Glasgow climate dialogues, which were hosted by the Scottish Government and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. Keeping the 1.5°C target alive is crucial. If the world can contain global temperature rises to 1.5°C, we can avert catastrophic and possibly irreversible storms, wildfires, floods and droughts.

The draft COP agreement states that the parties note

“the importance for some of the concept of ‘climate justice’ when taking action to address climate change”.

Every Government in the world must recognise climate justice as a key consideration. Many of the countries that will experience the worst of climate change are those that have done little to cause it.

In co-hosting the Glasgow climate dialogues, the Scottish Government recognises the need and responsibility to learn from, listen to and engage with citizens from the global south. Their voices must be heard, at COP26 and all future COPs, particularly given that they are currently experiencing severe climate change-related loss and damage. Leaders must listen to those voices and take action to support countries in the global south.

The Paris agreement requires that developed countries provide financial resources to assist developing countries with mitigation and adaptation. The promised \$100 billion per year has not yet been achieved. However, that amount, as a minimum, must be delivered if we want to achieve our global ambition to minimise temperature rises. As the communiqué sets out, it is important that the funding should be a grant, rather than a loan.

Scotland’s targets are world leading and our commitments to a just transition and to drastically cutting transport emissions are so important. As we are the host country, I hope that politicians from across the world will take some inspiration from what we are doing in Scotland. The Scottish Government launched its climate justice fund in 2012. The fund has delivered £20 million to support Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda, protecting communities from the worst effects of climate change. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government committed to doubling that fund, but just this morning the First Minister confirmed that we will treble it.

Scotland is showing leadership and I hope that a Glasgow agreement will secure commitment from other countries on that front. A good system of climate-related funding can help to build resilience while supporting adaptation and creating opportunities in the global south—if the larger developed countries step up to the mark. For example, financial support could help developing countries to expand renewable energy capacity, which would create jobs, reduce energy poverty and increase energy independence.

I hope that negotiators will come to an agreement tomorrow that accelerates global action to cut emissions and reach net zero. We must keep 1.5°C alive. We must also ensure that climate justice is considered an essential.

I thank everyone who participated in the Glasgow climate dialogues and I hope that the communiqué and associated work will demonstrate to world leaders their responsibility for, and the importance and urgency of, delivering climate justice as we collectively work to safeguard our planet. These global challenges require a global response.

13:01

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Fiona Hyslop for bringing the debate to the chamber. I welcome the opportunity to speak on such a motion while COP26 is still in full flow. Like many of my colleagues, I have been immersed in COP26 through attending meetings and speaking on panels, and using this historic event to gather as much information as I can on the approach to the climate emergency that is being taken around the world.

It is obvious that our concern is mirrored around most of the world, which is a good starting point, but I note that some countries intend to go on regardless, and it is incumbent on us all to persuade them that we need to move forward collaboratively and globally. That is the only way in which we can achieve the outcomes that the world so desperately needs.

Putting differences aside and working together has been a theme of the COP so far. Who would have thought that the two main global polluters—the USA and China—would be able to make such a significant joint announcement? Two countries, poles apart politically and ideologically, are setting aside their differences and looking for a commonality of approach.

The conclusions from the Glasgow dialogues are undoubtedly welcome. They have certainly helped to set the agenda on some of the main issues on which the economy will depend, such as ensuring that, in our drive to develop greener policies, we do not leave anyone behind and in doing so, create greater inequality. That theme has been prevalent in many of the presentations and meetings that I have been to so far. Social justice, the need to develop community involvement, a just transition—those are all buzzwords and phrases that have done the rounds.

It is Government's responsibility to create that opportunity and the framework to encourage individuals, communities and businesses to move towards a lower-carbon way of living. We need to ensure that everyone understands that the decisions that we make as individuals, as communities, as businesses and as Governments impact every other person on the planet. It is almost as though we need a public relations or marketing exercise here. Too many are looking only to politicians to solve the crisis when the reality is that it will take all of us.

Talking and setting lofty and necessary goals is hugely important but, unless those goals are realised, the outcomes that are required will not be achieved. Just so that we understand the consequences of falling short, I note that early work on the impact of the agreement that has been reached so far would still result in a global temperature rise of between 1.8°C and 1.9°C.

The \$100 billion of investment from Governments around the world does not touch the trillions of dollars that will be required to tackle a crisis on such a global scale. However, that investment should leverage private investment towards that trillions of dollars. We need to work with the private sector, not against it, as some politicians seem hellbent on doing.

An increase of 1.8°C or 1.9°C is, of course, way above the 1.5°C target, so not only do we need to achieve the goals that we have set, we need to go further. Scotland has set ambitious targets, but it has missed them three years in a row, and we cannot afford to miss any more. Scotland can and should highlight what can be done. If we are serious about achieving the outcomes rather than just having ambitious targets, we need to have a workable route map to those targets.

I welcome Fiona Hyslop's motion, and I welcome the Glasgow climate dialogues and the publication of the conclusions of those dialogues. However, it is the actions that are taken following those conclusions on which we should all be judged. Members across the chamber have a duty to ensure that our actions lead to the outcomes that are essential in tackling the climate crisis.

13:05

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Unfortunately, on reflection, what has been achieved at the COP so far has been far from the rate of progress that our country and the planet as a whole needed to see, and it pains me to say that.

The agreements that have been made thus far, as is outlined in the communiqué, are predominantly ambiguously worded and full of platitudes, and they contain lofty ambitions with little to no concrete commitments. That said, there have been slivers of light. Last night's agreement between the People's Republic of China and the United States is the most important development that we have seen so far. Combined, those two countries emit more than half the world's carbon. It is of crucial importance that they work together on the issue.

That development begs the question whether we should wrap up the conference in the next 24 hours. With the fate of the planet hanging in the balance and the diplomacy between the two biggest global emitters at a high point, should we not seek to extend the conference to see what other areas of co-operation might be possible as we go into the weekend?

Fiona Hyslop: Along with other MSPs, I was at yesterday's plenary stock-taking session, at which the president of the conference, Alok Sharma, said that it was the "intention to finish" on 12 November. I think that that was an indication that, if the deal does not get to where it needs to get to, it is possible that the conference might have to be extended, precisely for the reasons that the member has set out.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the member for that important intervention. Alok Sharma's somewhat diplomatically worded phrase opens the door to such an extension. If we can see the light of a potential breakthrough over the weekend, we should press for that. I hope that the Scottish Government, although it is not formally represented at the talks, will press for the UK Government to extend the event, and I hope that the Scottish Conservatives and their colleagues in the British Government will do so if necessary.

A key area in which what has been achieved has been quite disappointing is deforestation. The commitments that have been made at the

conference are welcome, but are they ambitious enough? The agreement gives a date of 2030 for stopping and reversing deforestation, but that is nine years away. The ink on the paper was not even dry before the Brazilian Government started backtracking. Indeed, the president of Brazil's Federal Senate told the media that the focus of the Brazilian Government would be on curbing illegal deforestation, rather than deforestation that is sanctioned by the Government. Therefore, the indigenous people of Brazil, on whom deforestation has a devastating impact, just as it does on the lungs of the planet, are still in jeopardy.

Between August last year and July this year alone, the Amazon rainforest lost more than 10,000km², which is an area that is seven times bigger than London and 13 times the size of New York. If that amount of damage can be done in the space of a mere nine months, how much damage can be done in the next nine years?

Brian Whittle: Does the member agree that the issue is not just about the deforestation of the rainforests and that we must provide a replacement way of earning a living for the people who would have to give up that way of doing so?

Paul Sweeney: I absolutely agree that economic justice goes hand in hand with the physical changes that we need to make in key industries.

Even after the agreement on deforestation was reached in 2014, no progress was made in physically stopping the practice. We must tie the commitments that are made to real action on the ground to ensure that that does not happen again. I would like the Scottish and British Governments, through their diplomatic channels, to put greater effort into pushing for tighter commitments from those Governments that have a critical responsibility across the rainforest belts of the Amazon, central Africa and Indonesia.

COP also begs a question about what role the UK plays in the world. This week of all weeks, the UK Government has been embroiled in sleaze allegations. Last night, we had the unedifying spectacle of the Prime Minister having to defend his Government from allegations of corruption. How did we get to that point at the heart of a conference at which the UK is on the world stage? At this time of all times, why did the Prime Minister expunge the remaining shreds of his credibility by trying to save the reputation of one of his members of Parliament?

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the lack of timing on the part of the UK Government. After all, it announced a tax cut on domestic flights two days before the climate conference kicked off. There has been a complete absence of leadership

in the run-up to and during the conference, which includes Boris Johnson travelling from Glasgow to London by private jet and his continued embarrassing behaviour, and the distraction of the sleaze allegations.

We need to go much further much faster, and with much greater commitments. We need to focus on climate reparations. Fiona Hyslop mentioned the climate justice fund and the Scottish Government's related commitments, but they represent just 0.01 per cent of Scotland's gross domestic product and 0.02 per cent of public expenditure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney, you have been generous with interventions, but you must close.

Paul Sweeney: I recognise that and I will come to a conclusion.

We have to increase the scale of our ambition. The numbers sound impressive but, given the legacy of Scotland's industrial pollution, we need to go much further in the share of our national wealth and be much more rigorous in order to meet our net zero carbon emission targets.

13:11

The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I thank Fiona Hyslop for lodging the motion at this critical time, while a vital summit is on-going in our largest city on this most important issue.

The dual crises of climate change and nature loss are, put simply, the greatest long-term threats that we face. We know that inaction will impact us all, but we also know that it will not impact us equally. There are two great intolerable ironies at the heart of the climate crisis, which members such as Fiona Hyslop have set out. First, those who are being impacted first and worst by climate change, and who are suffering right now, have often done little or nothing to cause the problem. Secondly, the voices of those who are set to suffer most, including young people, women and girls, indigenous communities and those in the global south, are far too infrequently heard in decision-making fora.

Those anomalies cannot be allowed to continue, and it is incumbent on us to challenge them. When confronted by the scale of the climate challenge and the pace with which we need to act, amid the business of COP26, we have to stop and ask ourselves whose voices we are not hearing. We must find them and elevate them, which is exactly what Fiona Hyslop has done today, sharing harrowing stories of loss and damage. That is what the Scottish Government has been trying to do before, during and after COP26.

As Ms Hyslop detailed, in 2012 Scotland was the first country in the world to introduce a climate justice fund, which has empowered people in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda to design and build resilience and equality in their communities. I had the great privilege in September of virtually joining the people of the village of Mangamba in Malawi, who told me how the fund had empowered and supported them to build the solutions that they needed in their communities.

Paul Sweeney: I note the progress in establishing the climate justice fund, which we commend. However, to ratchet up the ambition, will the minister consider linking it to GDP as a key indicator? We should be distributing our wealth in the world as a way of making progress and scaling up our ambitions to what is needed.

Màiri McAllan: I take that point on board, and I add that it is equally important that, as we scale up our support for climate justice, it is separate and additional to our international development funding, as Ms Hyslop mentioned earlier.

One of the local leaders I spoke to on my virtual visit to Mangamba was a young woman named Tapeewa. We agreed that we would try to meet in person, and I had the opportunity to sit down with her and her colleague Aaron this week as they visited Glasgow for COP26. During COP26, the First Minister and I and others have taken all opportunities to speak to leaders and delegates from the global south. Those conversations have increased our resolve to do everything that we can to support them.

That is why the First Minister announced today that, having committed to doubling our climate justice fund before COP26, in the light of those conversations and the need for action, we will now go even further and triple it. The Scottish Government has been embedding international justice in our climate action since 2012, and it is only growing. However, as well as being a chance to discuss funding, COP26 has been a vital opportunity to hear those voices from the global south. Scotland is not yet a state party to the COP, but we have been and we are determined to use our position as a bridge to elevate the voices of those who are too often unheard. That is why we funded the conference of youth, it is why we are backing international feminist policy and it is why we co-hosted the Glasgow climate dialogues with Stop Climate Chaos Scotland in September.

I have been honoured to be involved in the Glasgow climate dialogues and to launch the communiqué earlier this year and at COP26 last week. The communiqué represents the culmination of the views of experts from a range of countries and people who work and live on the front line of climate change right now. It is their collective call to action on key issues such as

participation, adaptation, loss and damage and a just transition. The document that I am holding is the outcome: the communiqué. My copy is now a little tattered because I have spent the past week showing it to people and speaking about it to anyone who will listen. I encourage everybody to do the same.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Màiri McAllan: I will give way if the member will be quick. I have a lot to get through.

Anas Sarwar: I pay tribute to the minister. It is a very impressive document and I would struggle to disagree with a single sentence. I also thank Fiona Hyslop for bringing her motion to the chamber for debate.

Does the minister agree that the subject of loss and damage should form part of the final communiqué from COP26? Would she echo the point that other speakers have made about the importance of providing grants rather than loans? Does she agree that conditions should be removed from developing countries, where many people are forced into energy insecurity in exchange for grants? That goes against the principles of social justice.

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely agree that the subject must form part of the final decision. Part of what we have been trying to do is to raise its profile and lead by example in that regard. The point about loans is also very important. This must not be done in a way that saddles developing countries with debt.

COP26 must deliver ambitious action on mitigation that is capable of keeping 1.5°C alive. It must deliver fair financing in a way that does not saddle developing countries with debt. However, we also need COP26 to recognise that the impacts of climate change and nature loss are being felt right now in ways that it is not always possible to adapt to. People are suffering drought, floods, desertification, coastal erosion and, tragically, loss of life. That means that we need support that is separate from and additional to the climate finance that is currently supporting adaptation and mitigation. Climate change is an urgent human rights issue that is posing a serious threat to the rights to food, water, education and life. The Glasgow climate dialogues brought that to the fore.

The Scottish Government is very proud to stand in solidarity with those who are impacted by climate change. That is why, last week, we took the substantial step of becoming the first western country to pledge support specifically to address loss and damage. That is now backed by £2 million. We do so with humility—as has been discussed, £2 million is a small part of what is

required globally, but we hope that other, large industrialised countries with borrowing powers that we do not have in Scotland will follow where we have led.

In our view, the issues of financing for loss and damage and climate justice more widely must be central to COP26 and the legacy of the conference, for two fundamental reasons. First, developed countries that have benefited from industrialisation, such as Scotland, have a moral obligation to those throughout the world who are suffering the consequences right now. Secondly, solutions to climate change that do not have fairness, justice and inclusivity at their heart will fail.

I take this opportunity to urge all those who are still taking part in the COP26 negotiations to have the greatest ambition. The world is watching and we must not fail.

13:19

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. I remind members that Covid-related measures are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The next item of business is portfolio questions on education and skills. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or, if they are joining us online, enter the letter R in the chat function during the relevant question.

Unemployed Teachers

1. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government how many unemployed teachers there currently are in Scotland. (S6O-00353)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are firmly of the view that we will need all possible teaching resources at our disposal to compensate for any loss of learning suffered since the start of the pandemic, as well as to bring much-needed resilience to the education system at this challenging time.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided £240 million of additional investment specifically for the recruitment of more education staff. In addition to that funding, we are providing local authorities with permanent funding of £145.5 million a year to support the recruitment of extra teachers on permanent contracts.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The issue is still a major problem. In the past 24 hours, I have had a flood of complaints from newly qualified teachers. One was so desperate, she was spending £400 a month travelling from Edinburgh to Glasgow for a teaching job. Another had retrained to become a teacher but is now back with her former employer. One said:

“I’ve had enough. My mental health has been affected. My life is on hold until I get a permanent post but there are none for any of us.”

The education secretary’s complacency is crushing the careers of newly qualified teachers. When will she get this sorted?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the member knows, responsibility for the recruitment of staff sits directly with local authorities and not with

national Government. National Government's responsibility is around funding, and I have just detailed the baselining of funding that we have provided to local authorities to ensure that they can recruit extra teachers on permanent contracts.

Figures published show that teacher numbers are increasing; indeed, they are doing so for the fifth year in a row. There are now more teachers than at any time since 2008 and the ratio of pupils to teachers is at its lowest since 2010. As I demonstrated in my first answer, we are undertaking firm action on the issue, and we will continue to support our valued teachers. As I said, we know that teachers' skills and expertise are required to support our young people during this difficult time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions. I hope to get all of them in, so I ask for brief questions and answers if possible.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): In a similar vein, I ask the Scottish Government for an update on progress on recruiting more teachers to Scotland's schools.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The additional £240 million that I mentioned in my first answer to Alex Cole-Hamilton has already been provided and has supported the recruitment of more than 2,200 additional teachers and more than 500 support staff. The permanent funding of £145.5 million a year that we are providing to baseline local authority funds will allow the recruitment of even more additional teachers on permanent contracts. As I said in answer to Alex Cole-Hamilton, that means that we now have more teachers than at any time since 2008.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Given the number of teachers looking for employment and the additional roles being created, does the cabinet secretary share my concern that Dumfries and Galloway Council are telling parents, particularly in smaller rural schools, that they may have to cut back on teacher numbers and strictly enforce ratios?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have said in my answers to two members, every council will be receiving additional funding from the Scottish Government. That includes Dumfries and Galloway Council, and I would encourage the council to ensure that the additional funding that has been baselined into a settlement is used to ensure that permanent staff are recruited.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for confirming that the 1,000 new teachers and the 500 pupil support assistants that were announced on 2 August have been employed. Out of that number, how many are

qualified to work with children with additional support needs?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the member knows, there are children with whom all teachers will work who have additional support needs. Particular arrangements are in place for them, and the Government is determined to ensure that we support children with additional support needs further in our work with our Scottish Green Party colleagues. I will keep Mr Whitfield up to date on the work that we are undertaking on that issue.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is truly astonishing that, after months of being asked, the education secretary still does not know how many unemployed teachers there are in this country. She is the education secretary—she should know the answer to that question and cannot simply pass the buck to councils. When will she get a grip of the situation and improve the careers of teachers, rather than crush them?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, I can only go through some of the figures that I have just detailed about the action that has been taken since I became Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, including the baselining of funding to ensure that permanent contracts are available. The matter is of course for local authorities. The national Government has provided funding to local government for those additional posts and we are determined to continue that work.

We have a commitment during this parliamentary session to the employment of at least 3,500 additional teachers on top of the additional 1,400 teachers that were recruited during the pandemic. The Government has taken and will continue to take action to support our teachers and young people.

Discover Cyber Skills Programme

2. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the discover cyber skills programme. (S6O-00354)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The discover cyber skills programme was delivered by Skills Development Scotland between September 2017 and March 2021. The purpose of the programme was to build young people's, parents' and teachers' understanding of good cyber practice and to inspire young people into cyber security careers.

Over the four years of the programme, SDS engaged with more than 130,000 pupils in schools from every local authority in Scotland. In addition, the programme provided upskilling to teachers through the development of a toolkit to support the delivery of cyber skills sessions to young people.

Tess White: The figures show a 29 per cent decrease in the number of pupils who took computing sciences at higher level between 2016 and 2020, as well as a significant decline in the number of computing teachers over the past decade. What action is the Scottish Government taking to increase uptake in that area to ensure that a pipeline of talent is in place to meet serious challenges such as cybercrime, which has nearly doubled in the past year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I concur with the member that the issue is important. We need to ensure that we have young people with adequate skills in that area, and part of the matter is having qualified teachers. The latest data show an increase in the number of computing teachers compared with 2019. We know that there is more work to do on that, which is why we are taking forward work from the Logan review to ensure that we move forward with that agenda.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The question is pertinent. Businesses in Dundee regularly tell me that, were sufficient skills available in the local labour pool, they could create hundreds of jobs, but the skills do not exist.

We commend the work of local universities such as Abertay University. Unfortunately, Abertay University cannot use computing as a compulsory subject, because so few state schools now offer higher computing classes. What concrete action can be taken immediately to address the deficit that has been identified and to ensure that people in the first year of their courses are not having to relearn a subject that they should have learned at school?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In my original, or perhaps supplementary, answer, I mentioned the work that has followed from the Logan review. A number of pieces of that work have to do with schools. I recently met with Mark Logan and senior officials to discuss those proposals and we are due to have further meetings in the next few weeks about how to take them forward.

Action in a number of areas is already being undertaken by Education Scotland and other agencies on the issue. However, I recognise that we need to do more, and that is exactly why I will continue engagement with Mark Logan and with others who are interested in that area.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Both Skills Development Scotland and the General Teaching Council for Scotland have previously noted the value of bringing computer experts into the classroom to upskill teachers and pupils on issues such as cybersecurity. Has the Scottish Government any plans to bring further industry experts into schools for other, broader tech-related subjects?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One valuable form of expertise comes from industry voices, who can work with schools to inspire young people and to support teachers. A number of partners are already working with schools to introduce industry skills. Skills Development Scotland is heavily involved in supporting that work and has established a framework that brings agencies together to help them tackle that challenge. It is an important area of work, and we are keen to do more on it to make sure that schools have close relationships with, and discussions with, industry and local and national businesses.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

4. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law. (S6O-00356)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): We remain committed to the incorporation of the UNCRC to the maximum extent possible as soon as is practicable. We are considering the implications of the Supreme Court judgment and how best to take forward incorporation.

We are undertaking targeted engagement with stakeholders on options before final decisions are made. Careful consideration is also needed to ensure that those options address areas that were found to be outwith competence, deliver the UNCRC policy and avoid further challenge. The Deputy First Minister will come back to the Parliament in due course with our proposals.

Although the Supreme Court judgment means that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill cannot receive royal assent in its current form, the majority of the work in relation to the implementation can continue and is continuing.

Sarah Boyack: The issue is too important for there to be further delays. Every day that passes is another day in which those rights are not enshrined in law. I know that the Scottish Youth Parliament is, understandably, concerned about getting those rights into place. We also have issues in Scotland, such as our national qualifications agency being subject to statutory action from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, that shows how vital those rights are. When can the Parliament expect a timetable for a revised bill, and how soon is "in due course"?

Clare Haughey: It is fair to say that the Scottish Government is bitterly disappointed that the bill

has been delayed, but we remain committed to the incorporation of the UNCRC to the maximum extent possible and as soon as is practicable. We are committed to a three-year UNCRC implementation programme in collaboration with public authorities, children and young people, during which time we are investing £4 million a year in supporting a fundamental shift in how children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in Scotland. Work is progressing and, as I said in my original answer, the Deputy First Minister will return to Parliament with our proposals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions. I hope to get them all in, so I ask that they be brief.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Does the minister agree that a straightforward—and the quickest—way of incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child would have been by means of a bill that the Parliament unanimously voted for receiving royal assent without objections from the United Kingdom Government's law officers?

Clare Haughey: Yes, I agree with that. The Supreme Court judgment makes it plain that we are constitutionally prohibited from enacting legislation that the Scottish Parliament unanimously decided was needed to enshrine and fully protect the rights of our children.

The Government believes that the children of Scotland deserve the fulfilment of the commitments that were made to them, and our determination to achieve that is undiminished. It is with urgency that we are carefully considering the implications of the judgment and how best to take forward that important legislation.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): It has been more than a month since the Scottish Government was told that its bill went beyond the powers that are available to the Scottish Parliament. Taxpayers' money is being spent so that the Scottish National Party can play cynical constitutional games with children's rights. Does the minister believe that using almost £200,000 of taxpayers' money to further the nationalist agenda is an appropriate use of public funds? *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we listen to the response, please? I say that to all sides.

Clare Haughey: Perhaps Meghan Gallacher, as a new member, is not aware that her party also voted for the bill. It was voted for unanimously by the Parliament. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have asked for a bit of quiet so that we can hear the response.

Clare Haughey: Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is very difficult when we have Opposition members shouting over us.

The Parliament is committed to ensuring that the rights of the children of Scotland are upheld and respected. We will continue to work to ensure that that happens.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members on both front benches were engaged in shouting over others. I ask for a bit of courtesy for speakers.

Alex Cole-Hamilton can ask a final, brief supplementary question.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The Government talked about moving with urgency and being bitterly disappointed, but it could have foreseen that what happened would happen. During the bill process, Whitehall officials informed Government officials that there were problems, but Opposition members were never told of those problems during the transit of the bill. They could easily have been remedied at that stage.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the Government explain to the children of Scotland why it withheld that information?

Clare Haughey: I am not quite sure what point Mr Cole-Hamilton is making. He seems to ask several questions, and I am not quite sure what he wants me to respond to.

The duty of the Government is to ensure that the children of Scotland have their rights respected. We will continue to work at pace to ensure that the will of the Parliament is upheld.

Universities (Autonomy)

5. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures are in place to protect the autonomy of Scotland's universities. (S6O-00357)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): The autonomy of Scotland's universities is protected through their legal status as independent charitable bodies. The Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 expanded the statutory definition of academic freedom and required our universities to aim to uphold the academic freedom of persons engaged in teaching or the provision of learning or research at the university.

Liz Smith: I am sure that the minister agrees that university autonomy—which, of course, includes the academic freedom that he referred to—has been part of the success of the university

system for hundreds of years precisely because it protects institutional diversity and specialisation and that the system reflects the likes of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Scotland's Rural College and Glasgow School of Art. Does the minister accept that recent developments with regard to free speech in the university system at the United Kingdom and Scottish levels threaten to undermine the concepts of autonomy and academic freedom? Will he explain to Parliament what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that university autonomy is never diminished?

Jamie Hepburn: I understand why that question has been asked, but, in my experience, not a single institution or academic has contacted me to express concerns about what the system in Scotland is operating to. Our responsibility, of course, is to ensure that we enshrine and protect the autonomy of institutions and, indeed, academics. That autonomy is enshrined in the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016, and we expect institutions to adhere to that. The act sets out that academic freedom includes the

"freedom within the law to ... hold and express opinions ... question and test established ideas or received wisdom ... develop and advance new ideas or innovative proposals ... present controversial or unpopular points of view."

Our universities should be able to do that, and I see nothing that encumbers them in their being able to do that.

Digital Skills (Education Curriculum)

6. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the education curriculum provides pupils with sufficient skills to build a digital economy. (S6O-00358)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Curriculum for excellence experiences and outcomes for the technologies have been reviewed to ensure that all young people are learning up-to-date computing and digital skills in primary and secondary schools. In addition, the Government has committed to fully implementing the Scottish technology ecosystem review, which was carried out last year by Mark Logan. That review includes the Scottish teachers advancing computing science—STACS—initiative, which was announced in our programme for government. STACS will be run for and by computing science teachers, and it will help them to share best practice in computing science across all schools, promote digital sector career opportunities and develop innovative teaching materials to be used by extracurricular computing clubs.

Pam Gosal: Official figures have revealed that there were 766 computing science teachers responsible for 25,000 pupils in Scotland in 2008 but that, by 2020, there were 595 teachers educating fewer than 10,000 pupils, of whom fewer than 2,000 were female. What action is being taken to address the gender divide in computing science studies?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Some of the discussion that we had on a previous question touched on the work that the Logan review has proposed. As I said in my answer to that question, Education Scotland and other agencies are already taking a great deal of action on that. That includes our work to increase capacity for initial teacher education in computing science, support for coding clubs and work to make it easier for schools to work with industry and bring industry voices into school. In response to the Logan review, we are taking forward the STACS proposal to establish that teacher-led group.

There is concern about the gender issue that Ms Gosal rightly points out in all areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It was addressed in the STEM education strategy that the Scottish Government produced, and we are determined to take further action, as we did in the strategy, to deal with the gender divide.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that investment in new facilities can also be a catalyst for improving interest in, and the skills set for, the digital economy, which makes the case for a new-build West College Scotland campus in Greenock even stronger?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree that good-quality learning opportunities that develop digital skills in our young people are vital at all stages of the education journey, including in our colleges.

I understand that the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training visited the Greenock campus of West College Scotland with Mr McMillan in September and heard at first hand about the benefits that a new-build campus could bring. Of course, Mr McMillan will be aware that the Scottish Funding Council has been working on a medium-term college estates strategy, which will help to set priorities for investment should funding become available in the college sector. We will work closely with the funding council on taking that forward.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary tell us how many high schools are offering higher computing this year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If the member agrees, I will write to him about the particulars of

that. I am not sure that the exact figure is in my briefing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

I call Christine Grahame to ask question 8. *[Interruption.]* Can we have some assistance for Ms Grahame? *[Interruption.]* Expectations have risen to an almost unsustainable level.

Education (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale)

8. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Then I am doomed to failure, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what improvements it considers it has made in the delivery of education in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale. (S6O-00360)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Schools and early learning settings throughout Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale have benefited from a range of national and targeted initiatives to support the improved delivery of education. The 1,140 hours of high-quality funded early learning and childcare, pupil equity funding and the £500 million of Covid funding to support education recovery and wellbeing will improve outcomes for children. At a local level, our £2 billion learning estate investment programme is funding a number of projects in Midlothian and the Scottish Borders, including a replacement at Beeslack community high school, Penicuik high school, Galashiels academy and Peebles high school.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for her detailed answer.

After four years, Scottish Borders Council has admitted liability for its failings in relation to some of my constituents' children attending Tweeddale support unit, which is currently subject to an independent enquiry to which I shall give evidence. Following that admission, what improvements has the Scottish Government made to support children with additional support needs and their families in my constituency and elsewhere in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: My thoughts are very much with the children and families who have been affected by any issue of concern in any part of our education system. All children have the right to be cared for and protected from harm and the right to grow up in a safe environment in which their rights are respected and their needs met.

I note Scottish Borders Council's announcement of an independent inquiry. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this stage, but I recognise Christine Grahame's

continued involvement in and concern about this issue, and I give her my assurance that I will keep a close eye on the proceedings on the matter. I will be happy to discuss the issues with her in due course, should that be more appropriate, once the inquiry has taken place.

Veterans and Armed Forces Community (Remembrance and Support)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate without motion on the subject of remembrance commemorations and the “Scottish Government Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2021” report. I invite any members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or put an R in the chat function if they are joining us online.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): I am delighted to present to the Parliament the Scottish Government’s fifth annual update on support for the veterans and armed forces community.

Since 2017, we have committed to returning to the chamber annually to update members, to showcase the work that we are doing to improve support and ensure that our veterans face no disadvantage as a result of their service, and to show that Scotland is the destination of choice for our service leavers and their families. First, however, I would like to thank my predecessor, Graeme Dey, and acknowledge the excellent progress that he made in his time as veterans minister.

I welcome the opportunity to deliver our update this year and provide the chamber with detail on the work that is being undertaken. This week, we published “Scottish Government Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2021”, which details the work that we have undertaken over the past 12 months, including the actions that we have taken on the commitments that we made as part of our response to the veterans strategy.

Despite the numerous challenges that we have all recently faced, we have achieved a great deal in those 12 months and, as always, that has been made possible only because we have worked collaboratively and productively with partners and the public, private and third sectors. Almost two years ago, we published a response to the veterans strategy that detailed how we intended to deliver our commitments through to 2028. As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, I believe that it would be prudent to take stock and to take the opportunity to review our commitments. I can confirm that, in 2022, we will be refreshing our strategy response and looking at the extent to which existing commitments remain valid and where there may be opportunities to add more detail to existing elements, or, indeed, add new ones.

As always, I am grateful to all our partners across all sectors who continue to work with us to improve the lives of veterans and armed forces families. I also acknowledge and recognise the support of our armed forces in providing military aid to civilian authorities in Scotland throughout the past year.

Members will certainly be aware of the acute challenges that the charitable sector has faced over the past 12 months and of the impact of the pandemic on their ability to conduct fundraising activities. Across the United Kingdom, estimates suggest that there might be a shortfall of £250 million in fundraising compared to a normal year. To counter that in Scotland, in June, I launched the armed forces third sector resilience fund, which is providing almost £800,000 in direct financial relief to the 19 third sector organisations that provide support to the armed forces community in Scotland.

One event that has affected veterans across the UK is the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I can report that providers of mental wellbeing services for veterans in Scotland received a significant increase in demand for support from veterans and family members who are concerned about their loved ones. We continue to engage with charities and service providers to monitor the position to ensure that we can provide support to our veterans.

The Scottish Veterans Care Network has undertaken a national review of existing mental health and wellbeing services for veterans across Scotland. A veterans’ mental health action plan, which will highlight needs and identify future priorities, will be produced in December of this year. That completed plan will aim to support veterans in Scotland to live a healthy life and reach their full potential.

I am aware of the UK Government’s work to improve support for veterans’ mental health, some of which is in light of the impact on veterans of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, I must be clear that the Scottish Government does not receive any additional funding from the UK Government to support veterans. All the veterans work that we do and have done over a decade and more is funded from Scottish budgets. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government has continued to fund both Combat Stress and Veterans First Point. In July of this year, I was thrilled to open a new facility for Veterans First Point in Fife, where I saw at first hand the value of the work that it does.

For my part, I remain committed to improving access to healthcare for the veterans and armed forces community. The armed forces personnel and veterans’ health joint group is a key part of improving access to healthcare. It will continue to

prioritise mental health, the employment of veterans in the national health service, priority treatment and the addition of veteran-aware general practitioner accreditation.

I have mentioned the importance of collaborative work when addressing the needs of our veterans, and nowhere is that more apparent than in relation to the unforgotten forces consortium. This year, the Scottish Government contributed a further £250,000 to the consortium to assist it in its vital work in improving the health, wellbeing and quality of life of older veterans in Scotland. In 2021, the consortium expanded the targeting of its support to include all veterans over the age of 60 instead of 65, as it was previously. That will ensure that support is available to even more of Scotland's veterans.

The challenges facing our veterans are also experienced by their families, and members will hear me make regular reference to the importance that I place on supporting families and all service personnel. This year, we have updated our welcome to Scotland guide to ensure that we present the most up-to-date and relevant information for personnel and their families ahead of relocation in Scotland. We are also working to tackle the difficulties facing our service families in accessing further and higher education. The partners of service personnel can often have difficulty finding employment, due to the impact of service life through things such as mobility and separation. The Scottish Government continues to work with Forces Families Jobs to post vacancies by directing to Work for Scotland, which is our jobs website. I recently visited facilities in Faslane that are designed specifically to support the spouses of service families to gain employment.

Members may have heard previously about the going forward into employment scheme, which aims to help veterans into employment in the civil service. That programme helps to overcome potential barriers to employment, providing life chances by offering meaningful employment opportunities. I am pleased to report that we can now offer roles to spouses and partners of serving armed forces and ex-service personnel. We will look to increase the number of those roles offered within the Scottish Government in 2022, and we are working with partners to further embed the scheme into our recruitment practices.

Also in relation to employment, the veterans employability strategic group has developed an action plan, giving the group a clear focus on enabling service leavers and veterans to access, sustain and progress in good jobs. That last point is very important because for long enough—certainly in the early years when I was involved in veterans activity—the emphasis was very much on getting veterans jobs. However, they are of course

entitled to have jobs that are commensurate with their experience and the skills that they have gained while in the armed forces, not just any job. Sometimes, those skills and that experience are invaluable to potential employers. Through new members, private sector employers are now well represented on the group. Furthermore, next year, the Scottish Government will deliver a public awareness campaign targeting employers and the business community to help increase employment opportunities for veterans.

This year, we have also seen further reports from the Scottish veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace. Late last year, Charlie published a new report on employability, skills and learning and, in the summer, he produced an additional report on housing, both of which were in the context of transition from military to civilian life. We accepted all the recommendations in the reports and we have outlined to the commissioner how we intend to take them forward. It was welcome that, for the first time, the Scottish veterans commissioner made recommendations to the UK Government; that was crucial, given the reserved nature of the transition process for service personnel.

Addressing those recommendations is a key priority for us, and I believe that it is hugely important. A key strand of the work on housing will be a pathway to prevent homelessness for veterans, which is currently being developed by members of the Veterans Scotland housing group and will be published by the end of 2021.

I am also very pleased that Charlie Wallace gave us the opportunity to contribute to his 2021 progress report, in which he assessed the extent to which we have continued to deliver against his predecessor's recommendations. The commissioner plays an important role in holding the Government to account. I am delighted that we have continued to make progress, and we will keep working with partners to prioritise the delivery of the outstanding recommendations.

That progress report is the final update to Parliament during Charlie Wallace's tenure. I am grateful to him for all that he has done on behalf of Scotland's service personnel, their veterans and their families, and I wish him all the best for the future. *[Applause.]*

In my view, it is vital—or, at least, fitting—that we hold this debate on armistice day; first, because it brings into sharp focus why we must never forget the sacrifices of our armed forces and the importance of giving them our full support; and, secondly, because this year marks some truly significant anniversaries, including the centenary year of the Royal British Legion and Legion Scotland and the iconic poppy appeal for Poppyscotland.

The critical role of our veterans charities cannot be overestimated and the vital support that they continue to provide to our veterans and their families across Scotland should always be recognised. It is excellent news that, this year, we will be able to gather in celebration for a special concert to mark the centenary, particularly because, last year, we were prevented from doing so for the anniversaries of victory in Europe and victory over Japan.

I will speak more about remembrance in my closing remarks, but we must recognise that remembrance is a hollow gesture if we do not provide the best possible support to our veterans.

Our veterans and service families contribute a huge amount to our society across Scotland and, of course, they continue to provide a huge contribution after they have left the service, if we make sure that they have the opportunity to do so. I believe that we can make Scotland the destination of choice for our service leavers. I am conscious that some of the many service personnel who have been drafted to Scotland have come—if we are honest—with trepidation, because, to an extent, it is an unknown territory for them. However, once they have come here, they have wanted to stay for many years, along with their families. We have to enhance that offer and experience so that we tap into the potential of our veterans once they leave the service. Therefore, we must remain committed to providing the best support for the entire veterans and armed forces community.

I look forward to members' contributions and to responding to them when I sum up the debate for the Government.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Thank you. Members might wish to be aware that we have time in hand for interventions.

15:08

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members that I am the third generation of my family to have served in the forces, and my son continues to serve today.

I am delighted to open the debate on behalf of the Conservative Party. Remembrance commemorations are so important to the history of this country and to the Commonwealth, because they are our chance to remember the sacrifices that were made to ensure our future, the future of world democracy and, importantly, the future of Europe.

On Sunday, people will gather to remember, and the way that they do that will be personal. Some will remember family members who died in two world wars; others will remember those who

have died since; and some will wish to reflect on their service and those who served with them. However, the commonality of purpose is to pause, reach out and appreciate and acknowledge all that has been given to secure our future.

At this time of year, I always reflect on the price that has been paid to protect our freedom; it is a high price and, sometimes, the ultimate price. We should never forget that every serviceman and woman who serves our country makes an unconditional offer when they take the oath of allegiance—one that we, perhaps, do not fully appreciate.

That offer is an unlimited commitment that binds them to defend their country. It is an oath without limit. It is all or nothing, and if the ultimate sacrifice is required, that is part of the deal. They know that, and perhaps we do, too.

That ultimate sacrifice has been made by so many. Over a million British soldiers were killed in two world wars, and numerous conflicts since have claimed the lives of this country's sons and daughters. The price that they have paid is also reflected in the price that their families have had to pay. As we sleep safely in our beds, knowing that our servicemen and women are watching our backs, we probably give scant thought to the families who are supporting those who are on the front line. For them, every telephone call and every strange car that stops outside their house could bring bad news. Their lives are not normal, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude, too. If they have to face the loss of their loved ones, we know that their lives will never be the same. Burying a son or a daughter is not something that any parent should ever have to do. Those huge costs are the ones that we have to pay for peace and for the protection of our country and our way of life. It is right that we always pause to reflect on what is given by others for our today and our tomorrow.

Our servicemen and women are prepared to give their all for us, so we should do the same for them. That is why I welcome the combined approach that is being taken by the UK Government and the three devolved Governments in implementing a joint strategy for our veterans community. That shared commitment makes a real difference. I am encouraged that our armed forces charities are due to receive £5 million from the UK Government and £1 million from the Scottish Government this year.

There is so much to commend in the latest report from the Scottish veterans commissioner—I agree with Keith Brown on that. Good progress is being made when it comes to health and wellbeing, whether that is improving access to chronic pain treatment or creating veteran-friendly general practitioner services. I also look forward to

the publication of the long-awaited mental health plan for veterans. However, other areas of the strategy need more urgent attention. The veterans commissioner has identified that progress is still lacking when it comes to supporting veterans in new careers. That is a cause for concern. Let me be clear: former armed services personnel are such an asset to their employers. They have so much to offer businesses, public services and charities across the United Kingdom. I will be pressing the Scottish Government to do all that it can to ensure that veterans are given the opportunities that they need to fulfil their undoubted potential.

There is much more that we can do in Parliament, too. That is why the Scottish Conservatives will introduce an armed forces and veterans bill this session. It will propose enshrining the armed forces covenant in law for devolved public bodies, such as the national health service, and introduce provisions to increase the support that is available for veterans and their families. We believe that what the bill proposes will improve transitions from military to civilian life by enhancing access to education, healthcare, housing and career opportunities. Such legislation would underline our unwavering commitment to support veterans and their families.

That never-ending commitment is something that I believe we should strive for, and I believe that it is reflected by another organisation that works so hard during the course of the year—the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The commission works tirelessly to ensure the immaculate upkeep of the graves that honour the sacrifices that were made for us. Its work never stops. On a daily basis, it ensures that the graves are maintained. I take a moment to encourage people to contact the commission if they ever find a grave that is in less than perfect condition. It is very responsive—as I have found out—and it will be diligent in its duty of care.

This Sunday, at 11 o'clock, the nation will fall silent as we remember those who gave their all for the freedoms that we cherish. Unlike last year, this year remembrance services will be taking place across the country. I say to everyone, on Sunday, please visit your local war memorials and stand together with all those who were willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice in memory of those who did.

15:14

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is an honour to be here to mark armistice day and to place on record my thanks to the people who have proudly served our country and those who, over the years, have made the ultimate sacrifice. As someone who has been a member of the Army reserves for more than a decade, I know the sacrifices that

members of our armed forces make. We owe a debt of gratitude to them. It is a vocation that requires them to sacrifice spending time with family and friends and isolates them from everyday civilian life, yet time and again they continue to be the very best of our country.

This year, it feels apt to mention the work of service personnel at home, as well as abroad. They have been a key part of our Covid pandemic response. More than 100 personnel are currently deployed at mobile testing units across Scotland, and at one point 95 per cent of all testing facilities were being run by the Army. They were recently asked to help with the ambulance crisis in a number of Scottish health boards and last month approximately 200 servicemen and women helped to deliver petrol to garages across the country in an attempt to ease the fuel crisis.

Despite their personal sacrifice, they are often forgotten when they return from duty or leave the armed forces entirely. Those individuals are highly susceptible to experiencing mental health difficulties, drug and alcohol-related problems and, in many cases, homelessness. We often think of remembrance in the context of a century ago, but more than 100,000 people have served in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades.

Remembrance is not about veterans of the world war two generation in isolation, but about people in my peer group—people in their 30s and 40s—who served in those theatres of conflict and have suffered terribly as a result of losing their friends. I think about some of the friends I lost in Afghanistan, far too young, and I recognise the trauma that that can cause for the people who are left behind. Yet, even though we know that to be the case, the support is not sufficient to alleviate those issues.

That plight has been exacerbated by the Covid restrictions and the recent calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to Help for Heroes, appeals for help rose sharply during the pandemic lockdowns and the mental health charity Combat Stress has experienced an increase of more than 50 per cent in its correspondence since the Taliban swept back to power in Afghanistan. Those mental health issues often lead to a reliance or dependence on alcohol and, to a lesser extent, drugs. A report published last year by the Forces in Mind Trust detailed the impact that alcohol and drug abuse can have on veterans and their families.

The research suggests that alcohol is the primary substance-misuse problem for veterans, with many developing a reliance during their service. One veteran described the drinking culture in the armed forces as a way of life. Knowing the damage that substance misuse can cause, I find that very concerning and I would like

to see the problem addressed more robustly by the Ministry of Defence.

We know that drug misuse is prevalent in the armed forces, with data from the Ministry of Defence showing that, in 2019, 660 Army personnel were dismissed from their duties after failing a drugs test. We need to ask ourselves why that is happening and how we can create a system in which service personnel do not feel the need to turn to alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism or a way of fitting in, only to lose their career as a result, with often devastating personal consequences that result in death or imprisonment.

Housing is another huge problem. A freedom of information request submitted to the Scottish Government last year revealed that almost 250 ex-service personnel were living in some form of temporary accommodation across Scotland. How can it be that in 2021 we still have veterans—men and women who have served their country in some of the harshest environments in the world—going without the basic human right of a permanent roof over their head? We very much need to get to grips with that issue.

The problems faced by our veterans community are multifaceted. As a society, we owe it to them to confront those issues and find solutions, but Government support is very often marching in the opposite direction.

The British Government's defence command paper that was published in March this year included plans to reduce the full-time established strength of the Army from 82,500 to 72,000 by 2025, leaving the UK with the smallest Army since 1714. Closures are planned at Fort George, Glencorse barracks and Redford barracks, cutting the number of regular soldiers and the footprint of the forces community in Scotland from 3,700 to just 2,000. There will also be a real-terms cut in revenue funding in the next four years. That means less money for forces recruitment, training, pay and families. It means a possible cut of 40 per cent to the budget of the office for veterans affairs.

Despite a recently announced across-the-board pay rise, members of the armed forces have faced a real-terms overall pay cut since 2010, with private soldiers' pay down 7.5 per cent during the decade.

Additional funding from all levels of Government for mental health projects and those who are tackling substance misuse is urgently needed as a starting point, but we need more than that—we need a cultural and societal change.

Keith Brown: I thank the member for taking an intervention and agree with virtually every word that he has said. In relation to funding, however, will he acknowledge the fact that we receive no

funding either for the work that we do to support the armed forces and their families or veterans? If that is the priority that all Administrations think it should be, surely that should be recognised in the settlement that we get from Westminster. Does the member agree?

Paul Sweeney: I would rather not get into a debate about the economics of the Barnett formula, but there is on average 30 per cent higher per head public spending in Scotland than there is in England, so there is significant scope for the Government to do a lot in Scotland. It is not about what the Government is doing, which I commend—there is much more that we can push the envelope on in Scotland than might be recognised by the Government.

Although I recognise that work is being done, we need to go further with societal change and place an emphasis on the value that veterans can bring to communities, as Mr Mountain said. Once someone's service is complete, they can offer so much to society. I would like to see more work being done by the Scottish Government when it comes to housing and mental health support.

Although I appreciate that constraints are placed on the Government when it comes to areas such as drug misuse, there can be no such excuses when it comes to homelessness or a lack of access to mental health services, and the extra £800,000 announced by the minister just does not go far enough to help charities to address the scale of the challenge in Scotland.

I assure both Governments that they will have my full support and the support of Labour members for any measures that are taken to improve the lives of ex-servicemen and women. In many areas, however, the Governments are found wanting.

15:22

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It gives me great pleasure to speak for the Liberal Democrats in the debate. I pay tribute to the speakers who have gone before me and give them our thanks. Each of them is a veteran and I am profoundly grateful for the service that they have given to this country.

In France and Belgium every year, farmers unearth from their fields barbed wire, shell casings, shrapnel and bullets. The "iron harvest", as it is referred to, is the product and material of a war that was fought more than 100 years ago. Although the memories of the men who served in that war have now passed, it has always been very striking to me that the land still gives up the product and material of that war. It has almost been metastasised into the very ground on which that war was fought. The word "metastasised" is

very appropriate, given that Wilfred Owen described the mechanised slaughter of the western front as being “Obscene as cancer”. It is from Wilfred Owen’s words that we learned much of what life was like in the trenches in that difficult time. He also wrote that not even poetry was “fit to speak” of the sacrifices made and the lives lost.

As we know, Wilfred Owen was one of his generation’s finest poets. He was treated for his injuries not far from this building, at Craiglockhart hospital, where he wrote some of his most famous poems and discovered his immense potential as a literary master. That potential was tragically dashed shortly after he returned to the front line, only a week before the armistice was signed. He was only 25 years old, and therefore typical of many of the young men who lost their lives in that conflict. He was not alone in having his life cut so tragically short.

Keith Brown: Vast numbers of people in the armed forces did not benefit from the treatment that Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon both received at Craiglockhart. During their time there, they taught at Tynecastle high school, which is one of the best schools in the country.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am very grateful to the cabinet secretary for such a considered intervention. I had not known that about Tynecastle, and I am grateful to him for telling me.

Unfortunately, the combat stress that Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and many others felt—they were described at the time as being shell shocked—is a condition that has been replicated down the ages. Many soldiers are still fighting the conflicts that they participated in many years after those conflicts came to an end.

The world wars are responsible for some of the greatest losses in the history of our islands. Each one sent aftershocks through families and communities, just as they would, in turn, send aftershocks through global politics, some of the reverberations of which are still felt today.

My first speech in the Scottish Parliament fell on a particular anniversary for my family. On that day a century previously, my great uncle, a private in the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles out of Saskatchewan, was killed at the age of 23, along with 80 per cent of his battalion, on the first day of the battle of Mont Sorel. His name was Alexander Bennet, and I am named for him. I cannot imagine the horror with which he greeted his final hours. In that battle, the Canadians were gassed and undermined. It was also one of the first occasions on which the Germans used flame-throwers as a front-line weapon. I cannot imagine the horror that he would have experienced. His body was never found. His name appears on the Menin Gate, along with those of so many others.

One million British Army personnel died during the first and second world wars. While we remember their sacrifices today, we must also acknowledge the global nature of those conflicts. Soldiers from across the Commonwealth fought—soldiers from countries such as Australia, Canada, Africa and India. More than 4 million Indian soldiers and 3 million African soldiers fought during the world wars. Although they fought under the British union jack, they were often paid significantly less and treated worse than their white counterparts. The crucial efforts and sacrifices of those forces in securing allied victory is often omitted from our history books. That is why Anas Sarwar’s motion on securing Scotland’s first permanent memorial to the soldiers of the British Indian Army, which I have signed, is so important.

Last remembrance Sunday, we could not come together in our communities. Instead, we were confined to commemorating remembrance within our households or on our own at cenotaphs. I did so with my family at the Davidson’s Mains war memorial on the green. This year, I look forward to returning to Davidson’s Mains, this time with our community. I will also attend at South Queensferry, where I will lay wreaths on behalf of the Parliament.

This Sunday, we will be united once again, whether in laying wreaths or attending services, in remembering those whom we lost. We are reminded of the sacrifices that were made for us every day, whether by walking past the national war memorial here in Edinburgh or driving across the Churchill barriers up in Orkney. Across Europe, there are constant reminders of the wars that were fought.

In remembering the victims of war, we remember the cost of that conflict. Margaret Atwood once said:

“War is what happens when language fails.”

In recent times, nationally and internationally, we have been divided. As a result, our language has often failed. The events of the last century have taught us that peace is a fragile matter and is upheld only through communication and co-operation. We must all make an active effort to encompass those values in our daily and political practices. We owe that to everyone who lost their lives due to the absence of those values.

The first world war gained its name posthumously. It was known at the time as the great war; it was also originally known by some as the war to end all wars, because people at the time struggled to conceive that humanity would once again resort to such mass desolation and destruction. I, too, find that hard to reconcile. I am reminded of the old adage that those who fail to

learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. That is at the centre of why we remember. We must learn the lessons of history.

The importance of conflict resolution and finding peaceful solutions to friction is one of the key reasons for my being a Quaker. Although I am a Quaker and believe in non-violence, I still carry the utmost respect for those who take up arms in harm's way and try to defend this country and our values for the greater good. Despite the fact that more than 100 years have passed since the war to end all wars, hundreds of thousands continue to lose their lives to conflict across the world. We need to continue to recognise the courage and sacrifice of those people, whether in the context of world wars that were fought decades ago or—Paul Sweeney summed this up beautifully—in how we treat our troops and our veterans today.

As time moves on, the first-hand accounts of those who gave their todays for our tomorrows will slip away, but age shall not weary their memory or their spirit. What they sacrificed must never be in vain, and they must never be forgotten.

15:29

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am grateful to speak in the debate and commemorate those who have given so much for our country and the society that we live in today.

I have long been a strong supporter of the Gordon Highlanders. My dad may have completed his national service by the time that I was born, but that did not stop me being brought up as a Gordons' bairn and having their values instilled in me as I grew up. At least three generations of my family have proudly served in the regiment, and it will be no surprise to members to learn that I know the commitment and honour that we owe to our servicemen, servicewomen and the armed forces community in Scotland.

My family's history with the Gordons is long and rich. My great-grandfather on my mam's side, William Stephen, served in the Boer wars and won two medals in 1901 and 1902. During a visit to the Gordon Highlanders museum, I was honoured to be shown a portrait of him, showing him proudly mounted on his horse. I also had the opportunity to see and hold his medals. I am hugely grateful to the Gordon Highlanders museum for facilitating that. That personal touch is just one of the reasons why it is a five-star tourist attraction.

My great-great uncle Robert Dunbar died aged just 23 at the battle of Arras in 1918, and my granda Dunbar was captured at St Valery during world war two and became a prisoner of war. Although he did not often speak about his experiences, I know that he had a difference of opinion, let us say, with his German guards and

ended up on a charge. I will not go into the details as it would take too long, but I will say that thanks tae spikkin i Doric, he came hame tae my grunny and his bairns efter i war wis endit. Fit wey? Because i Swiss interpreter couldnae unnerstand his Buchan-Deutsch accent. He ayewis said that wis fit saved him. I will always be grateful for that.

The Gordon Highlanders are a part of my city's history and heritage, and should be remembered with pride and gratitude for all that the regiment has done for more than 200 years. It was my greatest honour to lodge a motion at Aberdeen City Council in 2007 to erect a commemorative statue, which now stands proud at the Castlegate. It depicts two Gordons, one from when the regiment was first raised and the other depicting its last tour. They have their backs to each other, showing that no matter where they are in the history of the Gordons, they have each other's back. That is a very local example that is close to my heart, but it is replicated across the country by other regiments that deserve to be honoured and remembered on this day.

I move on from my family's experiences and the Gordons to what our Scottish Government has done for veterans across Scotland. I am proud that, since 2008, our Scottish Government has supported more than 180 projects through the Scottish veterans fund, which has recently been doubled. I am pleased to see the renewed commitment to supporting the fund for the coming years, furthering the continuing and growing support available to our veterans.

It is important to remember that supporting our veterans can bring much wider benefits. We know that veterans can offer a lot following their return to civilian employment—they are dependable, hard-working and adaptable. The offshore industry in Aberdeen understands the hard work and commitment that veterans can offer, and it is clear that they have reaped the benefits of recruiting those who have experience in the armed forces.

With the Scottish veterans fund prioritising those leaving the forces in order to help them find new career paths, there is a clear local tie-in, and as we look towards a just transition for our region, the adaptable skills that veterans have and can learn could help new businesses and industries to establish themselves in our city.

I continue to encourage organisations, not only in my Aberdeen Donside constituency but in Aberdeen as a whole, to consider applying to the fund to support those who have served our country and ensure that those who leave the armed forces can thrive as they transition into civilian life.

I was pleased to receive assurances from the Scottish Government regarding the support

services that are available to veterans and the ways in which the Scottish Government is working with veterans' charities to ensure that the support that is provided meets our veterans' needs. The Scottish Government's veterans strategy sets out to make Scotland a destination of choice for service leavers by creating an open, inclusive and supportive environment for them to come to.

I was also pleased to hear further information regarding the funding to Housing Options Scotland, which provides advice and advocacy services to veterans and helps to address homelessness in that population. The service is commissioned by Veterans Scotland's housing group to ensure that the support is accessible and fit for purpose for all veterans.

I finish where I started, with the Gordon Highlanders. I was brought up with the saying "Once a Gordon, ayewis a Gordon", so I make no apology for finishing with the Gordons' motto: "Bydand".

15:36

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West)

(Con): I join colleagues across the chamber in expressing my gratitude to all the servicemen and women who have protected and continue to protect the rights and freedoms not only of us, in the United Kingdom, but of those in need across the world. It is only right that we continue to commemorate 11 November every year. We must not forget the lessons of the past or the people who helped us to learn those lessons. We must remember them, and we will remember them.

As part of remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice, we have an opportunity to remember family members, and on this occasion I want to pay tribute to my grandfather, who fought and died in the second world war. He served as a lieutenant in the Parachute Regiment and the Gordon Highlanders, who were so admirably described by Jackie Dunbar.

At the end of November 1942, the 2nd battalion, in which my grandfather served, found itself at the head of a rapid eastward drive across north Africa as the allies tried to sweep the Germans out of the continent. It was reported that his last action was when the battalion had been sent ahead of the main advance to destroy aircraft at German airfields in Tunisia. Their drop, 50 miles behind enemy lines, was spotted by German patrols, which brought in reinforcements. At the same time, the main allied force, which was supposed to be advancing, was delayed.

The Germans called on the surrounded and relatively lightly defended Paras to surrender, but the call was rejected. With tanks, heavy mortar, artillery and machine-gun fire, the Germans

attacked. After two hours, his unit, C Company, had, according to the documents,

"almost ceased to exist as a fighting unit".

The survivors were saved only after a German fighter aircraft swooped down and mistakenly attacked its own men, knocking out several of their tanks. The remnants of the battalion then staged a lengthy fighting withdrawal over the following night and day, fending off German attacks, before finally reaching allied lines at Medjez el Bab.

I am very proud to be his grandson, and I will always stand up for our veterans and the importance of ensuring that we never forget the ultimate sacrifice that so many have made for us to live in a free country. I thank those who maintain the war cemeteries in Tunisia and elsewhere around the world for the amazing job that they do in respecting those who fell by keeping such places of remembrance in immaculate condition.

In 2018, we celebrated the armistice day centenary, and I took it upon myself to visit all 50 war memorials in my constituency of Aberdeenshire West, from Finzean to Corgarff and Cairnie. However, when I was visiting many of those memorials, I was disappointed to see that many graveyards are not being maintained properly. Many of our servicemen and women are laid to rest in these graveyards, and their memories should be honoured and their headstones maintained.

Due to several cuts to councils across the country, that is a growing issue. I urge the Scottish Government to increase funding to our councils, which have seen continuous cutbacks. I ask the cabinet secretary to look into the issue and perhaps even consider providing direct funding to community councils or other local groups to ensure that all graveyards can be kept appropriately in order, to show our respect.

On a positive note, I am pleased that the Scottish Government collaborated with the UK Government to publish a joint strategy for our veterans that will run until 2028. The strategy aims to address the immediate needs of older veterans and develop ways for the newer generation of veterans to be empowered and supported. Veterans welcomed the announcement of the strategy, noting that it puts the needs of the community before party politics. I would welcome an update from the cabinet secretary on how the strategy is progressing.

I am delighted that the UK Government has continued to show its commitment to supporting veterans throughout the UK and Scotland. The new Office for Veterans' Affairs has been of huge benefit to the veterans community, which has since seen armed forces charities receive £5

million in additional funding to support those who have served, as well as an extra £2.7 million towards mental health services. Since April 2021, employers have been eligible for a holiday from national insurance contributions for veterans who have been hired during their first year of civilian employment after leaving the armed forces.

There is a lot of support to help veterans to transition into alternative employment, with many organisations and charities working to help them achieve their next career step. It is important that both of our Governments work together to improve support for our veterans, and I am pleased that much work is being done to achieve that.

I will finish by thanking those who have fought for us and those who continue to serve. In recent times, you have come to our aid when we have needed support, to protect us from an invisible disease. You always step up to do what is required for your country. We are grateful, and we thank you for your service.

15:41

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): For more than 100 years, the Army has played an important part in the area of Edinburgh that I represent, with Dregghorn barracks and Redford infantry and cavalry barracks located in my constituency. I thank Paul Sweeney for reminding members that the MOD is due to close Redford infantry and cavalry barracks in 2025. The soldiers and their families are very much part of the community, and I take this opportunity to thank those individuals in our armed forces who are helping out during the pandemic, either by driving ambulances or by helping to accelerate the vaccine roll-out across Edinburgh.

For a number of years, I have raised the issue of MOD family accommodation units lying empty across Scotland and the UK. The figures from earlier this year highlighted that 11,000 homes lie empty across the UK, of which 900 are in Scotland and 160 are in Edinburgh alone. Given the housing pressure in Edinburgh, those homes could be used to house veterans or, indeed, the Afghan refugees who worked with our armed forces, instead of those people being housed with their families in hotels by the airport.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to housing veterans through its military matters project, which has received 266 new housing referrals in the past year alone; the £6 million that has been spent since 2012 to build 100 homes for veterans; and the £1.8 million Government grant for Riverside Scotland and Hillcrest housing associations to provide much-needed housing in other parts of the country,

including new homes in Edinburgh, which are due to be completed in January 2022.

The transition from Army life to civilian life can be eased when there is enough housing available, and I welcome Scotland's first long-term housing strategy, housing to 2040. Its implementation will, I hope, alleviate the housing pressures on veterans. I also welcome the allocation practice guidelines encouraging landlords and local authorities to consider giving priority to service personnel when allocating homes.

I will take this opportunity to talk about the symbolism of the poppy and pay tribute to a family member in this remembrance commemoration. The remembrance day symbolism of the poppy started with the poem "In Flanders Fields", which was written by world war one Canadian brigade surgeon Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae while he was serving in Ypres in 1915. He was struck by the sight of the red flowers growing in the ravaged battlefields, among the dead. His poem channelled the voice of the fallen soldiers who were buried under those hardy poppies.

Among the dead of that war are 147,690 soldiers whose names are recorded on the Scottish national war memorial at Edinburgh castle. One of those names is that of my maternal great-grandfather, John Maclauchan, of the seventh battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, who was killed in April 1917 in Arras. The date of his death is recorded as 5 April, but the battalion chaplain wrote to my great-grandmother to say that he died on 4 April. The circumstances in which ordinary private soldiers died was not normally recorded, but in that instance it was referred to in the regimental war diary, as the regiment was in a rest area away from the front line. The diary says:

"From the 3rd to the 7th of April the Battalion was billeted in the cellars of the Grand Place, Arras, preparatory to the battle. The shelling by the enemy was now considerable, but we only suffered two casualties."

My great-grandfather was one of the two killed during that period—no name recorded, nothing. I still have his dog tags and a letter from the chaplain to his widow. I was also the first in my family to visit his grave in Arras and lay a poppy wreath in his memory.

That war was supposed to be the war to end all wars—a phrase first used by the author HG Wells, who felt that that war would finally put an end to the sort of Governments and attitudes that brought war about. It is important that we remember Scotland's war dead by wearing a red poppy in the hope that, one day, Governments across the world will no longer send young men and women to war.

Poppies are worn in many countries around the world as an act of remembrance. We should

remember that it was a French woman, Anna Guérin, who was the originator of the remembrance poppy day. Initially, her poppy days benefited the widows and orphans of the war-devastated regions of France. She was christened “the poppy lady from France” after being invited to address the American Legion, at its 1920 convention, about her original inter-allied poppy day idea.

Artificial poppies were first sold in Britain in 1921 to raise money for the Earl Haig Fund and were supplied by Anna Guérin. Selling poppies proved so popular that, in 1922, the British Legion founded a factory to produce its own. The first Scottish poppy factory opened in 1926, in the grounds of Whitefoord House, across the road from the Parliament, in an old wood-chopping factory. Since 2019, Poppyscotland’s temporary home has been located at the Redford barracks, in my constituency, to allow the refurbishment of the factory at Canonmills. The team of 34 veterans hand produces more than 5 million poppies and 15,000 wreaths every year. The staff will move back to the place in Canonmills that has been their home since 1965 after this year’s poppy appeal ends.

The red poppy is a simple and minimal tribute to those who have laid down their lives in the service of their country. The 2020 Scottish poppy appeal raised £2.3 million, which supported the armed forces community in six areas, providing financial support and advice, as well as help with employment, mobility, housing and mental health.

Like many in the chamber, I will be attending a community remembrance service on Sunday to remember my family members who paid the ultimate price.

15:48

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I share in the thoughts and wishes of members across the chamber as we pay our respects to those who have fallen and those who still feel the pain of those losses to this day.

As an MSP for South Scotland, I, like many others here today, have met and worked alongside members of our armed forces community during campaigns and outreach down the years. In that time, I have been struck by their deep sense of commitment and dedication, not only to their country but to others who went before them and, indeed, to the places where they live. Many of the charities and community groups that we all work with daily have at their heart people with a forces background, who use the skills that they have learned to improve the places that they call home. If we can reflect a sense of that commitment today, we will have given something worth while

back to our country and the rich culture that is a key part of the armed forces here in Scotland.

In that spirit, today I am wearing a poppy that was made for me by pupils at Kyle academy in Ayr—a brilliant school, full of inspiring teachers and bright young pupils. Those children are actively learning about the stories and events that led to so many losing their lives so that we could live without war. Sadly, however, we are not there yet, and it is for their sake, as much as for those who fell, that we must continue in our efforts to educate each generation that follows and move forward towards a world without war. After all, that is what we all want and, to my mind, it is the best way to remember the sacrifices of the past.

These memorials, large and small—whether a national moment of silence or young people making crafts at school—are all important, not least because they force us to shine a light on the harsh lessons of war, while being reverential and educational about the issues that surround it.

For me, the key points are the educational aspect of remembrance commemorations and the understanding that war has so many victims, some of whom are never truly remembered. If even for a moment I can persuade others to cast their mind towards those individuals too, I will have done some good. I want our children to grow up understanding why those wars happened and, equally, learning how we can avoid them in the future. I hope that our children can teach us too, as we still see too much pain in the world due to conflict today.

Part of getting to that point is appreciating the significance of the effects of war on those who fought and their families, both physically and mentally. As we have heard from Paul Sweeney, mental health care to veterans and their loved ones is important and must be available—whether self-guided wellbeing support, one-to-one or group therapy, or access to psychological services, all of which veterans have reported to be essential at various times in their journey back to civilian life.

Paul Sweeney: Access to mental health support services is a vital focus. My friend recognised the Samaritans’ recent innovation of a specialised veterans app, which is potentially an effective way of improving access to mental health services, particularly for those in a crisis.

Carol Mochan: Yes—very much so. We hear that getting the right thing at the right time makes the biggest difference to people, and I have other examples of charities and veterans organisations that do great work to ensure that people get access to those services.

I believe that reaching out also involves giving veterans and their families a place to talk and share their experiences. I welcome the work of

charities, such as First Point Ayrshire and Arran in my community, that also help people find jobs, housing and other support. Equally, many active chapters of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association—SSAFA, the armed forces charity—and the Royal British Legion across South Scotland do exceptional work in the community for their own members and those in need from a veteran background and their families.

I draw attention to a more recent, but equally overlooked, aspect of the issue that other members have mentioned, about the vital role that the armed forces have played in protecting the health of Scotland and the UK during the pandemic and at the moment. Civilian assistance, which includes driving ambulances and heavy goods vehicles, and helping with the vaccination programme, is becoming increasingly important. That change goes to show the evolving role that those brave men and women can play in many different parts of our country, and we should express our gratitude for all of that here today. I thank all the members who have contributed to the debate.

15:53

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): My constituency is a constituency of two halves—part Midlothian and part Borders, each with a close connection to the armed forces.

In the Borders, we have the home of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, which my late father joined to serve in the second world war along with his great pal Jock Hunter from Hawick. Jock was killed in the parachute landings at Arnhem, which my father missed by the sheer luck of having bad feet, being posted instead to Shetland. My father lived to be 93; Jock died in his twenties—such is the randomness of war.

I almost forgot, but there was also my Uncle Dod, his brother, who served in the notorious Arctic convoys. He terrified us as children when he told us that his great black beard froze so hard that it broke into lots of little pieces if you touched it. That is all I remember, and all he ever told us about those dreadful convoys.

In Penicuik, we have Glencorse barracks, which I have also visited several times. The last visit was to demonstrate against its closure, which the MOD tastelessly announced during armistice week in November 2016 and is scheduled for 2032. Glencorse barracks have been there since 1803 and are integral to the community, but there is no sign of a reprieve.

When I first entered the Parliament, MOD support for veterans and their families was scant.

Due to pressure from both Parliaments—here and at Westminster—and from Army veterans and their families, that has, thankfully, improved, although much is still to be done, especially for those who are injured, traumatised, grieving or finding civilian life a great challenge.

It is a duty that politicians should never shirk, as it is they who send men and women into the battlefields of war, crisis, and starvation—too often, unfortunately, with no exit strategy and sometimes with poor equipment. I mention both wars in Iraq and the several wars in Afghanistan. Our front-line service personnel are left to pick up the pieces of human misery. The impact on their mental wellbeing, which has been mentioned by many, and on family life must be substantial.

However, support is out there. Veterans First Point Borders branch—run by NHS Scotland and part of the armed forces covenant—opened on 24 June 2016. It provides veterans services throughout the Borders. It consists of veteran peer support workers, clinicians, therapists and an administration team. It provides information and signposting; understanding and listening; support and social networking; and health and wellbeing, to ex-forces personnel and their families and carers. It has services and support to address whatever issues may be of concern to them, including transition from the armed forces, which is a huge difficulty for many.

In Midlothian, we have the Lothians veterans centre in Dalkeith. In addition to core services, it has organised a number of social activities with the opportunity to create new friendships, rekindle old ones and indulge in some military banter. Before Covid, for example, there were monthly outings—to Edinburgh castle, to the royal yacht Britannia or simply, gone fishing.

It was there that I met up with the Royal British Legion Riders, which is a national branch of the Royal British Legion that covers the UK. It supports and promotes the work of the Royal British Legion as that, in turn, supports the serving and ex-serving members of the British armed forces. The riders are brought together by their enthusiasm for motorbikes and their willingness to support the aims and charitable efforts of the Royal British Legion. I supported their coming to the Parliament. I am sorry that Liam Kerr is not here, as I am about to mention him. Somewhere in the archives, there is a photo of me and an overexcited Liam Kerr astride a buffed-up and shiny Harley-Davidson. I hasten to add that we were on separate bikes.

I welcome the opportunity to highlight some of the good work that is being done. However, I am mindful that our service personnel cannot express dissent when politicians take decisions that put their lives—not the politicians' lives—on the line,

so they have every right to complain when they and their families are not supported on discharge. Valuing our service personnel must extend beyond one day a year, and that will be in my thoughts as I represent the Scottish Parliament in Peebles on Sunday, wearing the gifted collection of poppies that I am wearing now: red for Poppyscotland; the white poppy of peace; and the purple, which people have asked about and which is for all the animals that have been a part of war. In the first world war in particular, animals were slaughtered and were on the front line along with all the people. We must remember all.

15:58

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): On this remembrance day, I wear a white poppy. The white poppy has been worn for more than 80 years to symbolise three things: remembrance of all victims of war, a commitment to peace and a challenge to attempts to glamorise and celebrate war.

On this armistice day, I remember all victims of all wars—those that are in the past and those that are being fought as we speak. Suffering does not stop at national borders, so I include people of all nationalities, members of all armed forces, and all civilians. I remember and acknowledge all those who have been killed in war, wounded in body or mind, or left without homes or health, family or community. I remember family member, friend and stranger. I remember those who have been killed or imprisoned for resisting war or refusing to fight.

However, it is not enough simply to remember. Our remembering must be active. We have a responsibility to all those whom we remember today to act—to strive for a better world—so that we can genuinely mean it when we say, “Never again.”

That is why I include both a commitment to peace and a challenge to militarism in my remembering. That means always seeking non-violent solutions to conflict. It means building our communities and economies on systems and processes that do not lead to war. It means working to ensure that all our Governments and institutions do not promote or contribute to war. It means challenging our economic reliance on arms sales and our investment in nuclear weapons. It means building the support systems—the housing, the healthcare and community—that will keep us all safe and well.

White poppies challenge the promotion of militarism by drawing attention to the human and environmental cost of war. They highlight the urgency of our struggle for peace, and they remind us of the importance of year-round resistance to

war and military conflict, because war is not the present or the future that we want.

We will all be familiar with the fine words, the sometimes stark words, and the words of warning and condemnations of violence that have come to us in the form of the poetry of the war poets who served in the first world war. I want to read a bit of poetry.

I will read an extract not from one of those first world war poets, but from Hamish Henderson’s “Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica”. Incidentally, Henderson was born on the first anniversary of armistice day; he would have been 102 today. The extract was written during, after and about the allied campaign in north Africa in the second world war, in which Henderson played a part. It does something very important, profoundly human, yet deeply difficult. It recognises the enemy. It values the enemy, living and dead. It acknowledges the humanity of the enemy. The extract is from “End of a Campaign”.

“There are many dead in the brutish desert,
who lie uneasy
among the scrub in this landscape of half-wit
stunted ill-will. For the dead land is insatiate
and necrophilous. The sand is blowing about still.
Many who for various reasons, or because
of mere unanswerable compulsion, came here
and fought among the clutching gravestones,
shivered and sweated,
cried out, suffered thirst, were stoically silent, cursed
the spitting machine-guns, were homesick for Europe
and fast embedded in quicksand of Africa
agonized and died.
And sleep now. Sleep here the sleep of dust.

There were our own, there were the others.
Their deaths were like their lives, human and animal.
There were no gods and precious few heroes.
What they regretted when they died had nothing to do
with
race and leader, realm indivisible,
laboured Augustan speeches or vague imperial heritage.
(They saw through that guff before the axe fell.)
Their longing turned to
the lost world glimpsed in the memory of letters:
an evening at the pictures in the friendly dark,
two knowing conspirators smiling and whispering
secrets;
or else
a family gathering in the homely kitchen
with Mum so proud of her boys in uniform:
their thoughts trembled
between moments of estrangement, and ecstatic
moments
of reconciliation: and their desire
crucified itself against the unutterable shadow of
someone
whose photo was in their wallets.
Their death made his incision.

There were our own, there were the others.
Therefore, minding the great word of Glencoe’s
son, that we should not disfigure ourselves
with villainy of hatred; and seeing that all
have gone down like curs into anonymous silence,
I will bear witness for I knew the others.

Seeing that littoral and interior are alike indifferent
and the birds are drawn again to our welcoming north
why should I not sing them, the dead, the innocent?"

So today, I wear a white poppy. Today, I remember all the victims of all wars. Today, I think of all that war destroys: innocence, safety, hope, love, life. Today, I reaffirm my commitment to work for peace for all.

16:04

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Sunday, in Whitehall, the Cenotaph will, once again, be the focus of the nation's annual remembrance. The monument's simplicity and grace, the poignancy of the tomb of the unknown warrior and the poppy are the most powerful symbols of our remembrance.

As the years pass, so, too, do the anniversaries of our war history, but the significance of our acts of remembrance only grows. Nothing at all can ever dim the memory of all the people who gave their lives so that we can enjoy our freedom, or the nation's determination to remember them.

Those acts of remembrance—small or large, public or private—are part of the nation's being, and rightly so. So, too, are our veterans and their families, because improving their lives and those of their families should be a core part of the legacy that those who did not come home would want to leave.

Every veteran, whatever their personal background, should feel supported around the clock on every day of every year, and should know that that support will be provided by our two Governments, which are absolutely in unison when it comes to the priorities within that support. No one should ever feel left behind or feel that we do not care, which is why it is important to recognise the considerable progress that has been made in recent years, which has been ably led in many respects by the cabinet secretary's predecessor, Graeme Dey, and by the cabinet secretary now. All too often, Parliament can descend into aggressive tribal politics, but when it comes to veterans support, we are united. That is testimony to the esteem in which our veterans are held.

Covid has brought home to us how much we rely on the armed services and how important they are when it comes to serving the best interests of the civilian population. How vital were their efforts to help communities to deliver essential services, to drive ambulances and other blue-light vehicles, to assist with the vaccination and testing programmes and, of course, to carry out their usual duties? It is often remarked upon that the British armed services have the highest standards of professionalism in the world.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly mentioned people from other nations who serve this country. I also draw attention to the contribution that was made by the 4 million service personnel in the British Indian Army, which included Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Gurkhas, many of whom gave their lives to free Europe. Unfortunately, the British Indian Army's role seems to be forgotten. Does Liz Smith acknowledge the role that it played in the first and second world wars?

Liz Smith: Yes, I absolutely associate myself with the remark that my colleague Pam Gosal has made. The point that she makes is important; I urge everybody who looks after veterans' interests always to recognise how many people from different countries and backgrounds have been involved.

Whatever the challenges that they face, including the realignments that often happen in the military—including some that are happening right now—our armed forces display professionalism that is beyond reproach. When we look after them following their return to civilian life, they deserve the same standards, so I will take some of the issues in turn.

As other speakers have said, healthcare and mental wellbeing are paramount. Our veterans often have complex issues, including physical disability that impacts on their mobility, and they often find themselves alone. Their being proud men and women because of their professional training can often make them reluctant to ask for help, but as we all know, suffering in silence can only make things worse. Therefore, it is imperative that we support them well with their medical needs and work with the third sector and the veterans charities to help them to cope.

I have to commend the trauma risk management system in the British armed forces, which allows senior professionals or retired professionals to provide appropriate support to their colleagues in the aftermath of traumatic events or, at least, to point them in the right direction to get adequate support.

At this point, I want to say how much regard I have for the people who work in those support networks. There are too many of them to mention by name, but they are the real lifeline that few of the rest of us could ever provide. It is good to see the increased funding that supports those networks, but we should never underestimate the extent of the pressure on their resources.

Nor should we ever underestimate the number of veterans who are either homeless or are facing difficult issues in housing, which is why we are so much in favour of the dedicated veterans help-to-buy scheme, so that veterans can find it easier to

get onto the property ladder. That measure, together with the Scottish income tax mitigation that is awarded to veterans by the UK Government, is important and should be an important part of any armed forces covenant to help veterans to transition to civilian life.

I turn to education and skills, in which some aspects remain in need of improvement. At a time when it is quite clear in the Scottish economy that there is a mismatch of skills in the jobs market, it is vital that the assistance that is provided to veterans be based on the need to provide relevant training to ensure that they have a diverse range of skills that suit the inevitability of a much more flexible future jobs market. That is not easy, but it is an essential part of veterans moving back to civilian life and of providing greater stability for veterans' families.

It is essential that there are no barriers in the way. For example, some years ago, veterans and partners of armed forces personnel who had wanted to resume their teaching careers in Scotland found that to be impossible because of restrictions that are imposed in respect of teacher-training qualifications, which are overseen by the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Happily, moves were made to amend regulations, although I think that there is still a little way to go in opening up new opportunities.

Of course, one of the most difficult readjustments can be when young families of new veterans have to change school across educational jurisdictions that have different curricula. I have some personal casework experience of that and know just how important it is that the families receive accurate good-quality advice about what different curricula can offer. Educational security at school is essential for helping veterans' families to settle into their new circumstances, so it is important that they have professional guidance to hand.

The Scottish Conservatives have the very highest regard for our armed forces, and will always stand up for them and for all 220,000 veterans in Scotland in every way we can. We salute the service that they have given, for which we owe them so very much.

16:12

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am the chair of the Neilston War Memorial Association.

As we mark armistice day and look ahead to this weekend's commemorations, I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate. In doing so, I wish to remember all those who have lost their lives in conflict down through the years and

remember those who are still living with pain today. Indeed, I think of all veterans across our communities and how we must do more to support them. I also pay tribute to our serving personnel, whether at home or abroad, and I particularly want to highlight the incredible work that has been done by our armed forces throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether staffing the asymptomatic testing centre in Barrhead, close to where I live, driving ambulances across the West Scotland region or supporting the logistics of the first vaccination centres, from Giffnock to Greenock, they have made a huge difference to the lives of people in the communities that I serve.

At the heart of remembrance, we reflect on service—the service of keeping us safe, of protecting our freedom and of helping the most vulnerable in our world. We remember those who have given their lives in that service, whether in two world wars or in more recent conflicts.

I wish to speak today about those who keep the flame of remembrance alive in our communities and those who continue to work to support veterans across Scotland. I never fail to be amazed by the dedication of the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland, which, as we have heard, marks its 100th anniversary this week.

As custodians of remembrance, Poppyscotland ensures that, down through the generations, people have space to reflect and remember, but it also does amazing work to support veterans across Scotland. It is supported by groups of volunteers, and, along with many other colleagues, I was honoured to meet some of them at the launch of the Scottish poppy appeal here in Parliament.

I was particularly pleased to meet Donna Louise Armstrong from Lochwinnoch, who organises the annual appeal in the village and further afield in Johnstone, and who received the president's award for her amazing fundraising efforts. She is an inspiration and draws people to support the appeal every year. Donna Louise has also undertaken a range of fundraising efforts to support Poppyscotland, including a terrifying wing walk. Her fundraising makes a real difference to the lives of veterans across Scotland and she does all of this in memory of her nephew, who died in service in Afghanistan.

I also think of the wonderful team of people in the Neilston War Memorial Association with whom I have been proud to work over many years. I know that my village's quest for a war memorial, which culminated in its unveiling in 2015, has been mentioned in the Parliament a few times, but it is a real honour for me to highlight the work of the association today, having been involved since its inception in 2011.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to pay tribute to Corporal David Timmins since his death in January. David was awarded the Queen's gallantry medal for his bravery in rescuing a comrade when an improvised explosive device exploded in Afghanistan. David worked for veterans' rights and support after his recovery, and he was influential in setting up the Neilston War Memorial Association. I know that his loss is keenly felt in the community, but his legacy, of course, lives on in all the work that is done.

Supported by the sterling work of its secretary, Matt Drennan, the association not only cares for the memorial gardens and continues the act of remembrance in the village each year, but has grown to deliver for the people of the village, in memory of all those who never came home from the front lines of the first and second world wars.

Each year, the association raises money to deliver Christmas lights and celebrations, gifts for local children from Santa and an annual poppy stone hunt. During the pandemic, the association delivered hundreds of craft packs to local children, organised afternoon teas for older people who were shielding and helped to facilitate community newsletters, food parcels and even socially distanced doorstep community concerts with the outstanding Neilston pipe band at Kirk Glebe sheltered housing complex.

When people ask Matt why the association does all that, he points to the stories of hundreds of young men who never returned to Neilston from Flanders and the beaches of Normandy. Those names are etched on the war memorial but, as we all know, remembrance is about more than that. Their stories have been recorded and meticulously researched so that they are not forgotten. In their name, the association seeks to work for the benefit of children and young people who live in the village today and are of a similar age to those young men when they died. It does that not to glorify the horrors of war but to aspire to peace and reconciliation.

I also want to talk about the wonderful Erskine charity, which is based in my region. Along with other veterans charities, it has called for real and meaningful action to improve support for those who have served and returned to our communities.

Labour members support the calls to establish clear statutory targets to underpin the delivery of the armed forces covenant. We also support the implementation of the recommendations of Poppyscotland and other armed forces charities to strengthen engagement, to implement the veterans housing pathway and to target provision, with the aim of ensuring that the most vulnerable service personnel and veterans experience a good transition back to civilian life.

On Sunday, whether it is at Abbey cemetery in Elderslie, at the war memorial in Neilston or at the free French memorial monument on Lyle hill in Greenock, I will stand silently and think of all those who have been lost and all that we must still do for the living. I know that colleagues will do something similar in their communities.

16:18

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): As homes and businesses across Scotland fall silent today in remembrance of the nation's fallen, I am honoured to participate in this debate to reflect on and show my gratitude to all those who have served and sacrificed. Today, we come together to remember all those who, more than a century ago, sacrificed so much when the world changed forever; to remember the day that exhausted soldiers shook hands and the guns fell silent along the western front; to remember all the men and women who have served and suffered in conflicts in the 103 years that have followed; and to remember and respect all those who are involved in the armed forces and veterans community, including service personnel, veterans and their families and children.

Service life impacts on families in many ways. Postings take people away from their support networks and spouses away from employment, and children are uprooted from schools. Therefore, it is vital that we remain committed to providing the very best support for them. As a parent whose boys are both in the armed forces, I know that the point about families is really important. One of my sons is in the second battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland and, when he went on his first tour of Afghanistan when he was 18, I know the worry that that brought. My other son is in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

Veterans charities and third sector organisations play an essential role in delivering key support, but they have faced many challenges as a result of the pandemic. I am pleased that the Scottish Government not only recognises and addresses those challenges but has strengthened its financial support to allow those vital services to continue to provide help where it is needed. The £1 million armed forces third sector resilience fund is a clear commitment to Scotland's former military personnel and builds on our proud track record of being there for our serving and military communities and their families.

In addition to setting up the national veterans care network—to ensure parity of access to specialist services and to support improved access to employment for spouses and partners of serving military personnel—the fund will allow Veterans First Point to continue its dynamic work.

Developed by veterans for veterans and staffed by an alliance of clinicians and veterans, the service provides accessible, credible and co-ordinated services to veterans and the veteran community.

Veterans First Point has been providing support across the kingdom of Fife since 2016. Early this year, it moved to a new dedicated centre, which was opened by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans. The new centre allows greater opportunities to improve the lives of the people of Fife and deliver the services, support and care that are needed in the right places and at the right time.

The centre is one of six Scottish centres that are jointly funded by the Scottish Government. The partnership between Veterans First Point, NHS Fife and Fife Council has had great success in delivering accessible, credible and co-ordinated services to ensure that veterans get the best possible care and support. The partnership was further strengthened in 2017 when Fife Council reaffirmed its support for Fife's armed forces community with the appointment of an armed forces and veterans community champion. Acting as the elected representative link between the armed forces, veterans, the community and the council, the appointment of Councillor Rod Cavanagh, who works closely with the services, has brought a hugely positive impact locally.

One service user described the centre as

"A 'haven' for myself and others, providing a variety of welfare, social and mental health support, together with comradeship and most importantly a cuppa and a catch up, giving us a sense of wellbeing."

Statistics that have been reported by the group that runs the centre show that 37 per cent of veterans who use the First Point Veterans service have experienced homelessness at some time in their lives, 31 per cent have addresses in the areas of the highest levels of social deprivation in Scotland, and 7.5 per cent are living with friends, are currently homeless or reside in homes of multiple occupancy. Those figures highlight the clear need for continued focus on the key transition areas, such as housing, health, education and families, and the importance of accessible practical and emotional support.

As we continue the work to ensure that all veterans and armed forces personnel have access to suitable and safe housing, to invest in programmes and strategies to aid mental health, to tackle issues of social isolation and loneliness, and to secure and improve employment opportunities so that veterans can access good jobs once their time in the military is over, it is important that we further develop our understanding and awareness of the needs of our veterans and armed forces communities. I am therefore delighted that Scotland's census on 20

March 2022 will, for the first time, include a question on previous service in the UK armed forces. That information will give us a much better understanding of the veteran community in Scotland, including numbers, location, housing, employment status and other needs, such as healthcare and education.

In addition, the inclusion of a census question on veterans in the Scottish Government's three primary surveys—the Scottish household survey, the Scottish health survey and the Scottish crime and justice survey—will vastly improve our understanding of the profile, circumstances and needs of veterans in Scotland. Those important steps will ensure that we have access to an increased quality and quantity of data that will best inform policy development and future strategy and enable targeted support.

I offer my thanks and gratitude to members of the armed forces community for their support throughout the pandemic and across every level of our Covid-19 response, from their work alongside the dedicated men and women of the Scottish Ambulance Service to the operation of mobile testing units to help to identify infections and break chains of transmission, as well as their support to ensure that more than 8 million first and second doses of vaccine have been delivered.

Today is a day of great emotion and rightly so. It is time to remember those who served and who are currently serving and to honour the memory of those whom we have lost. We must acknowledge the courage and sacrifice of those who have served our country to achieve the democracy that we enjoy today, and our responsibility to work for the peace that they fought hard to achieve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Jackie Baillie, who joins us remotely, will wind up the debate for the Labour Party.

16:24

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I join others in recording my thanks and the thanks of the Scottish Labour Party to all those who have served our country and, in particular, to those who, over the years, have made the ultimate sacrifice.

I also welcome Keith Brown back to the veterans portfolio, and I thank Graeme Dey for his work as the veterans minister. I am also thankful for all the contributions from across the chamber. There have been some very powerful personal stories of family members who have served their country over the years.

I am pleased to continue as deputy convener of the cross-party group on armed forces, veterans and their families in this new parliamentary session. I very much welcome the support and

expertise that has been given to us over the years by the Scottish veterans commissioner Charlie Wallace, both in identifying required improvements and change and in holding the Government to account.

Members will know very well that my constituency has a large armed forces community. It is made up of veterans, as well as current forces personnel who serve our country at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde. That community is growing, because in addition to the 11,000 people who rely on Faslane for employment and the 6,500 people who work directly for the MOD or are their partners, around another 2,000 navy personnel and their family members are relocating, or have relocated, to Faslane as a result of the decision by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown to relocate all UK submarines there.

One can imagine the complexity of transferring 2,000 forces personnel and their families. There has been considerable co-operation and partnership working among Argyll and Bute Council, the MOD, West Dunbartonshire Council and others, just to make sure that there is sufficient housing, school places and opportunities for military spouses to access employment. I am very pleased that the cabinet secretary has had the opportunity to visit a project at Faslane that matches the skills and talents of spouses to job opportunities or encourages them to set up in business for themselves.

Colleagues across Parliament have raised issues in relation to homelessness, access to housing, access to healthcare—mental healthcare, in particular—and many other areas. However, I will focus most of my comments on education—an area that has not really been touched on, other than by Liz Smith. I have raised these issues before; they are nothing new. I am sure that I have raised them with the cabinet secretary as well as with his predecessor, the veterans minister, so he will know that I am persistent about them.

First, I raise the question of the service pupil premium. It is provided by the Department for Education to schools in England for pastoral care for forces children. It is not available in Scotland, and it is not part of pupil equity funding. That is genuinely disappointing, given the concentration of forces families in particular geographical areas of Scotland, because those local authorities could well do with the additional funding. The Scottish Government receives Barnett consequentials for the premium, but those are wrapped up in the general education budget and are not teased out. I ask the cabinet secretary to look at that again.

I turn secondly to the MOD education support fund, which is a UK-wide fund with a budget of £3 million. It was doubled to £6 million, which was welcome, but unfortunately its funding trajectory in

the past few years has been downward—the amount of funding has dropped. I mention the fund because Scotland does particularly well out of it—we punch well above our weight. I do not know whether the fund still exists, but there is a need for it. As others have said, when young people go from school to school, the transition is really quite challenging. That kind of funding helps schools and it helps the young people to settle and do well.

It is disappointing that that money is not there, because local authorities such as Argyll and Bute Council would do well out of it. The fund has supported a range of activities in a number of different local authorities in Scotland where large clusters of forces children are in school. It helps during the stressful periods of relocation or deployment separation that those young people experience.

It will not surprise the cabinet secretary when I say that, given that education is a devolved matter, I am looking for him and his colleagues in the Government to do something about that. It would not cost a lot of money, it would make for sustainable planning in the long-term and it would improve the opportunities for those young people, the armed forces personnel and their families. I urge the cabinet secretary to look again at that. It is a small amount of money that would make a significant difference.

Let me touch on the points made by Paul Sweeney. He was right to highlight the issues that will be faced in the future and the implication of the UK Government's command paper. That will reduce the strength of the Army and precipitate the closure of some barracks, which members have referred to. It will reduce real-terms funding over the next four years, meaning that there is less money for recruitment, pay, veterans and their families. That is simply not acceptable; it is not good enough. We cannot say that we support the armed forces and veterans when, simultaneously, resources are being cut. I appreciate the investment that has been made for veterans over the years and I agree with Christine Grahame about the efforts made by both Governments, going from a standing start with very little in place to improving that investment. However, there is much more to do.

Finally, I thank all our armed forces personnel, as many members across the chamber have done. Their service to our country is greatly appreciated. In particular, I thank the hundreds of them who are helping our paramedics and ambulance drivers in what is a significant period of crisis, the hundreds of them who are acting as vaccinators in towns across the country, helping our hard-pressed NHS staff to ensure that we are safe, and the many of them who are helping with the extreme pressures in our hospitals. For all that

they do, every day, we are grateful to them. Like many members, I will be attending community remembrance services—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Baillie, I note that time is moving on in terms of your allocation.

Jackie Baillie: I will conclude.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr to wind up for the Conservatives.

16:32

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, I had the honour of speaking in the debate that was brought to the chamber by my good friend Alexander Stewart to commemorate 100 years of the poppy appeal. It was a moving debate.

Today's debate has also had some notable contributions, such as that of my colleague Edward Mountain, who spoke about the fragility and price of peace and the unconditional offer that members of our armed forces make in their service. He also spoke about the role of families.

Paul Sweeney was right to bring up issues relating to the current service conditions of our armed forces and the implications of future configuration.

Alex Cole-Hamilton spoke movingly about his great-uncle—I, too, have great-uncles buried in the fields of France and Flanders—and the remarkable story of Wilfred Owen, who chose to go back to the front in what turned out to be the dying days of the war, which tragically led to his death.

Jackie Dunbar made an excellent speech about her family pride in the Gordon Highlanders. I was particularly struck by the concept that they had each other's backs. That absolutely describes the spirit and tradition of Scotland's regiments and the regiments of the British Army.

Alexander Burnett spoke movingly about his grandfather and praised the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I have seen that work, as many members will have, and it is hugely moving to see how well manicured those graveyards are.

Gordon MacDonald reminded us of the important role that our armed services play in the lives of our communities, and Christine Grahame spoke about the duty of politicians in respect of sending our armed forces into harm's way. She also conjured up the image of an overexcited Liam Kerr on a Harley-Davidson. I must see that picture.

Christine Grahame: It will cost you a donation to Poppyscotland to see that picture. [*Laughter.*]

Stephen Kerr: I will happily make that donation to Poppyscotland for the privilege of seeing that picture.

Liz Smith spoke with her usual authority about matters relating to education. She also spoke about how the spirit of remembrance continues to grow, which I think we will see again this weekend.

Paul O'Kane spoke about the work of the Neilston War Memorial Association, of which he is a member, and the excellent work that it does in the community all year round.

David Torrance reminded us of the power of a cuppa and a catch-up—absolutely. One of the blights of our modern society is loneliness. I also agree with his comments about the census question.

Many members rightly reflected upon the important work that is being done by Poppyscotland in offering support to veterans, active service personnel and their families. The work of the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Combat Stress, the Ancre Somme Association and many other service charities is immensely important, and we are grateful for what they do today. Armistice day is a most appropriate time to thank our servicemen and women for everything that they do and to thank our veterans for the contribution that they continue to make in so many walks of life.

For as long as I can remember, it has been my good fortune to have the privilege of working alongside veterans. They are men and women of exceptional character and capacity, and I pay tribute to them. They truly are an asset in every situation in which we come across them. I have learned and continue to learn much from the veterans whom I work alongside. For example, I am grateful to my colleague Edward Mountain, the Scottish Conservative deputy chief whip. I value his leadership and guidance. His life is fashioned by the values of service, duty and patriotism.

I also want to reflect on those who paid the ultimate price to preserve our freedoms and way of life. We owe it to them to never forget what they did for us and to devote ourselves to continuing to work for a better, more civilised and freer world for every human being.

I especially want to thank Her Majesty's armed forces for all their work in the past year, from helping the most vulnerable Afghans and other nationals to escape the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan—we heard about the emotional consequences of that for many others—to helping the Scottish Government set up NHS Louisa Jordan at the height of the pandemic. The successful roll-out of the vaccination programme throughout Scotland, supported by armed forces personnel, boosted the protection of the most vulnerable against Covid-19. As we speak,

members of the armed forces are working to ease the crisis pressures that our national health service is facing. It is in recognition of their service that Governments across the UK have a duty and obligation to veterans and their families.

This week, the Scottish veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, published his report on the Scottish Government's progress against the commissioner's recommendations to improve veteran services and support in Scotland. Although welcoming progress—as we do in the Conservative Party—the commissioner stated that stubborn challenges remain. Last year, the Scottish veterans commissioner identified 20 recommendations that were in need of more attention from the Scottish Government to drive change, and he highlighted his concerns about employment and skills development, health and mental health services. Among others, those areas were the ones in which the commissioner felt that the on-going pandemic posed an increased risk to service leavers and veterans, who often face additional challenges when seeking civilian employment or health or mental health care services. The commissioner stated:

“we have seen more people suffer from increased anxiety, isolation and job losses, and services which are slower to respond to need.

These are still areas where a strong focus and emphasis on support and early intervention needs to be maintained.”

The veterans commissioner also stated that he wanted to see further progress in other areas that he had previously flagged, including

“the lack of recognition of Service Leavers' and Veterans' qualifications, skills and experience which prevents them competing for employment opportunities; efforts to better align Veterans' skills and abilities with known skills gaps in key sectors of the Scottish economy and where there are labour shortages; and ensuring we get the levels of support right for Early Service Leavers, who can often be vulnerable to poor transition back into civilian society.”

The UK Government has introduced an armed forces champion in every Jobcentre Plus district, who ensures that they provide the support that best meets the needs of the armed forces community. Scotland's social security system presents opportunities to make a positive and meaningful difference for the armed forces community in Scotland, and one of the ways in which that can be achieved is through the Scottish Government establishing a nationwide armed forces and veterans champion network within Social Security Scotland. Such a network would allow the agency to better understand the specific needs of the armed forces community in Scotland and to build relationships with a view to sharing information and encouraging the community to get more involved in the agency's experience panels and other forums.

That brings me to the wider issue of the Scottish Government's use of working groups to oversee policy planning, development and delivery. Although the membership of those working groups often includes people with experience of the policy that is being examined, members of Scotland's armed forces community—despite their unique needs—are noticeably absent from the membership of such policy working groups. In the light of the unique and often multiple and complex needs of the armed forces community in Scotland, who represent a significant group in society, it is therefore imperative that the Scottish Government consult that community and involve it in future policy development. We believe that there should be a cross-Government commitment to involving our armed forces community in any working groups that are established to develop and take forward policy, thereby ensuring that their specific needs are recognised and their experiences learned from.

Although the Scottish Conservatives recognise that progress has been made, we also recognise that much more needs to be done to support our service personnel and our veterans. We must ensure that they have financial security and prosperity; provide opportunities for further education and employment; and look after their physical and mental health. That is why, as Edward Mountain said in opening the debate for our party, the Scottish Conservatives are proposing to introduce an armed forces and veterans bill in this session of Parliament.

Today, at 11.00 am, we fell silent to remember the sacrifices that were made to protect the freedoms that we enjoy today. On Sunday, we will do the same. Let us come together and show our collective respect for those who paid the ultimate price. We will remember them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Keith Brown to wind up the debate.

16:41

Keith Brown: The debate has been very interesting. That applies, not least, to Stephen Kerr's speech, which was markedly different from that of Liz Smith, who rightly talked about the consensus that we usually have in such debates, and have had for a number of years. There is a real value to that. I know that the many veterans and armed forces personnel who watch these debates take a lot of comfort from that.

However, it is also true to say—especially in relation to veterans—that they have real needs and that they are not unwilling to engage in an argument. Therefore, members should—as Stephen Kerr and Paul Sweeney have done—make trenchant criticism of the Scottish

Government when they feel that it is appropriate to do so, and I will respond to it. It might be a bit odd to have a debate that covers remembrance and veterans, which means that it will be hard for me to respond to all the points about veterans that have been made today. For my part, I would be more than willing to attend any debate on the subject of our veterans. I do not think that I have ever had a request for a debate of that nature, not that it is for me to decide whether the Parliament should have such a debate. I would be happy for us to have one.

A number of criticisms have been made, to which I will return, but first I want to mention a number of speeches by back benchers, several of which Stephen Kerr mentioned. I apologise if I miss anybody out.

With regard to Alexander Burnett's point about graveyards, I am not sure that I agree that we should just give a dollop of further cash to local government and hope that that will effect the change that he seeks. It is also true to say that, as his colleague Edward Mountain said, any graves in graveyards that are for fallen personnel can be looked after by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, although not in every case. If there are any such graves that Alexander Burnett is aware of that are not being looked after, he should feel free to raise that with the commission. One grave in Kingussie cemetery came to mind when it was mentioned by Edward Mountain. That is the appropriate way to deal with that issue.

Alexander Burnett will know that it is the practice of the UK and Scottish Governments not to fund war memorials. However, a number of years ago, we introduced a fund to help people to maintain and improve war memorials, where that was required.

Gordon MacDonald spoke about his great-grandfather and expressed his support for Jackie Dunbar's point that, once a Gordon, always a Gordon. He liked that a huge amount. It was a very good point about the Gordon Highlanders. It is amazing how many people in different parts of Scotland claim to be Highlanders—today, I was at a remembrance event in Glasgow for the Glasgow Highlanders—and I dare say that that is to do with the reputation of Highlanders around Scotland.

Christine Grahame mentioned the situation at Glencorse barracks. It is bizarre that the MOD would close a facility that had £60 million spent on it only recently. When I previously had responsibility for veterans, I talked to a former UK veterans minister—he has long since left the position—who told me confidentially that he could not understand the decision, that it was totally Treasury mandated and that it made no sense whatsoever. Like Christine Grahame, I hope that further thought will be given to that decision. The

former UK minister believed that it would shortly be reversed and that the facility would be maintained. I hope that that will be the outcome.

In a really interesting contribution, Maggie Chapman quoted Hamish Henderson. I should make it clear that I am not a pacifist; from what she said in her speech, I think that Maggie Chapman probably is. She mentioned "half-wit stunted ill-will", which is a fantastic description—so much of Hamish Henderson's writing is fantastic—of those who are happy to send other people to war. She made an important point.

My comments are not necessarily in the order that I would want to make them. Liz Smith made a number of points about education; Stephen Kerr's point also feeds into this. It is fair enough to demand of the Scottish Government that we should do more in relation to education—as it happens, my constituency has the only school in Scotland that is devoted to the children of military personnel, which is Queen Victoria school in Dunblane. However, in a situation in which the UK Government decides, as it did about five years ago, to move people from Germany to Scotland to Northern Ireland within the space of 18 months, subjecting children to such disruption and three different education systems, I am not sure exactly how the Scottish Government is meant to respond to those demands. There is of course more that we should do.

Jackie Baillie's points—

Liz Smith: I am grateful to Keith Brown for taking my intervention; I agree with him on that point. That said, there were specific issues a few years ago because of barriers that the General Teaching Council for Scotland had put in place that prevented—although not deliberately—some people who would have been valuable additions to the teaching profession from becoming teachers. That cannot be acceptable.

Keith Brown: That is a good point, which has been made to me by a number of personnel and, more often, their spouses. That is true, and I am pleased that Liz Smith has acknowledged that work has been done. As she said, it was a GTCS issue rather than a Scottish Government bar, if you like. It is a fair point and is well made.

I will come back to remembrance, but there is so much more that I want to respond to.

Paul Sweeney's speech was a real departure from the Labour Party's approach to these debates.

If members want more money to be spent on veterans and if, as seems to be the case, their position is that we should not seek that money from the UK Government, I would like to point out one or two anomalies. The Welsh Government is

about to have imposed on it by the UK Government a commissioner for veterans, which the UK Government will fund. We did that first—it was my idea—and we have established and paid for the Scottish Veterans Commissioner. If there are continuing demands as a result of UK Government actions, such as those that I mentioned in relation to children who might get moved around the education system or, as Paul Sweeney mentioned, the calamitous drawdown from Afghanistan that produced an immediate demand on mental health services, we must have a way to plan for that, which is more difficult to do if we are not part of the discussion.

Paul Sweeney: I want to quickly clarify our position. We are certainly not saying that the UK Government should not step up to the plate on the issue; we are merely saying that it is not necessarily a zero-sum game. We must have efforts to innovate at all levels of government to produce the best possible outcome. We are not precious about where that comes from; it is just about getting more resource into the sector.

Keith Brown: I acknowledge that point. I note that I am not asking anybody to be on the side of the Scottish Government; rather, I am asking people to be on the side of veterans. If we pursue more money for things that we think are legitimate for veterans because of the actions—sometimes legitimate actions—of the UK Government, I would hope that we would get generalised support for that.

I will say one more thing, because it has not been mentioned and I think that it will become increasingly important. The way that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who were in the armed forces were treated—some of them were drummed out of the service, disgraced and all the rest of it—has had a huge impact on their lives. In particular, how women were treated will be a very big issue. When I went to Veterans First Point in Fife, which David Torrance mentioned, I talked to a woman who was one of the first Wrens to serve on a ship. Her experience was absolutely horrendous and she attributes her post-traumatic stress disorder to it. Such matters will become very important. Having spoken to the Secretary of State for Defence earlier this week, I know that he shares that view.

I will conclude with a couple of comments on remembrance, as it is remembrance day.

Pam Gosal may have left the chamber, but she made an important point about the contribution of people from the British Indian Army. Earlier this year, I was pleased to go up to where my family comes from in the north of Scotland—to Lairg, Brora and Dornoch. We went to a place in Lairg called the tin church, which was used as a makeshift mosque during the second world war by

Force K6 soldiers, as they were known, who were mostly from the Punjab area of Pakistan. They came from Pakistan at Churchill's request for the D day landings, then went to Wales and then Scotland, where they were asked to do mountain arctic warfare training. Many of them died during the process.

As I said, the tin church, which was previously a Free Church of Scotland church, was used by Muslim soldiers as a mosque. The very thought of the call to prayer coming out of the tiny church first thing in the morning in Lairg, with hundreds of shoes sitting outside it is an amazing part of our cultural history.

Pam Gosal was absolutely right. We do not do nearly enough to recognise the contribution that was made by people from Pakistan, from India—of course, it was one army at that time—and from the rest of the Commonwealth and further afield. Two and a half million men volunteered for the Indian army during the second world war, and many millions of others from elsewhere in the Commonwealth also made a huge contribution. We in Scotland are happy to work with the organisation Colourful Heritage, which seeks to ensure that we do not forget the contribution that was made.

This day, 11 November, is the day when we all pay attention at 11 o'clock, with the two minutes' silence. Sunday will be a huge day as well, and I think that all members said that they intend to be involved then.

I confirm that the Scottish Government values and appreciates our relationships with Scotland's diverse south Asian communities and our faith communities. We welcome the contribution that is made by service personnel wherever they have come from.

Armistice day and the remembrance day period serve a vital purpose in allowing everyone in Scotland a moment to pause and be thankful. We will all have people in mind at this time, and many members said who that is, for them. For me, it is the four members of my troop who died during the Falklands war, and others. We all remember relatives who served in different parts of the armed forces, too. Remembrance day is a time for reflection, and there should always be time within it to reflect on our personal links to the past.

It is important that we continue to remember those who served and lost their lives in conflicts, not to glorify war—Maggie Chapman was quite right about that—but to recognise the sacrifices that were made to protect the freedoms that we enjoy today and, as members said, to make sure that we do not make the same mistakes again.

Motion without Notice

16:51

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders to bring forward decision time to now. I invite Stephen Kerr, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.51 pm.—[*Stephen Kerr*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:51

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business, so that concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:52.

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