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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 28 April 2022

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

Point of Order

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have lost count of the number of times that the Scottish Government has leaked significant policy announcements to the press before they have been delivered in the chamber. That often includes media reports that contain full extracts from ministerial statements that have yet to be made.

This morning, we have learned through the media that Angus Robertson will say in the chamber today that there will be a four-week extension to the deadline for completing census entries. That follows the Scottish National Party's insistence that we diverge from the United Kingdom census timeline so that we can achieve

"the highest possible response rate".

The argument did not make sense then, but opponents were hushed because the Scottish Government knew better. It turns out that it did not. It has utterly bungled it.

Presiding Officer, I do not know how many times the Scottish Government has bypassed your request that significant announcements be made in the chamber in the first instance. What I do know is that it is ignoring your instruction, which is contempt. What action can you now take to ensure that ministers respect the Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: I thank the member for the point of order. I have made my position clear on several occasions that significant announcements should be made in the chamber in the first instance. I have seen the press coverage that speculates on the content of the statement. I am, as yet, unaware of the content of the statement, as it is under embargo and has not been delivered or circulated, but I have asked the Minister for Parliamentary Business's office for an explanation ahead of this afternoon's statement. I will give that full consideration.

General Question Time

11:42

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We now move on to general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be preferred.

Laptops and Internet Connection for Young People

1. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the provision of funded laptops, tablets and internet connections for young people across Scotland. (S6O-01014)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to providing every school-age child with access to a device and connectivity by the end of this parliamentary session. We have already provided £25 million to councils, which has resulted in more than 72,000 pupils receiving a device and 14,000 receiving an internet connection. Councils have also invested in technology and have indicated that, in total, almost 280,000 devices have been, or are in the process of being, distributed to learners.

That is a complex and ambitious commitment, and we are commencing preparatory work now, ahead of deeper investment in technology from 2023-24.

Stephen Kerr: That was jam tomorrow, as usual.

In written question S6W-07296, I asked how many laptops and tablets had been handed out by local authorities, and in question S6W-06243, I asked how much it would cost to replace and upgrade devices. The Scottish Government could not provide answers, because it told me that it held no data.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): No records.

Stephen Kerr: No records—indeed.

The truth is that the Scottish National Party has not worked with local authorities to provide free laptops. It has made an election promise, thrown responsibility to the councils, issued a press release and moved on. Does the cabinet secretary have any idea whatsoever how many pupils currently in secondary schools will leave school without ever having had access to the free laptop or tablet and the free internet connection that they were promised by the SNP Scottish Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Kerr might wish to rewrite the SNP's manifesto as he continues to rewrite his own party's. However, as I have made clear every time that we have discussed the matter in the chamber, and as I said in my first answer, we are committed in our manifesto to providing every school-age child with access to a device and connectivity by the end of this parliamentary session. We are absolutely determined to do that.

We have convened the joint partnership board with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to oversee the work so, once again, Mr Kerr is factually incorrect in saying that we are not working with councils. We are, in fact, working in partnership with them to oversee the project and I would have thought that Mr Kerr would be pleased that the partnership between the Scottish Government and local government has enabled the distribution of devices to the equivalent of 40 per cent of school pupils at this point. We will deliver on our manifesto commitment by the end of the parliamentary session.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that young people should also be provided with tuition on the use of the devices and that the correct and proper way to use them is to use touch typing? After all, one would not give a child a violin or a trombone without also arranging for music lessons. People who possess the skill can type at three times the speed of those who cannot. Written communication is now essential for most jobs. Therefore, touch typing would open up more opportunities for young people. Will the cabinet secretary meet me and experts in the tuition of touch typing to consider how that might be progressed?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Mr Ewing for his question and recognise his commitment to the issue, in that we discussed it at committee when he was a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. He will be aware that we know that the capability to make the use of technology is equally important to the provision of devices. Therefore, as always, I would be delighted to meet Mr Ewing to discuss the matter further.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 has not been lodged and question 3 has been withdrawn.

Multiple Sclerosis (Access to Specialist Nurses)

4. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that anyone living with multiple sclerosis has access to a specialist nurse in their national health service board area. (S6O-01017)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I pay tribute to the Multiple Sclerosis Society and other stakeholders during this MS awareness week for the excellent work that they do.

Decisions on staffing requirements are the responsibility of individual NHS boards. They are based on changing population demographics. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities co-produced and published the national workforce strategy on 11 March this year. The strategy commits to publishing new workforce projections in the autumn once we have the opportunity to consider the three-year workforce plans from health boards and health and social care partnerships. Staffing needs for services and professional specialties across NHS Scotland will be factored into the development of those projections in partnership with stakeholders.

The "Scottish MS Register 2021 Report" notes that,

"despite the challenges presented by COVID-19"

87 per cent of newly diagnosed people received

"contact with an MS specialist nurse within 10 working days of diagnosis".

Donald Cameron: I am told that NHS Western Isles has stated that it will not replace its recently vacated MS nurse post with a like-for-like replacement but, instead, will appoint a more general neurological specialist and ask its Parkinson's disease nurse to assist. There are around 100 people in the Western Isles living with MS and the need for specialist care is critical, so what action will the Scottish Government take to assist NHS Western Isles and other health boards in Scotland to recruit full-time specialist MS nurses?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Donald Cameron for an important question. I am aware of the situation in the Western Isles. The Scottish Government has been in contact with NHS Western Isles and there are a couple of points that I can advise him of.

Donald Cameron is right that the advanced clinical nurse specialist in neurology, who I understand will be recruited at band 7, will have speciality across neurology services, including MS. I understand that NHS Western Isles will also take the opportunity to increase the hours of the specialist nurse for Parkinson's. The additional hours for that nurse will also be in general neurology services.

The board of NHS Western Isles has assured me that patients should not experience a negative change in their care as a result of the changes. If Donald Cameron or any member hears about any diminution or reduction in the care or service that

those in the Western Isles with MS are receiving, they should bring that to the board's attention. They can, of course, bring it to my attention, too.

Dog Theft

5. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many incidents of dog theft there have been in the last five years. (S6O-01018)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): The Scottish Government does not hold statistics on the incidence of crimes of dog theft, as data is held only under the type of theft—for example, theft, robbery, theft by housebreaking or shoplifting—not by what is stolen.

Last year, however, the Scottish Government contacted Police Scotland, which confirmed that its internal records showed that 62 cases were recorded in 2019-20, and 88 cases in 2020-21. Police Scotland noted that around a third of those cases were recorded as domestic or ownership disputes, rather than theft for financial gain.

Maurice Golden: I thank the minister for that answer, which goes to the heart of the problem that there is a lack of robust and reliable data. That is what we need if we are to understand the true scale of this growing problem. Can the minister shed more light on the matter by providing the number of prosecutions and convictions for dog theft over the past five years?

Ash Regan: I do not have that data with me today, but I can certainly follow that up with the member in writing. A specific offence of pet theft would of course aid in the data gathering on offending behaviour. However, careful consideration needs to be given to the creation of a different or specific offence. I know that the member is considering introducing a proposal on the issue. That risks creating a large number of very similar offences, covering different types of theft.

I would certainly agree that one theft of a dog is one too many, but I am heartened by the internal figures that I have just shared with the Parliament, showing that dog theft is not a high-volume crime in Scotland, with 88 cases being reported last year. We suspect that that figure of 88 cases—being a slight increase on the year before—is likely to have been driven by the rise in demand for puppies during the coronavirus lockdown.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am very sympathetic to the issue that Maurice Golden has raised, and I trail the fact that my proposal for a bill on the welfare of dogs is lodged today, so it is open for signing.

Further to the response from the minister, I believe that there are eight or so microchipping companies, and every puppy in Scotland has been microchipped. Is there a possibility of combining their data into one database for traceability?

Ash Regan: I am not sure; I would have to give that some thought. I can come back to the member, or perhaps the member and I could meet to discuss the issue further.

NHS Scotland COVID Status App

6. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to extend the NHS Scotland COVID Status app to 12 to 15-year-olds in order to support the increasing number of families that are returning to international travel. (S6O-01019)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): We are currently exploring an age-appropriate way to provide digital access to Covid status for children under 16. In the meantime, children under 16 in Scotland who have been vaccinated can obtain a paper certificate of their vaccination status via NHS Inform.

Stephanie Callaghan: More broadly and looking forward, does the Scottish Government see an on-going need to maintain and develop similar applications as part of its preparation for future pandemics?

Humza Yousaf: Yes. I think that that is a wise thing for any Government to consider, given the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The member will know that we have a standing committee on pandemics, which continues to advise the Government about any future preparations.

The app that we have developed works well for international travel but, as I alluded to in response to Stephanie Callaghan's first question, there is further development and evolution of the app still to go. We are keen to complete the work for under-16s prior to the summer holidays.

Violence and Antisocial Behaviour (Glasgow)

7. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to address the reported increase in levels of violence and antisocial behaviour in Glasgow city centre. (S6O-01020)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): Everyone has the right to be and to feel safe in their community. We are aware of reports that young people have been travelling to Glasgow to enjoy the city and connect with other young people; we also know that it is only a minority of young people who are carrying out acts of antisocial behaviour.

The police response will continue to be measured and intelligence led, but robust where appropriate, in order to protect the public and young people and to ensure that businesses and the wider community feel safe in the city centre. That response includes the deployment of anti-disorder patrols, which ensure that there is enough capability to respond to spontaneous incidents; the mobile police office, which provides a physical policing base; and mobile closed-circuit television vehicles, which capture evidence in real time. Local authority community enforcement officers support the police, and city centre exclusion orders can be used to place restrictions on offenders.

Paul Sweeney: This week, I met Niven Rennie and Will Linden from the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit to discuss the on-going problems in the city centre of Glasgow. They were clear that the situation is complex, as described by the minister, but that the main driver of antisocial behaviour is children from across the central belt who have nothing to do in their local communities due to the closure of vital community centres and youth projects.

What analysis has the Government conducted to establish how many of those vital community assets have been closed due to continued local authority budget cuts? The Government has placed an emphasis on providing local authorities with Covid recovery grants. How much of that money is going to reopening those vital community assets? Finally, what work is the minister undertaking in conjunction with Police Scotland and Glasgow City Council to explore the possibility of establishing an OnSide youth zone in Glasgow? Those youth zones have been incredibly successful at reducing violence and antisocial behaviour in 18 English cities.

Ash Regan: The member has asked a number of questions that I do not think I will be able to answer. I would be happy to meet with him if he wants to discuss more of that in detail.

The member correctly identifies that no single approach will solve the issue. He mentioned youth services. The allocation and planning of resources and services for young people is for local authority partners. However, I understand Mr Sweeney's concerns and those of the residents of Glasgow about the recent antisocial behaviour in the city and behaviour that is harmful or offending. Such behaviour is unacceptable.

It is important to appreciate that young people have certain rights to associate with one another, whether that is in or outside their home communities. I will ask officials to work closely with leads from the national youth justice advisory group to identify whether there are any gaps in youth service provision. In Scotland, we have a

strong focus on early and effective intervention and diversion. Glasgow City Council, the children's reporter and other relevant agencies are already looking in depth at what they can do about the issue and to offer positive alternatives to antisocial behaviour for young people.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Under the Scottish National Party, the streets of Glasgow have become dirty, depressing and dangerous. Will drugs tolerance zones lead to an increase or a decrease in crime on the city's streets?

Ash Regan: Sanitation is not one of the things for which I am personally responsible.

I will address the issues of crime and young people, youth justice and antisocial behaviour. The Scottish Government is increasing funding for the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit. I am sure that the member will be well aware of many of the important and successful initiatives that have been carried out by that body. This year, we have increased funding for the unit by 14 per cent, or over £1 million, to deliver additional violence prevention activity in the area.

The member will also know that the Scottish Government has taken forward the successful whole-system approach to address the needs of young people who are involved in offending. That has contributed to a dramatic change in the way that youth justice is carried out in Scotland, and the number of under-18s who are sentenced has decreased by 93 per cent.

Asylum Seekers (Afghanistan)

8. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan have arrived in Scotland since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. (S6O-01021)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Although that is United Kingdom Government reserved policy, Scotland is committed to playing its part in welcoming people who are fleeing Afghanistan. All 32 local authorities have confirmed their participation in relocation and resettlement schemes.

Afghans are being welcomed into Scottish communities. As of 14 April, 119 families, with more than 480 people, have been resettled in 20 local authorities, and there are six Home Office-procured bridging hotels that are accommodating approximately 350 people. We expect more people to arrive in the coming months.

John Mason: Last week, at the cross-party group on freedom of religion or belief, we heard about the awful situation for minorities in Afghanistan, such as Shia Muslims, Sikhs and

Hindus. Is the Scottish Government able to put any pressure on or encourage the United Kingdom Government to help minorities in Afghanistan?

Shona Robison: The member raises an important point, as the situation in Afghanistan continues to be extremely concerning, especially for minority groups and women. I raised the issue in a letter to the then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, on 20 August, and the First Minister raised equality issues in Afghanistan in a letter focused on resettlement to the Prime Minister on 24 August. I followed up with a letter to the Home Secretary on 1 September.

I will write again to the UK Government to press it to do all that it can to support minorities in Afghanistan. The Scottish Government stands ready to help in any way that we can.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Ferry Procurement (Documentation)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Last week, the Auditor General criticised the Scottish National Party for failing to record the crucial decision to go ahead with ferry contracts that have, so far, cost the taxpayer a quarter of a billion pounds. In response, a Scottish Government spokesperson said:

"A thorough search has been conducted and the paperwork ... cannot be located."

That is laughable. A few weeks ago, the First Minister was telling us that a big boy did it and ran away. Now, the dog has eaten all her homework. Those excuses would not cut it in a primary school classroom. Does the First Minister really expect anyone to believe that? Will she tell us where that crucial document has gone?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): More than 200 documents, amounting to more than 1,500 pages, relating to the decisions are already in the public domain. They were published by the Scottish Government and they have been there for quite some time for anyone to read and scrutinise. One piece of documentation is not there, which is the formal record of the decision to proceed with the final contract award. That is, absolutely, a key decision.

There are two further points that it is important to make. First, there is no evidence that the paperwork has been withheld. [*Interruption.*] Well, let me quote the Auditor General, who said at last week's committee meeting:

"our judgment is not that evidence has been withheld from us during the course of our audit work but, rather, that an important piece of documentary evidence was not prepared in relation to the judgment that ministers arrived at".—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee, 21 April 2022; c 31.*]

That is the first point.

Secondly, what is missing is a note confirming that ministers have considered the issues and have decided to proceed. However, that decision is clear in all the surrounding documentation. There was advice to ministers on 8 October, which said—I am summarising—

"We would welcome the Minister's confirmation that he has ... considered the CMAL note,"

is

"aware of the ... procurement and financial risks"

and is

"content to give approval to CMAL to proceed."

The day after that, on 9 October, Transport Scotland wrote to CMAL and said:

“The Scottish Ministers have also seen and understood that”

CMAL risks

“paper and have noted and accepted the various technical and commercial risks identified and assessed by CMAL and have indicated that they are content for CMAL to proceed with the award of the Contracts.”

So, the minister’s decision is narrated in the letter that Transport Scotland wrote.

There is one link in the chain that is missing, but one can still very clearly follow the chain of events—something that Douglas Ross clearly has not tried to do.

Douglas Ross: Let us try to get this straight. At the time, Nicola Sturgeon said that this was

“one of the achievements we are most proud of”.

Now, we are expected to believe that there is not a shred of evidence about the crucial final decision. The SNP was so proud of it that it did not want anyone to know about it.

Given the First Minister’s pride, that should have been hanging on her wall. Maybe that is it—maybe the document is hanging on Nicola Sturgeon’s wall in Bute house. The excuse that we have just heard from the First Minister is that there are hundreds of documents available but—wow!—not the one that we need and that the Auditor General was looking for. The vital document has vanished into thin air.

Can the First Minister say, with a straight face, that this does not look like an almighty cover-up? I will also ask again, because she did not answer: where has that document gone?

The First Minister: That document would have been an email or a note that said, “The ministers are content on the basis of the reasons set out”.

I will say, first of all, that it was and is an achievement to have saved almost 400 jobs. As we speak, 400 people are working in Ferguson’s shipyard, earning a wage and supporting their families. I know that jobs do not matter much to the Conservatives, but they matter to this Government and they always will.

Let me run through it again. On 8 October 2015, a submission goes to ministers, asking for confirmation that ministers have considered the CMAL note and are aware of the potential procurement and financial risks—of course, the mitigations are set out in the submission—and that ministers are content to proceed. The next day, Transport Scotland writes to CMAL and says that

“Scottish Ministers have ... seen and understood”

the risk paper,

“have noted and accepted the ... technical and commercial risks”

and have decided “to proceed”. The decision is recorded there. The bit that is missing is the link in the chain between those two things that says simply that the ministers were content. However, the fact that the ministers were content is narrated in the document from the next day.

I suggest to Douglas Ross that it might be a good use of his time to read the 200 documents—the 1,500 pages—that are published on the Scottish Government’s website.

Douglas Ross: I say to the First Minister that it might be a good use of her time, and Parliament’s time, if she answers the question. Again, there is nothing—[*Interruption.*] Nicola Sturgeon has more ministers than ever before, more special advisers than ever before and more communications staff than ever before, and none of them can find the vital link—as she has called it—that is missing.

The First Minister claims to be a master of detail right up until the point at which the Government makes a mistake. Then, her memory is like a sieve. Every time the going gets tough, we hear, “She can’t recall,” “She doesn’t know,” “She’s not sure.” We are supposed to believe that a quarter-of-a-billion-pound decision either was never written down, has vanished or has been illegally destroyed.

The First Minister has botched this and covered up mistakes. Those who are trying to get to the bottom of the matter have been unable to do so because Ferguson Marine employees cannot speak openly, because of Scottish National Party gagging orders. The First Minister could change that. Will she tell us—as she is rifling through her folder—how many gagging orders were issued? Will she waive them all today to end the secrecy? I am also going to keep asking: where has the vital document gone?

The First Minister: The email, as the Auditor General said last week, has not been “withheld”. It was, in his judgment, “not prepared”. I am answering that question.

Let me set it out again. On 8 October 2015, a submission goes to ministers, setting out CMAL’s concerns, the issues with the guarantee and the steps that have been taken to mitigate those risks. That is what ministers considered. On 9 October—the very next day—Transport Scotland narrates to CMAL—

Douglas Ross: This is the third time.

The First Minister: Yes, it is the third time, because Douglas Ross does not seem to want to understand it. I am going to read it—

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, First Minister.

When people are asking or responding to questions, I would be grateful if everyone else could keep from contributing. Thank you.

The First Minister: Let me read it again, a bit more slowly:

“The Scottish Ministers have also seen and understood”

the CMAL risk paper

“and have noted and accepted the various technical and commercial risks identified and assessed by CMAL and have indicated that they are content for CMAL to proceed with the award of the Contracts.”

On the basis of the advice on 8 October, that is the decision that was narrated to CMAL on 9 October.

On the issue of non-disclosure agreements, it was the Scottish Government that negotiated with the FMEL—Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd, which was the previous owner of the yard—administrators to secure the release of FMEL’s employees, who gave evidence to the inquiry, from their terms and conditions of employment confidentiality obligations. The Scottish Government complied fully with Audit Scotland’s inquiry and will encourage everybody to comply fully with any future investigations or inquiries.

Douglas Ross: Again, I am asking questions that Nicola Sturgeon will not answer. I asked specifically—[*Interruption.*] SNP members do not want to hear this, but I asked how many gagging orders are in place—how many are there?—and whether the First Minister will agree to waive them today. She has quoted the Auditor General from last week. Let us quote him from this morning. He told the Public Audit Committee that he would speak to Ferguson employees if those gagging orders were removed. Let us allow him to do his job.

Last week, the Auditor General also said:

“we recommend that there needs to be a fuller review—lessons learned feels too glib to describe the circumstances before us.”

All we have heard from Nicola Sturgeon is one glib statement after another. When asked to apologise to the islanders, she dismissively said, “Och, for goodness’ sake.” That was the response from Nicola Sturgeon to islanders who are struggling right now. Her feeble excuse for wasting a quarter of a billion pounds on the ferries is that it is regrettable. It is not regrettable—it is absolutely scandalous.

We know that advice was given to Government ministers not to go ahead with the deal, and we know that they ignored it. Will the First Minister finally come clean and tell us this: she mentions

Government ministers, but did she personally see that advice not to proceed with the deal before the decision was made? And, for the fourth and final time today, I ask: will she tell us where that vital piece of documentation is?

The First Minister: The Tory leadership is in some difficulty, but this really is desperate stuff. I have quoted from the advice that was given to ministers and from the Transport Scotland letter that went to CMAL, narrating the decision that ministers took.

Let me go back to the issue of non-disclosure agreements. I will say this very clearly: nobody in the employment of Ferguson’s shipyard will be prevented in any way, shape or form from speaking in full to Audit Scotland. [*Interruption.*] I point again to the fact that it was the Scottish Government that negotiated with FMEL’s administrators to release employees from the confidentiality obligations that they had back then. Therefore, everybody will be fully free and enabled to speak to Audit Scotland.

On my views on island communities, I think—I will be corrected if I am wrong—that the *Official Report* will show the regret that I expressed about the impact on those communities.

In terms of a fuller review, in the first exchange that we had on the issue after the Audit Scotland report was published, I pointed to the recommendation about having a fuller review and said that we would consider the terms of that. However, I think—and I think that the Auditor General said this last week—that the focus and priority now must be on completing the ferries. A key milestone in that vein was delivered yesterday.

I take full responsibility for everything that this Government does, and I always will. Perhaps that is the difference between me and some other leaders across these islands.

Patient Discharges to Care Homes

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Today is workers memorial day. We pause to remember all those who have lost their lives simply doing their jobs and resolve to campaign for workplaces free from harm.

Yesterday, a judge at the High Court in England ruled that the policy of discharging positive and untested Covid patients into care homes was “unlawful”, unreasonable and “irrational”. It was described as

“one of the most ... devastating policy failures in the modern era”

that cost lives. Does the First Minister accept that her decision to send untested and positive patients

into care homes in Scotland was unlawful, unreasonable and irrational and that it cost lives?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No, I do not accept that. However, those matters will now, rightly and properly, be scrutinised by the public inquiry that is under way in Scotland and, of course, the parallel public inquiry that will take place into those matters UK-wide. Those matters will, rightly and properly, be scrutinised should any legal cases be brought in Scotland.

The most important thing I want to say is that my thoughts are with every single family who has lost a loved one during the pandemic, either in a care home or, indeed, across wider society. We are obviously aware of the ruling at the High Court yesterday regarding decisions made for England by the UK secretary of state.

During the pandemic, the priority for all of us has been to save lives at all points, and we have sought to make the best decisions on the basis of the best scientific and clinical evidence we have at any given time. All nations developed guidance on the basis of what we understood at the time. The guidance in Scotland was broadly similar to the guidance that was in place in England, but it was not identical; there were some differences in versions of the guidance. Our guidance from 13 March 2020 and 26 March 2020 emphasised that care home residents should remain in their rooms as far as possible and that routine visiting should be suspended. From 26 March, we also required the isolation of anyone discharged to a care home who had been in contact with Covid cases, even if they were not displaying symptoms. It is right and proper that these matters are fully scrutinised by the public inquiry.

The last thing I will say—and I have said it before—is that there is nothing anybody in this chamber can say to me that will make me feel the weight of those decisions any heavier than I already do, and I will do so for the rest of my life. I took all of those decisions, as did my ministers and the Government, in good faith and on the basis of the best information we had at the time.

Anas Sarwar: I am sorry—that last part might be fine in words, but it is extraordinary and unthinkable for the First Minister to say that she does not accept the judgment, particularly when an almost identical thing happened in Scotland. Let us look at what the judgment makes clear: it says that what happened was “irrational”, “unlawful” and unreasonable, given what Governments knew.

Let us look at what happened in Scotland. As early as 4 February 2020, this Government’s advisers suggested that asymptomatic transmission was a possibility. On 13 February 2020, this Government’s advisers said that

asymptomatic transmission was likely. On 13 March 2020, despite warnings from care home staff, this Government’s guidance said discharge from hospitals should not be hindered.

On 26 March 2020, this Government’s guidance said:

“Individuals being discharged from hospital do not routinely need confirmation of a negative Covid test.”

As late as 17 April 2020, this Government’s health secretary was saying that there was still not a strong case for testing patients before discharge, even though testing guidelines had changed in England on 15 April 2020.

By the time the Scottish Government changed its guidance and guidelines on 21 April, nearly 3,000 untested people and 75 known positive cases had already been transferred into Scotland’s care homes. Does the First Minister accept—in the words of the families who are affected and impacted—that this was a shameful, unforgivable, criminal act that cost lives in Scotland?

The First Minister: My thoughts will be with the bereaved families every single day for the rest of my life.

This is not about not accepting a judgment. The Scottish Government will look very carefully at the terms of yesterday’s judgment—we have already started that process—but this was not a case about the situation in Scotland. Therefore, it is only a statement of fact and not a judgment about the situation in Scotland. It is not about us not accepting the judgment; it is about recognising that very important fact.

As I have said, and as anybody can see, the guidance in Scotland was broadly similar to that in England—and, indeed, in Wales, which has a Labour Government, so this is nothing to do with politics. However, there were some differences. For example, at a time when there were mixed views—to put it mildly—about the risk of asymptomatic transmission, our guidance from as early as 13 March 2020 recommended that residents remain in their rooms. From 26 March, the guidance recommended 14-day isolation of anyone discharged to a care home even if they did not have symptoms. The risk of asymptomatic transmission was clearly in mind, to some extent, at that point.

These are matters that will be fully scrutinised by the public inquiry under the convenership of Lady Poole, a High Court judge in Scotland. If other processes are brought in in Scotland, scrutiny will be brought to bear on those, too.

Analysis of discharges to care homes has been undertaken by Public Health Scotland, and the finding was that there was no clear statistical

evidence that hospital discharges were associated with care home outbreaks. Instead, it was care home size that was more strongly related to outbreaks. That is the analysis that has been done so far, but it is right that we have full analysis and scrutiny by the independent public inquiry, whose work is now getting under way.

Anas Sarwar: I remind the First Minister that families will be hearing the sympathy that she has expressed, but they will hear the ducking and diving that she has expressed, too.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): This is a disgrace.

Anas Sarwar: I am sorry, but Mr Swinney is right—it is a disgrace that people lost loved ones in care homes.

I have already narrated the timeline for what happened in Scotland. Let us look at the consequences of the shameful decision. In the first wave of the pandemic, 4,073 people died with Covid in Scotland, 1,900 of whom were in care homes. That is almost 50 per cent. By the time that the Government acted, half of all care homes in Scotland had a Covid outbreak.

Families have been through the heartbreak of losing a loved one, and many of them could not be there at the final moments, yet it seems that the First Minister is suggesting that those families should perhaps go through the Scottish court system to get to the truth. Do not force those families to relive their heartache all over again by being dragged through the courts, with the emotional toll that comes with that, and having to spend thousands of pounds to get the First Minister to admit the truth. Does she accept that her Government's decisions and actions were unlawful, unreasonable and irrational and that they cost lives?

The First Minister: On an issue as serious as this, Anas Sarwar is shamefully misrepresenting my words. I did not suggest that people should have to go to court. What I recognised was that people have a right, if they so choose, to go to court, and that they might choose to do that. It was not a suggestion that they should. I believe that people should get the answers to the questions that they have around all aspects of the handling of the pandemic without having to do that, which is why this Government has set up an independent public inquiry that is chaired by a High Court judge.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): How long?

The First Minister: I refer Jackie Baillie to the Inquiries Act 2005. The conduct of the public inquiry, the rhythm of reporting and the time taken for it to report are entirely matters for the

independence of the inquiry and not for ministers. Jackie Baillie should stop indulging in political commentary from a sedentary position and engage with the importance of the issues.

I do not have to be reminded of the numbers and consequences of the pandemic. The facts and figures and the human consequences are embedded in my soul and always will be. That does not mean that my decisions and actions and those of my Government should not be subject to scrutiny; they should be subject to full, independent scrutiny, which is exactly what the independent public inquiry will do. That is what families deserve, and they deserve a process that takes place in a proper way. I am determined that they will get that.

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementary questions.

Cost of Living

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It was reported this week that, despite soaring energy prices, the United Kingdom Government's working group that was set up to address the cost of living has not met since the start of the partygate scandal. It was also reported that the chancellor has said that it was "silly" to boost support for energy bills. Does the First Minister share the view expressed this week by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the UK Government's response to the crisis has been "woefully inadequate"?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I share that view. The UK Government's response has been woefully inadequate. Most of the resources and levers to tackle the crisis lie with the UK Government. Some—not all, I accept—of the factors that are driving the crisis have happened at the hand of the UK Government, not least the impact and implications of Brexit and the removal of universal credit from the most vulnerable families. It is time that the UK Government stepped up and responded properly.

The chancellor's comment that it would be "silly" to provide help for people is deeply offensive to those across Scotland and all other parts of the UK who, right now, are struggling to heat their homes and feed their children. It is time for Rishi Sunak, Boris Johnson and the UK Government to step up and to act.

Spiking

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): A young woman called Jess Insall believes that she was spiked during a night out in Glasgow and she has bravely spoken publicly about her distressing ordeal as a warning to others. However, because of a 34-hour delay in police taking a sample, she

will most likely never know what happened to her, let alone get justice. Instead of setting up yet more SNP talking shops, can the First Minister tell us when her Government will start to take this dangerous and predatory crime seriously?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We do take it seriously. Let me put on the record my sympathies to the young woman for her experience. Every woman in the country understands how serious such offences are and the consequences of the impact that they have on people's lives.

How the police conduct criminal investigations is a matter for the police and, rightly, not for ministers. I am willing to correspond with the chief constable on this case to seek any explanation that he is able to give for the situation that has been narrated in the chamber, and to ask the justice secretary to write to the member in due course. These are serious crimes and I know that the police take them seriously, as does the Government.

Delayed Discharge

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Delayed discharge is increasing. The number of people who are dying while waiting to be discharged is also increasing—almost 400 people died in the last year alone. Those statistics represent loved ones who died while unable to get the care package that they needed. The SNP promised more than seven years ago to end delayed discharge but, three health ministers later, they have simply failed to do so. I am sure that we will hear a list of initiatives from the First Minister but, despite them, delayed discharge has gone up by 57 per cent; they are clearly not working. Does the First Minister agree that this is a scandal and that it is the human cost of the SNP's failure to take effective action?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Jackie Baillie says that we are three health ministers later, but she omits to mention that we are a global pandemic later. That has impacted on such issues in Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and probably in every country in the world.

Delayed discharge is unacceptable, which is why Jackie Baillie is right to say that I will talk about the actions that we are taking, because they are important. We have spent £62 million to enhance care at home, £48 million to increase the pay of those who work in the social care sector, £40 million to support interim care arrangements and £20 million to enhance multidisciplinary teams. Two new programmes—the interface care programme and the discharge without delay programme—have been launched and are supported by a further £10 million.

We will continue to take action and make investments to get delayed discharge down in our national health service as we recover across society from the impact of the global pandemic.

Brexit (Shortage Occupations)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Borders Buses has had to restrict its timetables—an essential service in my rural constituency—because of a shortage of bus drivers following Brexit. The United Kingdom Government refuses to place bus drivers on its shortage occupation list, as the UK Migration Advisory Committee does not consider that the occupation meets the threshold. That is completely wrong. Does the First Minister agree?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Christine Grahame highlights an issue that is relevant to her local authority area, but it is sadly all too evident in other areas and industries. We are experiencing shortages of bus drivers and haulage drivers, as well as workers from many parts of the food and drink industry, the health service and social care.

As we warned, Scotland is paying the price for a Brexit that we did not vote for. Despite repeatedly asking for a formal role in determining in what occupations there is a shortage in the devolved nations, we have been denied that and so we have been unable to ensure that bus drivers are included on the shortage occupations list. I understand that the UK Government will review that list later in the year and we have asked for full involvement in that process.

We have also set up our own group, which includes the operators, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other public agencies to find ways of resolving such workforce issues. Those issues have been caused by Brexit. They are the fault of the Conservative Government and it is high time that it took action to address them.

College Lecturers (Strike)

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I have been contacted by many students who feel sick with worry because of the decision of their college lecturers to go on strike during the most critical phase of their studies, just before their final assessments and exams. With classes being suspended, students face the prospect of getting no feedback on assessments, they are unsure whether exams will go ahead as planned and they even face the prospect of taking exams without having completed their courses. It is clear to see that students are the real victims in this dispute.

What support is the Scottish Government prepared to offer students who have been left

hanging for the second year in a row as a result of the failure of management and unions to settle their dispute?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Colleges—as, I know, the member is aware—are independent institutions. It is for employers to negotiate pay and conditions with unions, and I would expect employers to get round the table with the college unions and come to an agreement that takes away the risk and the reality of strike action.

The Scottish Government will continue to work closely with all parties to ensure that there is a process that involves constructive conversations on both sides, but I say to colleges, which are the employers here, that they should ensure that they are engaging to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. We will continue to support students in every way that we can, but the best way in which we can support students is to ensure that employers get round the table with the unions and resolve the dispute.

Global Seafood Alliance (2024 Conference)

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In making a successful bid to host the Global Seafood Alliance conference in autumn 2024, Scotland has been selected to host a major international event, which will put a spotlight on the world-class and highly sought-after produce that comes from Scotland's seas and oceans. Last night, I had the pleasure of sponsoring an event in the Parliament to celebrate the tastes, sounds and culture of the island of Bute, including smoked trout and salmon.

Will the First Minister join me in congratulating Seafood Scotland on putting together the bid and wishing it well in showcasing some of the very best seafood available anywhere on the planet?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Jenni Minto for that question and take the opportunity to congratulate Seafood Scotland. Thanks to its work, the prestigious event to which she referred will be held in Scotland in 2024, which will be the first time that it has been held anywhere in the United Kingdom. It will be a global showcase for Scotland at its best.

The seafood sector has faced enormous challenges as a result of Brexit, and it is really heartening that our investment in delivering innovation, sustainability and quality has been recognised internationally. Our recent launch of the "Blue Economy Vision for Scotland" underpins our commitment to help producers to continue to deliver high-quality produce from clean, well-managed Scottish waters.

Scotland's hosting of the conference represents a great recognition of the dedication that our

seafood producers have demonstrated, and it will be a platform for Scotland to continue to shine globally. I hope that everyone in the chamber will join me in congratulating Seafood Scotland on such a success.

Police Scotland (Domestic Abuse Training)

3. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on whether Police Scotland's procedures and training for responding to cases of domestic abuse are sufficient. (S6F-01029)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The training and development of officers and the operational delivery of policing are matters for the chief constable. That said, I am assured that Police Scotland is committed to proactively targeting perpetrators and protecting victims and their families from the horrors of domestic abuse and the significant harm that it does.

To support implementation of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, the Scottish Government provided funding for the training of 14,000 police officers and staff, and the appointment of 700 domestic abuse champions to embed training and sustain organisational change. Officers in Scotland are therefore now more aware of and informed about the dynamics of domestic abuse.

Police Scotland is also undertaking divisional reviews of its policing response to domestic abuse across the country, and that process includes partnership and multi-agency engagement and working.

Pam Gosal: Today, Caroline Lyon, the mother of Louise Aitchison, who was murdered in 2020 by her boyfriend, who had convictions for abusing women, is here in Parliament. She is calling for a swift fatal accident inquiry, after Police Scotland admitted to 18 separate errors, which meant that her daughter was never notified of her partner's violent history.

Does the First Minister agree that the current system is simply not doing enough to keep victims safe, and that a measure such as a domestic abuse register is needed to ensure that any potential victim knows when they are at risk?

The First Minister: I take the opportunity to welcome Louise's mum to the chamber, although I am sure that she does not want to be here in these circumstances. I absolutely understand her desire for a fatal accident inquiry and for that fatal accident inquiry to be taken forward as quickly as possible.

It is the case—I know that members across the chamber understand this—that the Lord Advocate is constitutionally responsible for the investigation

of deaths in Scotland and conducts that responsibility independently of Government. Decisions on whether a fatal accident inquiry is held and the timing of the initiation of such an inquiry are also matters for the Lord Advocate. I will ensure that the detail of this exchange is brought to the attention of the Lord Advocate later today.

The other parts of the question are entirely reasonable. On the proposal for a domestic abuse offender register, we keep the law under continual review and are always open to exploring options to reduce crime, particularly crime of this nature. We will look carefully at the detail of any measure that is put forward and I know that the justice secretary would be happy to engage on that.

A domestic abuse disclosure scheme is already in place in Scotland. The purpose of that scheme is to allow people to make informed decisions about their situation when they may be at risk in a relationship. The scheme also allows Police Scotland to tell people that they may be at risk. That information can be given even if it has not been asked for.

Finally, I think that we always have to be open to improvements here. There is a real need for us to do everything possible to protect women and children in particular—because they are most often the victims of domestic abuse—as much as possible. The Government will remain open to any suggestions and proposals that are brought forward.

On this particular case, it is, of course, right that any issues are properly scrutinised in the course of the fatal accident inquiry process which is, as I said, a matter for the Lord Advocate.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege for me, as their regional MSP, to host Louise Aitchison's family in Parliament today, on what is the second anniversary of Louise's death. I thank them for giving all of us the opportunity to remember Louise, because she is the person who matters today. In life, Louise gave much love, care and service to others. This photograph—this is Louise. We should remember her. Saving other women's lives will be her legacy.

As Louise's family are in the gallery today—they look forward to meeting other MSPs after question time—will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to Louise's mother, Caroline Lyon, and to Marion Scott and *The Sunday Post*, for their work in securing the important fatal accident inquiry? The First Minister has recognised the importance of that work starting with urgent pace, so that lessons can be learned. Will she also confirm when domestic homicide reviews will be introduced?

The First Minister: I will return to the member with a specific answer on that latter point so that I give the right information.

I thank Monica Lennon for remembering Louise in the chamber in the way that she has. I pay tribute to Louise's family not only for being here today, but for raising the issues. I can only imagine how incredibly difficult it must be for any family that has been bereaved in such circumstances to do that, but doing it ensures that we can act to reduce the risk that other women will be subjected to domestic abuse and suffer as Louise did. Therefore, I want not only to pay tribute to them but to thank them for the courage and bravery that they are showing.

There are clearly questions about Louise's situation. We have heard those already in this exchange. That is why it is right that a fatal accident inquiry takes place. It is also right for me to say that the conduct of that must be allowed to be independent. I hope that it gives the family answers and comfort.

For my part, I will continue to ensure that the Government acts in all possible ways to do everything that we can to protect women from domestic abuse. I believe that the bravery and courage of Louise's family at such a sad time, and on such a sad day for them, will help with that. I did not know Louise, but I am sure not only that she was a wonderful young woman but that she would be very proud of her family today. [Applause.]

Climate Changemakers Report

4. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Climate Changemakers impact report from the Scottish Children's Parliament. (S6F-01042)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome the impact report. A fundamental part of Scotland's Climate Assembly process was the involvement of children. I am pleased that the impact report recognises the Government's work to ensure that children's voices are heard. We are committed to upholding children's rights, as is demonstrated, of course, by our approach to the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That inclusion of children reflects our commitment to empower children and to respect, protect and fulfil their rights.

In the impact report, children ask us to do more, and that is what we intend to do. At the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—I committed to on-going and meaningful engagement between the Scottish Government and children and young people, and I remain committed to that.

I am grateful for the children's hard work and for their creativity and commitment.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the First Minister for her answer and extend a warm welcome to all the young people in the gallery today.

More broadly, what role does the First Minister see organisations such as the Children's Parliament and the Scottish Youth Parliament playing in shaping future policy, particularly in areas such as addressing the climate emergency, in relation to which we see, time and again, the value of bringing younger generations into the conversation?

The First Minister: The Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children's Parliament do a fantastic job and have a key role to play. I hope that our annual Cabinet meeting with children and young people demonstrates the on-going commitment of the Government at the highest level to meaningfully engage with them on the issues that matter most to them.

Scottish Government core funding of more than £580,000 this financial year for the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children's Parliament will continue to support children and young people to participate in climate decision making.

The Scottish Youth Parliament's work at COP26 was very successful. It included partnership working with the Scottish Parliament and the Children's Parliament on the Moment. The work of young people as Scottish delegates to the conference of youth led to the public commitment that I gave to work with children and young people to tackle climate change going forward, and I want to reiterate that strong commitment today.

Glasgow Gender Specialist Clinic (Children's Referrals)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will investigate the reported increasing number of children being referred to the gender specialist clinic in Glasgow, in light of reports of a similar inquiry planned by the United Kingdom Government. (S6F-01022)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are aware that referrals to young people's gender identity services have increased in Scotland, as they have throughout the United Kingdom. The recent interim report of the Cass review of the services in the national health service in England highlighted the importance of robust data collection and the impact of long waiting times.

In Scotland, we have already recognised the need to improve services, including those for young people. That is why we plan to provide £9 million over three years to support improvement in

service delivery, data collection, research and support. We do not look to replicate the work of the Cass review, but, as we have previously said, we will carefully consider its findings in the context of NHS Scotland's services.

Meghan Gallacher: According to recent reports, 263 patients under the age of 18 are being treated at the Sandyford clinic in Glasgow, and almost 1,000, including 86 pre-pubescent children, are on the waiting list for their first appointment. At least 98 per cent of children who consent to take puberty blockers go on to have sex hormone treatment that can cause irreversible changes to their bodies. Those figures are alarming.

We must balance the need to help those who are definitely suffering from gender dysphoria with the need to protect vulnerable young people who are unsure of their identity and risk embarking on gender hormone treatment prematurely.

Will the First Minister commit to a similar inquiry to that which has been announced by the UK Government, to ensure that our children are safeguarded?

The First Minister: I think that safeguarding is important, but I think that it is also important that we understand and apply principles of safeguarding properly.

I hope that everyone recognises, as the Scottish Government does, that it is important and right that trans people or anyone who is questioning their gender identity should have access to the right support at the right time for them. One of the biggest issues in this area is that of the waiting times for access to NHS gender identity services, for adults as well as for young people. That is why we are making the investments that I referenced in my original answer.

It is also important to recognise that, in Scotland—as a matter of law under the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991, which predates the life of this Parliament—any person under 16 can consent to a medical procedure or treatment when the qualified medical practitioner attending them considers that they are

“capable of understanding the nature and possible consequences of the procedure or treatment.”

Rightly, any decision on the type of treatment to prescribe is for the clinician to make, in consultation with the patient, following an individual assessment.

On the issue of puberty blockers, it is also important to narrate that the Sandyford young people's services reported that, during the 11 years from 2011 to 2021, fewer than 100 young people in total—93—were referred for an appointment with a hormone specialist. That is an

average of eight per year. The number of young people who were prescribed hormones was even smaller than that.

We must take these issues seriously, but we owe it to everybody also to treat these issues incredibly sensitively and, in doing so, to have at the heart of it the rights of all young people to get the advice that they need at the time that is right for them.

Women Standing for Elected Office

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

To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government can take to encourage more women to stand for elected office. (S6F-01044)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is important to record the good news that the Parliament now has a record number of women MSPs, although the proportion who are women is not yet at 50 per cent. We should aspire to all our Parliaments having representation at national and local levels that properly represents the society that we live in.

There is no doubt that women in society, including those in public life, continue to face unacceptable levels of sexist and misogynistic behaviour. That can—and does, I believe—put many women off standing for elected office. It harms democracy; it harms all of us; and it is completely unacceptable. Those things need to change. To change them, we need men to end their sexist and misogynistic behaviour and to be much more aware of their actions and words and of the impact of them.

The Scottish Government funds projects to support and equip women to stand for elected office. That includes Engender's equal representation project to help political parties to increase their diversity, and the young women lead programme and Elect Her, which empower women to stand for elected office.

Collette Stevenson: The comments that were directed at Angela Rayner, as reported at the weekend, were deeply sexist and misogynistic. Women face misogyny not just in elected office but in everyday life. Will the First Minister outline what work is under way to eliminate prejudice and misogyny in Scotland, and will she join me in condemning the comments that were made towards Angela Rayner? [*Applause.*]

The First Minister: Yes. I am glad to hear the support from across the chamber for Angela Rayner. I certainly stand in solidarity with her and condemn unreservedly the comments that were reported on Sunday. Like everybody else—or most other people—I was absolutely appalled both by the male Conservative MP who thought that it was okay to make those pathetic and derogatory

comments and by the fact that we still live in a society in which it is deemed acceptable for such a story to be published in a major newspaper. A lot of reflection is needed on both of those points.

Unfortunately, I am all too familiar with—in my case—the *Daily Mail's* tactics of attempting to reduce women politicians to their legs. To the best of my knowledge, such tactics are never used to dismiss and degrade male politicians in the way that that happens to female politicians.

Sadly and depressingly, the story highlighted what women already know and what many women already experience daily, which is deep-seated sexism and misogyny in society. That needs to be addressed.

We will continue to take the actions that I set out in my earlier answer, but I am also pleased that in our response to the work of Baroness Kennedy's misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland working group, we committed to consult on draft legislation in advance of introducing a bill to specifically tackle misogyny.

This is something for all of us—but for men, in particular—to reflect on. We will rue the day that we make it more difficult and less attractive for women to come forward for election to public office. It is time to draw a line in the sand, and it is time for men—not all men are misogynists, but misogyny comes from men—to change.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business.

Global Intergenerational Week 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-04039, in the name of Jackie Dunbar, on global intergenerational week 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that Global Intergenerational Week runs from 25 April until 1 May 2022; understands that the campaign originally started at a local level, before growing to a national level event and is now going global for its third year; further understands that the aim for the week is to inspire individuals, groups, organisations, local and national government as well as non-government organisations to fully embrace Intergenerational Week, which, it believes, will help connect people of all ages, particularly the younger and older generations; understands that in 2022, eight countries will participate, including Ireland, America, Australia, Mexico, Spain, Canada, Sweden and the UK, with a different theme set for each day of the week; notes that over 80 organisations have signed up to support the week, while also attracting the attention of international partners; understands that intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities, which, it believes, promotes greater understanding and respect between generations and helps to contribute to building more cohesive communities; understands that Generations Working Together is working in partnership with organisations from across the UK; further understands that Generations Working Together is a nationally recognised centre of excellence, which supports the development and integration of intergenerational work across Scotland, and understands that the vision of the charity is for a country where all generations are more connected and everyone can build relationships, which it believes, will help to create a fairer society.

12:51

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank colleagues across the chamber for their cross-party support, and I thank in advance the folk who are taking part in the debate. I also thank Kate Samuels from Generations Working Together for the help that she has provided to me.

Intergenerational week first took place in 2020 as a local campaign by St Monica Trust. Following its success, it grew into a national campaign in 2021 before it became the global campaign that it has become this year.

The campaign is led by Generations Working Together, which is an intergenerational charity that is based in Scotland. It has gone truly global, with eight countries, including America, Spain, Australia and Sweden, joining in. They have worked alongside partners from every nation in the

United Kingdom—Linking Generations Northern Ireland, the Beth Johnson Foundation in England, and the bridging the generations project in Wales. It is understood that each country will lead on a programme of events, with intergenerational interactions and social media co-ordination throughout the week. That will show the activities of each country that is participating in global intergenerational week across the globe. I hope that that will help to inspire other countries to become involved in future years.

To date, more than 150 organisations have registered their support for global intergenerational week. In looking through the list of organisations, I was delighted to see that my local authority—Aberdeen City Council, whose area Aberdeen Donside lies within—has registered its support, but I was surprised to see that, out of all our local authorities, Aberdeen City Council and Perth and Kinross Council are the only ones to have registered their support. I say to the local authorities: “Come on—you can do better.”

It is through intergenerational practice that younger and older generations are able to come together and learn from each other. One example of intergenerational practice could be the older generation in local communities helping to teach younger generations how to cook. We, as adults, sometimes take that skill for granted. Teaching young folk how to cook is often learned from the older generations in families and passed down. I know that my grunny's baking was second to none and that how to do things was passed down to her children and then to her grandchildren. I swear that I can still taste her apple crumble when I put my mind to it.

However, not everyone has family nearby to pass on such skills. It does not have to be just cooking skills. Sharing skills can help both generations—the young and the not-so-young.

Intergenerational practice is one way in which we can help to fight an increase in loneliness in our communities. It is estimated that around 500,000 older people go five or even sometimes six days a week without speaking to or seeing anyone at all. The number of people over the age of 50 experiencing loneliness is set to reach 2 million by 2025-26, which is a 49 per cent increase on the figures in 2016-17. I am sure that we are all agreed that that needs to change.

I note from the Scottish Government's 2018 strategy “A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections” that

“the role of the Scottish Government in reducing social isolation and loneliness is to foster the right environment and create the conditions for people and communities to design and deliver the solutions that best meet their needs.”

That shows that it is vital that, if Scotland as a country is to continue to aspire to be inclusive in all areas of life, we need to ensure that all generations in our society communicate with one another and that no one is isolated or feels left out of the communities in which they live. I am pleased that the Government is committed to tackling loneliness and isolation across all generations in Scotland. We must not leave anybody behind.

The vision of Generations Working Together is for a Scotland where different generations are more connected and everyone can build relationships that help to create a fairer society. Generations Working Together promotes intergenerational projects, because the charity is dedicated to promoting intergenerational work. It trains, supports and links projects.

Generations Working Together is a national charity and a centre of excellence in intergenerational training that delivers training to communities, charities and individuals, in person and online. It is working in partnership with Linking Generations Northern Ireland, the Beth Johnson Foundation in England and the bridging the generations scheme in Wales to deliver global intergenerational week across each of the devolved nations and should be applauded for the work that it is doing to help raise awareness of intergenerational practice and share good practice.

It is crucial that no one in any community in Scotland feels isolated or lonely. The fantastic work that Generations Working Together is doing across Scotland will help to ensure that Scotland becomes a nation where the generations seamlessly work in collaboration. The incredible work that the charity does will help to ensure that folk who feel isolated or lonely are aware of the opportunities available to them in their local communities and can access such opportunities.

I strongly encourage all members to encourage intergenerational practice across their constituencies and regions and to raise further awareness of global intergenerational week in the areas of Scotland that they represent. It is important that we have a Scotland where individuals and communities are more connected and that everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, status, circumstances or identity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give another gentle reminder to members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

12:58

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I thank my colleague Jackie Dunbar for bringing this important topic to the chamber for debate and highlighting the excellent work of the charity Generations Working Together.

We can all agree that the past two years have been challenging. It is important that we recognise the challenges of isolation and loneliness presented by the pandemic for all generations and the negative impact on some opportunities for intergenerational working.

I always enjoy hearing examples of the intergenerational associations that have been created across Scotland and am delighted to have the opportunity to highlight the inspiring work that has taken place across my constituency of Cunninghame South in North Ayrshire. Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus, a number of special relationships were developed between primary schools and older-generation groups. St Mark's primary school and early years class visited Vennel Gardens. Stanecastle primary school allied with the Burns day-care centre.

Special recognition has to go to St Winning's primary school in Kilwinning for its stellar efforts at community intergenerational developments. St Winning's primary worked hard to develop a number of intergenerational opportunities with groups such as Chalybeate sheltered housing, Buckreddan Care Centre and the St Winning's over-60s club. Working with Lingo Flamingo, the young people helped older residents to learn Spanish words, which were later tested while playing fun games of Spanish bingo. At Christmas, the young people performed a selection of songs and carols for the St Winning's over-60s club and encouraged its members to get involved.

As a result of the incredible benefits that both groups felt through intergenerational working, people from Woodland View dementia unit, based at Ayrshire Central hospital in Irvine, had a day visit to St Winning's primary school for a range of activities, including a roast beef lunch with other members of the community and a Christmas assembly. The day visit involved pupils in primaries 5 to 7 being assigned a Woodland View patient, and they spent their time giving them a tour of the school and having a meal with them.

The older folk enjoyed sharing stories and gaining an insight into present school life, which was fun for the young people and helped them to develop essential life skills. The rich and diverse intergenerational projects at St Winning's underline the mutual benefits to both the younger and older generations and the extent to which that enhances their health and wellbeing.

Sadly, as we all know, the pandemic resulted in some face-to-face interactions being paused. In the midst of adversity, the people of North Ayrshire found other ways to contact the older and sometimes isolated residents of care homes, to make them smile and let them know that someone was thinking of them.

We saw Artastic CIC's pots of talent project in Kilwinning providing schoolchildren with pots and paint, so that they could design a colourful reminder for those who were alone in lockdown that they were not forgotten. The Co-op's community member pioneer for Irvine and Dreghorn developed the sunshine through your letterbox campaign to help those in local care and nursing homes during self-isolation. Those campaigns involved hundreds of local children sending care homes some sunshine in the post through daily drawings, poems and uplifting messages.

The activities co-ordinator at Three Towns care home in Stevenston noted:

"The residents really enjoy looking at the pictures. It definitely cheers them up and lifts their spirits."

She planned to print out the drawings to put up around the care home, as the residents really enjoyed looking at them.

Those simple remarks, and the other examples that we are setting out today, speak volumes about the mutual value and happiness of intergenerational friendship and collaboration. As our life returns to more of a normality, I am happy to echo Jackie Dunbar's call to inspire and reconnect people of all ages, who have so much to gain from one another, in Scotland and around the world, in starting or restarting intergenerational connections.

13:03

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I thank and pay tribute to Jackie Dunbar for securing the debate. As my party's equalities and older persons spokesperson, I am pleased to take part.

As we know, this year's global intergenerational week runs from 25 April to 1 May. From its humble beginnings, the event has grown and acquired international status in a very short space of time—in just over three years. I am particularly enthused that the event in Scotland this year has been broken down by Generations Working Together into specific daily themes. The themes provide insights and opportunities to plan for the future by developing new ways to explore and discover the myriad of resources that are available across generations. It is highly encouraging to see many organisations and groups such as the Forth Valley intergenerational network, in my region, all pulling

together for what is a highly important common goal.

The development and celebration of relationships between generations is exceptionally relevant and has never been more important as we emerge from the pandemic. It will help to rebuild communities, with young people catching up with their learning as we tackle and reduce ageism.

In many communities across my region and Scotland, isolation and loneliness increased as a result of the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, as has been mentioned. I have concerns about how that is being tackled. We need to look at ways to ensure that communities and individuals can come through that. There are many stereotypes when we consider what has been happening during the lockdowns, but younger and older people alike have difficulties with isolation and loneliness.

Many residents have access to electronic devices, the internet and social platforms, but those are no substitute for the face-to-face interaction that many individuals require. Moreover, it is widely accepted that loneliness and isolation have a similar impact on mortality as that of smoking around 15 cigarettes a day. That is just one reason why intergenerational connection should be encouraged across our communities so that our neighbours, friends and colleagues can get together to interact and fight loneliness and isolation together.

As I have said, ageism can be a major blight to communities. It has serious consequences and detrimental effects on individual self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing. It is important that we consider that age is just a number and that we have more in common with other generations than we think. Sadly, ageism persists in Scotland, although there are many efforts to tackle it, which I welcome.

Ageism, loneliness and isolation impact health, wellbeing, finances and the economy and present serious consequences for individuals' human rights. Age Scotland's recent survey provided a wide range of information, and showed that only 7 per cent of respondents agreed that older people were represented positively, especially in the media. A massive 51 per cent of over-50s said that older people were not valued for their contribution to society, while 36 per cent believed that they were made to feel a burden on society. We must tackle those issues. I look forward to hearing what the minister says on that when she sums up.

It is especially important that we educate and encourage people of all generations to interact with one another as far as humanly possible. That

is why I whole-heartedly encourage initiatives such as global intergenerational week and support it in the chamber. I wish everyone involved in the initiative the best in their endeavours to ensure that we can work together to benefit everyone in our communities, regardless of their age and responsibilities.

13:07

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Jackie Dunbar on securing the debate. She has highlighted the global, Scottish and wider United Kingdom intergenerational work. Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities that promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contribute to building more cohesive communities. It is right that we are marking and supporting global intergenerational week.

Due to changing demographics and greater mobility within families, generations are becoming increasingly isolated from each other. Both younger and older groups can become victims of stereotyping and discrimination. For example, we have all heard blanket statements such as, "Older people can't do social media." However, when generations work together, they realise that those generalisations are inaccurate.

Many younger adults do not have the immediate support of their families for everyday discussions, and older people may no longer have easy access to family when they need support as they age. Both groups have commonalities that, often, neither side sees. When children encounter new concepts through interaction with others, those concepts and ideas are incorporated into their understanding. That works between generations, too. For young people, intergenerational working improves academic performance, and older adults can learn about new information and technologies. In general, the breadth and depth of learning improves for everyone. Culture, values and traditions can also be passed on. Hearing Jackie Dunbar describe her grunni's bacon rolls is one of those examples.

Each generation learns about the other and gains a better understanding of strengths, fears and weaknesses. Each generation has resources that are of value to the other and shared areas of concern; that aids with providing a sense of empowerment.

A study by Professor Duncan Graham of the University of Strathclyde reaffirmed the benefits of intergenerational working. The study found that it recreates the links between generations and makes it possible to promote intergenerational

understanding and respect. It can contribute to the development of individual competencies for a more inclusive society, and fostering intergenerational dialogue encourages collaboration. Generations will learn from each other, as has been mentioned already.

Intergenerational exchange significantly fosters solidarity, active citizenship and personal development, and can strengthen teaching quality. The benefits are many and should be built on and supported.

A local example is Loreburn Housing Association, which is doing fantastic work to promote intergenerational working. In Stranraer, at the former Garrick hospital site, eight one-bed and four two-bed extra-care dementia-friendly homes are being built, alongside a youth foyer, which is an employment hub offering supported accommodation for up to 12 young people. Youth foyers, which are recognised as international best practice, provide safe and secure housing, support and training for young people aged 16 to 25. The Stranraer development will be the first for Dumfries and Galloway, and only the second foyer in Scotland. Young people living at the foyer will be in education or training, an apprenticeship or employment, and will have access to volunteering opportunities within the community. It is a promising project and I look forward to it progressing. I invite the minister to come and visit the project when her diary allows.

Another local example is Malory house nursery and day care in Dumfries, led by Kenny Little. The nursery kids have interacted with older people in Cumberland day centre. They started doing that before the pandemic, and I understand that the nursery will restart the programme as soon as the weans and everybody can get back together again. The feedback has been so positive and all have enjoyed and benefited from the intergenerational experience between the children at Malory house nursery and day care and the older people at Cumberland day centre.

Again, I thank Jackie Dunbar for securing the debate. I welcome all the work that is being done globally, locally and across the United Kingdom, and I look forward to following it in the future.

13:12

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Jackie Dunbar for bringing the debate to the chamber. As someone who can still smell his Irish granny's soda bread, I associate myself with Jackie Dunbar's comments. I think that I am making everyone in the chamber hungry for their lunch.

I am extremely pleased to stand in support of global intergenerational week 2022, a campaign

that, as we have heard, stresses the value of all of our generations in society, and a campaign that highlights the benefits of learning from and supporting one another—a measure that is integral to strengthening our communities and tackling social isolation.

Since the start of the pandemic, public health messaging has emphasised the importance of social distancing, but for hundreds of thousands of Scots who live alone and rely on community social support, a secondary, quieter public health crisis has surfaced, and that is loneliness.

We know that loneliness is a public health crisis, as it significantly increases the risk of stress, anxiety and depression, and it doubles the risk of dementia. In fact, as we have heard from colleagues already, long-term loneliness is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Although loneliness can occur at any and all stages of life, most triggers tend to congregate in later life due to factors such as retiring from work, being bereaved, experiencing illness and children moving away from home.

During the pandemic, the effects of social isolation were often felt most acutely by our older generation, many of whom fell into high-risk brackets and, as such, were forced to not only isolate but shield completely. For the rest, as a result of Covid regulations more generally, most mechanisms of social support, such as in-person community groups, were closed.

In common with colleagues across the chamber, during the lockdown period, I saw generations coming together in a way that perhaps I had not in the past. That could have been something as simple as young neighbours looking in on their older neighbours, to make sure that they had their shopping in or had their prescription picked up. There was a real willingness to go across the garden gate and have a conversation with someone, perhaps in a way that had not happened before.

There were also formal examples of that in my West Scotland region, in Renfrewshire. The intergenerational project and creative writing programme poetic pathways worked with older adults living independently in sheltered housing and young people from schools to provide an outlet for both generations to exchange their feelings and experiences during the lockdown. Pupils at local schools periodically wrote letters and cards, facilitating connections between the generations at a time when many were shielding and had experienced little or no social interactions. That had the effect of breaking down the stigmas that are often attached to both older and younger people, and it created instead a sense of partnership between generations through which

life experiences could be exchanged and commonalities shared.

That project has moved on further, and poetic pathways has now created an interactive poetic walk down national cycle network route 7 in Renfrewshire, which runs from Paisley through Johnstone. Two schools that were involved in that, Glencoats primary school in Paisley and Fordbank primary school in Johnstone, are very proud of the work that they have done along with sheltered housing residents to put poetry onto that path for everyone to read. They won an award from Generations Working Together for their use of place and space, which absolutely has to be celebrated.

The third sector and voluntary organisations continue to work tirelessly to combat loneliness. In the Parliament, we all know that we need to do more to provide sustainable funding and support for those organisations. Undoubtedly, age-based discrimination and loneliness will often result from wider pressures in our society, not least within our health service.

Global intergenerational week is about having important conversations about recognising the value of every generation in Scotland and taking a next step towards continuing to reconnect our generations post Covid-19.

13:16

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my friend and colleague Jackie Dunbar on introducing the debate in recognition of global intergenerational week. I commend the contributions so far, which have reflected just how much we can all relate to intergenerational week. It certainly resonated with me.

Inspiring individuals, groups and organisations to connect younger and older generations makes complete sense, especially given that tackling loneliness and isolation is an increasing policy concern for Government. As was articulated during the launch of this year's campaign, it offers the chance to change the narrative from connection being just a nice thing to do to being essential practice.

Why? The improvements in older adults' mental and physical wellbeing and the impact on conditions such as depression, dementia and, of course, loneliness are well documented. It also improves strength, leads to eating and sleeping better and to sharing stories, and tackles stigma, which are all significant health and wellbeing benefits for older people.

Although it is easy to assume that loneliness and isolation impact only older people, as Lee

Knifton from the Mental Health Foundation Scotland reminded us, the

“elephant in the room is the ... number of young people ... who struggle to form relationships at a young age”.

Intergenerational practice has many benefits for children and young people, including shared thinking, stronger social skills, the development of empathy and kindness, and learning about local history.

Like many of my peers in the sandwich generation, I care for my parents and my own family at the same time. That is sometimes demanding, but it is an opportunity to build a strong intergenerational dynamic between my son and his grandpa. It was organic and natural for my son to visit his grandpa—my father—when he was in residential care and to take him for a walk to the nearby beach, help to set up the annual summer care home barbecue or just talk with residents in the common room about his school trip to the battlefields in France and Belgium. That was a wonderful opportunity for the residents to reminisce about their own lives and experiences. Importantly, it enabled them to acknowledge their own past, rather than have it be just a photograph on their bedside table or a memory kept but never really shared.

My constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine is home to some fantastic groups and organisations that support intergenerational connections. My friends at Portlethen and District Men’s Shed never fail to amaze me with their sense of brotherhood towards not only each other, but those in their village and beyond. Recently, they prototyped and delivered a tinkering board, or busy board, for the local primary school to support younger pupils to tinker, learn and explore while developing their sensory practice.

I invite the minister to visit the Portlethen men’s shed after she has been to my colleague Emma Harper’s constituency. If she wants to drop in at the Old Torry Community Centre just along from my office any Thursday morning, she will find a fabulous group of physiotherapy students from Robert Gordon University who are running a community physio drop-in, offering older folks in particular the chance to chat about their aches and pains, do some exercises or just have a cup of tea and a blether. At the same time, the students are developing their clinical skills in a real-world environment—a living example of intergenerational practice.

At this point, I acknowledge Generations Working Together in Scotland and its Welsh partner, the Bridging the Generations initiative; Linking Generations Northern Ireland; and the Beth Johnson Foundation in England. I also acknowledge the work of the many charities and

third sector and voluntary groups and organisations that are all working to support intergenerational practice. Many of them are supported by the £10 million commitment that the Scottish Government announced last year to support a five-year social isolation and loneliness plan. That will be a pivotal part of our national response as we face the challenges arising from the awfulness of the pandemic.

I wish everyone who is supporting and participating in intergenerational week well, and I look forward to hearing more about the work that they will be taking forward, both in Scotland and beyond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I warn the minister that Dumfries and Galloway is not really on the way to Aberdeenshire, but I am sure that she will have worked that out. [*Laughter.*]

13:21

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Jackie Dunbar for lodging her motion and for securing the debate. I am delighted to share in the welcome for global intergenerational week and the appreciation of the work of those behind it. It is essential for both individual and community wellbeing that we develop and celebrate relationships between generations and that, together, we work to combat loneliness; create inclusive spaces and shared stories; and build solidarity and overcome barriers to its expression. Intergenerational practice, care and learning are indispensable parts of that important work.

However, we need to acknowledge that some of the barriers between generations are structural and have been constructed by decades of deliberate policy and shameful inaction. For the first three quarters of the 20th century, there was an assumption that each generation of children would have better life experiences than their parents: they would be better housed, fed and educated; they would have higher-paid and more rewarding jobs; and they would live longer, healthier and happier lives.

That is no longer the case. Young people—not only the very young—are disproportionately burdened by massive levels of student debt and other debt; by precarious work, including zero-hour contracts; by career pathways being blocked, except to the highly privileged; by insecure, unhealthy and exploitative private sector tenancies; and by overburdened and inaccessible healthcare, especially in relation to mental health.

Just this week, LGBT Youth Scotland launched a new report that showed a huge drop in the percentage of young people who believe that Scotland is a good place in which to be LGBTI,

from 81 per cent 15 years ago to only 65 per cent now. That statistic is shocking and sobering, as are the findings that 69 per cent of young people identify transphobia as

“a big problem in Scotland”

and that 81 per cent say that media representation of LGBTI people “is not accurate”. Those are scandals for which their generation is not to blame.

I am proud that, as Scottish Greens, we have recognised that deep and broad intergenerational injustice and are addressing those issues head on. I urge others at all levels—the Government, Parliament and councils—to do the same. Much more must be done, especially by the generations that have benefited from the 20th century welfare state, to repair that legacy for those who follow.

Meanwhile, our younger generations, including the tiniest children, bear yet more, and even heavier, burdens in the form of the climate and biodiversity crises. The simplest and most fundamental foundations of our everyday lives—predictable seasons, rainfall, harvests, healthy soil, pollination and peace itself—are all diminishing as we watch and debate, are distracted and procrastinate. The righteous and accurate anger of Greta Thunberg, Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti and Carlos Manuel is—if it is noticed at all—met with condescension and contempt or with useless sentimentality.

Those two ways of responding to the voices of the young are, in reality, mirror images of each other. We either ignore what they are telling us, dismissing their experience and their analysis with cheap jibes and patronising pats on the head, or we sanctify them, taking their evidence and argument out of the realm of political action altogether. We might say, “These young people are so clever. They’ll fix it in the future.” It is not their job to fix things, and the time to act is not in the future.

I again welcome the initiative, and I wholeheartedly support the development and celebration of intergenerational relationships. However, those relationships must take place in political, institutional and structural contexts, not just in personal and social contexts. We need to develop a truly participatory politics that is shaped as much by the young as by older people and that has the honesty to name injustices and the courage to act on them.

13:26

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I, too, thank Jackie Dunbar for securing the debate. It has been great to listen to

what everyone has had to say. I will try to keep my comments quite light.

Global intergenerational week provides an opportunity to strengthen intergenerational bonds, communities and our response to major challenges in an uncertain world and to share knowledge and joy.

During the Covid pandemic, there have been examples of intergenerational connections that have literally saved lives. However, the pandemic has also highlighted the terrible toll of isolation like never before.

For decades, policies and practices have segregated younger and older people, which has resulted in a cascade of problems from ageism to loneliness and fragmented movements for social change. Scotland must strive for a future in which different generations are much more connected, with people working together to build relationships that help to create a fairer society.

The elderly can be vulnerable in our society, and, if we are honest about it, we can be guilty of taking them for granted. That can lead to solitude and confusion, and it can foster a general feeling of alienation in a community. However, by playing and reading with children, the elderly are less likely to suffer from loneliness, and our children thrive in those opportunities for one-to-one reading and playtime.

In Sweden, it is popular to twin nurseries with care homes. That not only boosts children’s literacy skills but improves the health of the elderly. In France, initiatives enable students and seniors to live together, which provides students with cheap accommodation in exchange for helping out.

Every generation wins when age-diverse programmes help to solve the unique problems that older and younger people face today, by creating new ways of addressing everything from homelessness to climate change. Let us forge ahead with innovative, joined-up policy thinking in Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar was the first to mention Generations Working Together. The Connecting Scotland initiative aims to boost confidence in digital technology. That is an exciting and sensible approach to fostering an intergenerational community, and we should support it wholeheartedly. The initiative is not just about digital skills. Indeed, at the heart of all such initiatives are the objectives of spending more time together, understanding one another better and appreciating the beliefs, values, achievements and potential of the generations that have come before and after us.

Inspiration is at the heart of weeks such as global intergenerational week, and I have seen at first hand the positive impact of intergenerational action in my Uddingston and Bellshill constituency. I take this opportunity to champion Jim Cuthbertson, an inspirational local man whom I am proud to call my friend. Too often, important work in the community can go unnoticed, and community leaders such as Jim are typically pretty humble.

Jim, who is based in Whitehill, has adopted a street—it is more like a housing scheme, actually. He visits more than 60 elderly isolated residents. He drops off shopping and prescriptions, goes round for a chat and a cuppa, offers companionship and generally goes out of his way to improve the lives of those round about him. Sometimes, Jim brings with him his grandson or other young people who have shown an interest in helping. That builds relationships that benefit both young and old.

Jim benefits from the joy that the wee chats bring him, too. He loves hearing all the stories of bygone times. I am sure that he will not mind me saying—at least, I hope that he does not—that he could talk the hind legs off a donkey, but he is putting that to the best use possible. He is a fantastic example of the power of everyday people coming together.

On the societal challenges that we face, it is often said that older people are less informed about climate change. I would argue that that is because they have limited opportunities to connect with younger generations, who see climate change as the greatest threat to their future. Equally, it is often said that younger people take many of today's civil rights and workers' rights for granted. I would argue that that is because there are not enough forums to hear from those who fought for union recognition and social justice.

With so many of our fundamental rights under attack, we must bring our generations together. Decision making needs to be global and intergenerational, because that empowers communities and empowers our society.

13:30

The Minister for Equalities and Older People (Christina McKelvie): I am absolutely delighted to close this debate on global intergenerational week 2022, which, as we have heard, runs until 1 May. I thank colleagues from across the chamber for a wonderful debate, and I thank Jackie Dunbar for lodging her motion. My grateful thanks go to all members for their contributions.

Many of today's speeches have included excellent examples of intergenerational projects—I have made a wee list of them, which I will come to

in a minute. If I miss anybody out, please forgive me. It is important that, as a Parliament, we come together to support and celebrate this global event, which is organised by the wonderful Generations Working Together, a nationally recognised centre of excellence that supports the development and integration of intergenerational work across Scotland.

This is the first year that the event has gone global. More than 150 organisations from around the world have supported it, and it is great to see generations working together, with Scotland at the forefront of intergenerational practice at the international level.

The Government is clear that intergenerational practice can promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contribute to building more cohesive and fairer communities. That is why we work closely with a wide range of partners across the age equality spectrum, including Generations Working Together, which is a valued member of the older people's strategic action forum and our social isolation and loneliness advisory group. I recognise the contribution that it makes there.

I echo Jackie Dunbar's call for our local authorities to support intergenerational work. We all stand ready to support that, and we might get a wee taste of Jackie Dunbar's granny's apple crumble or Paul O'Kane's granny's soda bread—that would be lovely.

In order to facilitate that work, we have provided £600,000 to Generations Working Together, through the equality and human rights fund, to support its valuable work up to 2024. We also supported Generations Working Together during Covid by providing £58,000 from the immediate priorities fund and £76,000 from the winter fund for digital resources for faith groups and care homes. That included individual radios for care home residents—a simple thing that made a huge difference.

I am delighted that, tomorrow, Generations Working Together will launch a toolkit to support practitioners in developing intergenerational relationships through play and stories. The toolkit is a legacy from some pilot events from our get into summer play programme for 2021. Generations Working Together and Play Scotland were supported through Scottish Government funding to pilot intergenerational play and story projects, which I heard were absolutely wonderful. The toolkit will support understanding of how to develop such projects and build confidence in practitioners. I hope that that is a clear example for members who said that we need to learn lessons from everything that we do in order to develop great tools. Emma Harper and Audrey Nicoll, in particular, called for that.

We already know that, when generations mix together as equal partners, wonderful things can happen. I have certainly seen that for myself, and we have heard about some amazing examples today, whether it was Ruth Maguire's lingo bingo, Emma Harper's foyer visit—yes, I will come for a visit in Dumfries and Galloway—Paul O'Kane's fantastic writing pathways project or Audrey Nicoll's Portlethen men's shed. I will visit there, too—I have a higher in geography, Presiding Officer, so I understand that it will take two trips to cover both of those, but thank you for your advice.

I pay tribute, as Stephanie Callaghan did, to Jim Cuthbertson, who is an absolute legend in Hamilton. It was great to hear about his work. I hope that she will welcome the fact that it is about not only funding and supporting those wonderful examples but building intergenerational practice into our futures.

A great practical example of that is the new collaborative intergenerational housing development in Alloa, which involves Architecture and Design Scotland, Clackmannanshire Council, the Scottish Government and Kingdom Housing Association. The development will provide 60 apartments in the town centre, close to essential amenities, and its key features will include dementia-friendly elements and mobility scooter charging points. That is a practical example of how we can build intergenerational practice into our future.

For older people, in particular, intergenerational practice can, as we have heard, alleviate loneliness, encourage participation and increase mobility and happiness. I hope that that reassures Jackie Dunbar that tackling loneliness and social isolation is a key priority for the Scottish Government.

Alexander Stewart made some incredibly important points on social isolation and ageism, and we are doing a lot of work in that area. The same is true of Connecting Scotland, and members should have a wee look at what Outside the Box is doing with digital buddies. I am happy to speak to Alexander Stewart about that in detail if he wishes, because there is so much more to say but no time to do so in this debate.

In the programme for government, we committed to investing £10 million in projects that focus on reducing social isolation and loneliness, and I hope that Paul O'Kane and Audrey Nicoll will be happy to know that the fund will open for bids later this year. I look forward to seeing what innovative approaches to this pernicious social problem result from that substantial investment. We are very excited about that.

As Ruth Maguire reminded us, we are living in very different times from when the issue was

previously debated. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected us all—young and old alike. Not one person remains unaffected by the pandemic, which has forced us to change how we work and connect, but, my goodness, we have done so much to create those connections during the pandemic, and we need to learn how to sustain them. During the early months of the pandemic, we provided funding to do that, and I am happy to give more detail on that if members want it.

Maggie Chapman and Stephanie Callaghan reminded us of historical wrongs and modern-day challenges. Intergenerational good practice that builds positive relationships and dismantles negative attitudes towards older people or younger people has an important contribution to make in rebuilding our communities. There is so much more that I could have brought to the debate—including our human rights work, the equality and human rights fund and our work on the disability equality strategy—but I am quickly running out of time, and everybody is probably desperate for their lunch.

Global intergenerational week provides us with an opportunity to reinforce the connections that we know are needed to build a stronger and fairer society. We have come a long way towards a more inclusive and equal Scotland, where everyone can play their part in shaping their community, but there is more to do. I am sure that everyone in the chamber will play their part and seek to listen and learn from the wisdom of those of all ages as they do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:38

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is rural affairs and islands. As ever, if any member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function during the relevant question. I make the usual plea for succinct questions and answers whenever possible.

Animals Abroad Bill

1. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is regarding the impact on Scotland of recent reports that the United Kingdom Government's Animals Abroad Bill is no longer likely to be introduced. (S6O-01006)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government is deeply concerned to hear of reports that the proposed Animals Abroad Bill might not be introduced.

In principle, Scottish ministers are supportive of proposals in the bill, which, if introduced, will address important animal welfare and conservation issues simultaneously across UK Administrations—subject, of course, to the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament in areas of devolved competence.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice, on 11 April 2022 to express my concerns and to request information on the current intentions in respect of the bill. I am currently waiting on a response from him.

David Torrance: The bill was supposed to include bans on the trade in hunting trophies that threaten the conservation status of species abroad and on the domestic sale and advertising of experiences overseas that are cruel to animals, such as elephant rides.

Will the cabinet secretary join me in expressing revulsion at the practice of trophy hunting and other practices that perpetrate animal cruelty? Does she agree that the weekend pursuits of a handful of Tory peers should not decide the approach to the rights and welfare of animals?

Mairi Gougeon: I join the member in condemning some of the objectionable practices that the bill so importantly seeks to address. The

Scottish Government is absolutely committed to the highest possible standards of animal welfare. In our programme for government, we promised to work alongside UK Administrations on legislation to control the import and sale of products that raise ethical concerns. The bill would have brought in the necessary requirements simultaneously across the UK to address those conservation and animal welfare concerns. The UK Government even tabled those proposals as demonstrating UK leadership at an international level. However, it has sadly failed to deliver those important safeguards and has not only let down the people of Scotland but failed to prioritise the welfare of animals in this country as well as abroad.

Livestock Registration Agency

2. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on establishing a Scottish agency to create a fully functional, all-species data system for the registration of all livestock births, deaths and movements within Scotland. (S6O-01007)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The final element of the Scottish multispecies database system for the recording of cattle births, deaths and movements went live on 4 October 2021. The system was built and is operated by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society under the name of ScotEID. I would like to acknowledge and thank the cattle sector as a whole for its support during the development of that service.

Since the go-live date, 10,000 keepers have signed up for the ScotMoves+ platform and have electronically registered more than 282,000 calves, recorded 914,000 cattle movements, and notified more than 477,000 deaths at abattoirs.

Those figures highlight an important achievement in the delivery of improved traceability for disease prevention and control, as well as opportunities for enhancing efficiency and provenance in the livestock sector.

Gordon MacDonald: Given the importance of traceability and provenance to food safety, what difference will the agency make and what advantages does it offer farmers and crofters?

Mairi Gougeon: In addition to the enhanced livestock traceability and protection of the food chain, the ScotEID system provides benefits to Scottish cattle keepers, such as the bovine viral diarrhoea eradication programme, the ScotMoves+ system for within business movement recording, and the Scotch potential eligibility cattle checker, which provides evidence that animals have been born, raised and slaughtered in Scotland.

The system will enable the introduction of the electronic identification of cattle, the creation of an online holding register and the removal of cattle passports. Electronic identification, combined with the ScotEID systems, will enable real-time data transfer and sharing through the production chain from farm to farm, as well as feedback from abattoir to farm. All those components are key to improving economic and environmental efficiency in the livestock sector, and they will support trade within and outwith the United Kingdom.

Food and Drink Supply Chain

3. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it takes to support the food and drink supply chain in order to increase the percentage of Scottish products in the food and drink that it is responsible for supplying to local authorities, national health service boards and other public bodies. (S6O-01008)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Public procurement is an important tool that can be used to transform food production and supply, strengthen local economies and tackle climate change. We continue to support the Food for Life programme, which has been funded by the Scottish Government since 2012. It now operates across 18 local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, and ensures that more children in Scotland than ever before have access to fresh, local and sustainable food on their dinner plates.

Our local food strategy consultation had a focus on harnessing the buying power of public sector procurement to encourage better access for local food producers. Feedback from the consultation will be used to inform next steps in that area and will be published in late spring this year.

Brian Whittle: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, through supporting and enhancing the public procurement process to ensure that the maximum level of food in our public services is locally produced in the UK and especially in Scotland, the Scottish Government has a major tool with which to tackle food insecurity and better health outcomes, especially in our younger population? Does she agree that, over and above that, doing so could make a major contribution to reducing food miles and, therefore, achieving better environmental outcomes?

Mairi Gougeon: I agree with what Brian Whittle has said, which is why the next steps following our consultation on the draft local food strategy will be critical. It is important to recognise what we have seen through the Food for Life programme, which has been really successful.

As Brian Whittle has said, there are many benefits to local procurement—not only health benefits but a strong economic incentive. Some of the independent research that has been conducted on the Food for Life programme has shown that, for every £1 that is spent on it, the social and economic return is more than £4. There are many added benefits from the programme, and it is powerful in tackling some of the severe issues that we see, which is why we are intent on rolling it out to, eventually, encompass all local authorities.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is unfortunate that Brian Whittle's United Kingdom Government colleagues have negotiated disastrous trade deals that have completely undercut Scotland's lamb, beef and pork markets and, potentially, made way for cheaper, lower-quality products to be imported? His concern for the food and drink supply chain might be more usefully directed towards those who are actively undermining it.

Mairi Gougeon: I absolutely share the concerns that Alasdair Allan has expressed, particularly on the trade deals that have been negotiated by the UK Government. We know that the deals will undercut Scotland's high-quality red-meat sector—there is no doubt about that—with both the UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand trade deals facilitating, in essence, the mass import of cheaper and, in many cases, lower-standard food into the UK market.

The Scottish Government has consistently called on the UK Government to ensure that imports of agrifood arising from free trade agreements are produced to equivalent standards to those in Scotland, but, unfortunately, those protections have not been built in. I have written to the UK Government on a number of occasions to express my significant concern with its approach to agriculture in trade deals and, right across Government, my colleagues have done the same.

Pig Farming Industry

4. Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to support the pig farming industry in response to reported rises in the cost of feed, electricity, diesel, labour and haulage. (S6O-01009)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Rising farm input costs are significantly impacting all sectors of Scottish agriculture. We have set up the food security and supply task force jointly with industry to monitor, identify and respond to any potential disruption to food security and supply.

Responding to recent market disruption in the pig sector, we provided an initial £715,000 to producers through the pig producers hardship support scheme and extended that with a further £680,000-worth of support. We have also assisted the sector with a private storage aid scheme for pig meat from November 2021 to 31 March this year.

Paul McLennan: The cabinet secretary will recall that we recently met Jamie Wylie, the NFU Scotland lead on pigs. At that meeting, he raised issues that are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, such as the need for proper border controls to monitor pork imports and for a relaxation of the English language requirements for overseas butchers who are looking to come to work in our processing sector. What discussions has the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs held with the Scottish Government about those matters and their impact on Scotland?

Mairi Gougeon: First, I thank the member for contacting me about the issue and for extending the invitation to meet Jamie Wylie at his farm. It was during that visit that the severity of the issues that pig sector is facing really hit home. They include the significant rises in all input costs as well as the ever-changing date for implementing border controls on imports. Visa requirements were also raised as a significant issue.

On visa requirements for overseas butchers, we are clear that the current immigration system is not responsive enough to labour market requirements. I have personally raised that point with the UK Government on a number of occasions, and I know that the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development, together with his Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts, wrote to the UK immigration minister in February to call for immediate changes to the immigration system so that we can address the on-going labour shortages across the UK.

I also want to touch on border controls, which were also raised during our meeting. We engage regularly with the UK Government on those issues, and we expect to be doing more of that in the coming weeks in light of today's announcement that there is to be a further delay to the implementation of import controls on European Union goods of at least another 18 months. Delays not only put our exporting businesses in Scotland at a competitive disadvantage but present a real biosecurity risk, which will be of significant concern to our pig industry as well as the wider food and drink sector.

Rural Jobs (Nature Restoration)

5. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what it

is doing to support the creation of new rural jobs, including in nature restoration. (S6O-01010)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): Scotland's national strategy for economic transformation contains bold and ambitious actions to deliver economic prosperity for all Scotland's people and places. We are committed to delivering good, secure and well-paid green jobs. Through the future and climate emergency skills action plans, and our continuing work via the action plan for nature-based skills, we are investing to ensure that people of all ages in our rural communities have the right skills to meet our current and future needs.

Ariane Burgess: According to modelling by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, nature restoration projects such as woodland creation, peatland restoration, and deer management could create almost 8,000 new jobs across Scotland, mostly in rural areas. On a local level, I welcome the Cairngorms National Park Authority's new five-year draft plan to regenerate its native woodlands. How will the Cairngorms national park plan contribute to the creation of green jobs within the park?

Lorna Slater: I thank the member for the question and for her excitement about the green jobs that we will be creating in rural areas.

The Cairngorms national park partnership plan sets out a bold vision to restore nature in the park while tackling the climate emergency and building a wellbeing economy that works for all the people of the Cairngorms. That is driving investment and creating green jobs within the park. Initiatives contained in the plan include encouraging contractors to diversify into the programme of peatland restoration in the Cairngorms, which is expected to support seven new posts in the immediate future, and the heritage horizons programme, which is led by the park authority and which is expected to create 11 new jobs in woodland expansion and climate mitigation work.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given the great potential for nature recovery in Galloway, and the support of all parties and more than 30 candidates in the forthcoming local elections, how will the minister ensure that the process for the designation of national parks adequately reflects the huge amount of work that has already been done so effectively to make the case for Galloway to be Scotland's third national park?

Lorna Slater: I am very aware of how proud Galloway is of its natural heritage and how keen its people are to see Galloway become the next national park. Of course, many other parts of Scotland would also like to see a new national

park or, as it says in the Bute house agreement, at least one new national park created.

Very shortly, we will bring forward the plans for the process to create that park and start the consultation on where it should be. I am very proud that the member has asked this question today.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): How is the annual nature restoration fund delivering benefits for Scotland's species, woodlands, rivers and seas, as well as improving the health and wellbeing of local communities?

Lorna Slater: At the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—we announced a new £55 million multiyear commitment to the nature restoration fund, as part of a wider Scottish Government commitment to the investment of an additional £500 million in our natural economy over the course of the parliamentary session. This year, we are investing £13.5 million in nature restoration.

The fund is now supporting land-scale, multiyear, multipartner projects that will deliver transformative change to drive forward nature recovery across Scotland, including in the Cairngorms national park, which I have visited to see some of the schemes, and to create the security that is needed to support new green jobs, which will reinvigorate local communities and reinforce Scotland's green recovery. The fund is focused on outcomes that will address the main drivers of the decline in biodiversity: overexploitation of the natural environment; habitat loss and fragmentation; and invasive non-native species, especially their effect on rural biodiversity.

Food Security and Supply

6. Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding food security and supply. (S6O-01011)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government has held and continues to hold numerous discussions with UK Government departments on a variety of topics relating to food resilience.

I wrote to George Eustice and the other devolved Administrations on 4 April to request an urgent four-nations summit on the impact of rising fuel prices, which we know are putting significant strain on the food and drink industry right across the supply chain. In a meeting with the secretary of state on 20 April, he agreed to the request to hold a summit, and we had a short initial meeting last night. At that meeting, I raised a number of

issues that key food and drink sectors, including seafood and agriculture, face as a consequence of rising fuel prices.

Joe FitzPatrick: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and for joining me last week on a visit to Dundee Cold Stores, where we heard about the additional strain that rising energy costs are putting on such businesses. It is expected that those rising costs will result in higher food prices and make it more difficult for the company to compete with European food producers. Therefore, I am pleased to hear about the cabinet secretary's positive engagement with the UK Government on that matter.

The president of NFU Scotland, Martin Kennedy, has stated that, without proper support,

“we will be looking at food security concerns that we haven't seen since World War Two.”

He urged shoppers to “vote with their feet” and support local produce to avert future food shortages.

What assurances can the cabinet secretary provide that the Scottish Government will continue to work with farmers and the wider food supply industry to ensure that they are provided with the necessary support and that the UK Government does not shirk its responsibilities in that regard?

Mairi Gougeon: I assure the member that we are doing everything in our power to ensure that we have security of food supply and to tackle and mitigate the effects of the significant challenges that are being experienced across the food and drink sector. I thank him for inviting me to visit Dundee Cold Stores last week. I was struck by the truly astonishing increases in energy prices that the company faces. That is happening across the piece and business are struggling—there are no two ways about it.

The powers that relate to energy markets remain reserved. The Scottish ministers have repeatedly called on the UK Government to urgently take further tangible action to support households, such as reducing VAT, considering targeted support for people on low incomes and holding four-nations discussions in an effort to develop an effective response to the increases in energy bills. The situation is frustrating when we see other countries taking action. For example, France has limited energy price rises to 4 per cent and, in Germany, rebates of €300 have been offered.

We continue to engage with the UK Government, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and energy suppliers to look at ways of alleviating the impacts of the high energy bills that people across the country are faced with. I reiterate that we are using all the powers and

resources that are available to us to support people in Scotland and protect them from the cost of living crisis.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The Scottish National Party Government can use the devolved powers of the Scottish Parliament to act now to provide farmers with urgent help.

At yesterday's meeting of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, Scott Walker of the NFUS agreed with my suggestion that a moratorium on large-scale forestry could be put in place to prevent the further removal of productive agricultural land. Can the cabinet secretary tell me and my party what the Government's position is on implementing such a moratorium, rolling out track 1 of the test programme and temporarily suspending the ecological focus area component of the greening requirement?

Mairi Gougeon: This Government absolutely supports food production and we recognise how vital our food security is. That is why we established the task force. I will not pre-empt the work that will come out of that, because we will have to consider our recommendations. The task force has met three times, so far, and is due to meet again. Recommendations will come out as a result of that.

There is a need to accelerate, where possible, the actions that we can take to help build resilience within our agriculture sector. The member mentioned the roll-out of our track 1 programme, which will start imminently. We will roll out carbon audits and soil testing. All those measures are vital in helping to build resilience in our food system and we are not wasting any time in implementing them.

Net Zero (Role of Agriculture)

7. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the agriculture sector plays a leading role in delivering a net zero Scotland. (S6O-01012)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The vision for agriculture outlines our aim to transform how we support farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. This summer, we will consult to inform the introduction of an agriculture bill to deliver on the vision. We are taking early action: the £51 million national test programme will build on a range of support, including grants, advice and research, to support our farmers and crofters to learn how their work impacts on climate and nature.

Martin Whitfield: The Scottish, United Kingdom and Welsh Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive jointly announced plans to establish the UK emissions trading scheme—UKETS—from January 2021. The consultation on a UK emissions trading scheme is currently open. Does the Scottish Government agree that it is essential that our farming communities have effective carbon calculators, are recognised for their role in carbon sequestration and are able to participate in carbon trading markets?

Mairi Gougeon: As the member indicated, the consultation on that is currently open. I encourage all of those with an interest to take part in it. We will, of course, consider the responses carefully.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 has been withdrawn, so that concludes portfolio questions. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Scotland's Census 2022

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Angus Robertson on Scotland's census 2022.

Members will be aware that there has been some media coverage today, prior to this item of business, stating that the deadline for completion of the census will be extended by four weeks. That is a significant and important piece of information that members would rightly expect to hear first in the chamber. I have met the Minister for Parliamentary Business and have asked for an explanation of how and why it is the case that that information is already in the public domain. The Scottish Government will carry out a thorough investigation and will report back to Parliament.

There is, in the statement, other information that is not covered in the media reports. I will therefore allow the statement to be delivered, in the interests of optimising scrutiny on a subject that affects every household in the country.

I am sure that members share my dismay that we are—yet again—using valuable parliamentary time to address the inappropriate advance sharing of part of a Government statement. That being the case, and given the information that is already publicly available, I will allow the cabinet secretary a reduced time of five minutes. He will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I begin with a fulsome apology that news of the announcement found its way to the media ahead of the statement. We take that very seriously and have commissioned an internal leak inquiry, which will be led by the Scottish Government's chief information security officer, who will liaise with the lead officials to determine who had access to the information and to check our data systems to see whether the source of the breach can be identified through Government systems.

Census day in Scotland was 20 March 2022. I am pleased to note that well over 2 million households have already submitted their responses. I extend my thanks to all the households that provided responses prior to the deadline. Their participation in this once-in-a-decade exercise is hugely appreciated.

To date, 77.2 per cent of Scottish households have provided a census return. That is a substantial figure, given everything that is happening in the world right now. I understand that

many people might be dealing with other concerns. Recent world events have caused anxiety for many people, and have remained a focus for the media—quite rightly—in recent weeks. Closer to home, people are still dealing with the impacts of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis. Given those challenges, I appreciate that another ask of people is difficult.

However, I cannot stress enough how important it is for the Government to hear the voices of the remaining 604,000 households that are still to return forms before the deadline of Sunday 1 May. That figure includes many thousands of people who have begun the census online but have not yet completed it and thousands of others who have requested a paper copy but have not yet returned it.

That is why I am announcing today that National Records of Scotland will continue to accept census returns until the end of May. In support of that, we will provide an additional budget investment this year of up to 7 per cent of the programme costs, which amounts to £9.76 million. That will allow the census collection period to continue for four weeks, in order to give everybody the opportunity to complete Scotland's census, and it will allow all outstanding returns to be captured so that everybody's voice can be heard.

To be effective, a census requires a high response rate and a response that captures the diversity of our communities and their needs appropriately. I reassure members that that is a valuable further investment. Research shows that every £1, or equivalent, that is invested in a census generates £5 to £6 of broader economic benefit.

From 14 February, a significant multichannel awareness campaign was launched, which has included social media, radio and TV advertisements. That continued throughout March and April, reminding people of the importance of completing the census. Continued help to complete the census has been available on the website [census.gov.scot](https://www.census.gov.scot) and via the free helpline on 0800 030 8308. As of 25 April, over 700,000 calls had been made to the contact centre, with over 260 language interpretations having been offered.

Field staff have now undertaken more than 988,000 household visits in Scotland, providing in-person support to people who need it. Households have received a range of information through the post, including an initial contact letter; a census postcard; first, second and third reminder letters; and a final targeted postcard and two reminder letters for those who have started but not finished their census return online.

Extensions to census collection periods have occurred internationally. Countries including Poland, Japan and the United States of America have all taken similar steps in recent years to ensure maximum participation. England and Wales extended its enumeration of some specific communal establishments for three to four weeks in its 2021 census, and Northern Ireland continued to accept returns after its deadline. An extension to a census collection period remains a legitimate and often-used process to facilitate engagement with the census process.

The Scottish Government announced the decision to move Scotland's census to 2022 following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. That decision was not taken lightly, and it remains the right decision. I am now here to make another important intervention to ensure that we deliver the required benefits for the people of Scotland.

Every household must complete Scotland's census. In addition to being a civic responsibility, completion of the census is a legal responsibility, as it has always been for previous censuses. Failure to meet that responsibility can result in prosecution, which could lead to a criminal record and a fine. However, the shared focus is—and must be—on ensuring that people are supported and encouraged to complete the census. Help will remain available to people throughout May, via the census website and the free helpline.

Completing the census enables better decisions about the things that matter to us all. It is essential that we maximise participation and ensure that everyone is heard and has their needs captured. It is vital that we secure as high a response rate as possible, so that the census can be effective in delivering its many benefits for future public services.

I thank those who have already completed their census, and I urge those who have still to do so to act now.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that have been raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement.

I will be clear. The Scottish National Party Government's handling of Scotland's census has been nothing short of disastrous. It was needlessly delayed by a year; it cost taxpayers an extra £30 million; and, as of today, around a quarter of households in Scotland are still to respond.

The SNP ignored our calls to hold the census in sync with the rest of the United Kingdom, when

they would have benefited from a UK-wide publicity campaign that managed a 97 per cent response rate. Despite our warnings, the SNP insisted on going it alone and delaying the census until this year, claiming at the time that that would ensure the highest possible response rate. Today, however, we learn that the opposite is true. All of this represents a significant failure by the Scottish Government that will have serious long-term implications for public policy making.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that it was a mistake to delay the census? Can he guarantee that there will be no further delays beyond the end of May? What support is being given directly to councils to get this census back on track and to urgently boost the response rate?

Angus Robertson: I welcome the acknowledgment by Donald Cameron and the Conservative Party of the importance of the census and of successfully completing it. I also put on record the positive co-operation that he and spokespeople from other parties have given to promoting participation in the census. I underline that the key message from today is that everyone who has yet to complete and submit a census return should, please, do so as soon as possible.

I have already addressed a number of the three questions that Donald Cameron asked in succession. First, it was not a mistake to hold the census on an appropriate date that was not in the middle of the pandemic. Secondly, I do not believe that there will be further delays.

When it comes to council support, which was the most constructive element of Donald Cameron's intervention, it is right to say that there is a variance in the rate of census returns in different parts of the country, and he can rest assured, as can members across the chamber, that there are very specific interventions, especially in council areas in which rates of return are lower. Just one example of that is the targeting of enumerators to conduct their work especially in areas in which there are lower rates of return, to make sure that those can be maximised at the present time and in the weeks ahead.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for sight of his statement, and I agree that the census is absolutely vital to planning ahead—by the Scottish Government for services that our constituents need and by the councillors who will be elected next week, to tackle inequalities in our communities.

What work was done to analyse the impact of not using a paper response form in relation to people who are not digitally connected—from the length of time that it took for people to get through on the phone to get a paper copy, to people simply not getting around to it because a paper copy was

not distributed to everyone? What work was done to analyse the response rate and the timescales, in comparison with previous years, in order to avoid today's last-minute decision to extend the timescale, potentially incurring a cost of nearly £10 million in the process?

From within the system, numerous concerns have been raised for some time now about problems of outsourcing, information technology, recruitment and accessibility. Why was the process outsourced from local authorities to the Pertemps recruitment agency? What measures were taken to account for Airbnbs and other temporary accommodation, so that the entire process was more cost effective?

As the cabinet secretary has said, some houses will have got multiple letters, envelopes, census notification cards and reminders. All of that is rather more than an envelope with a form. As the cabinet secretary has told us, thousands have started but not yet completed the digital form, and enumerators will now have to tour our communities. Would the higher rates that we have seen in previous years have been achieved if we had all simply been sent a paper copy at the start?

Angus Robertson: Sarah Boyack has asked a long series of questions. Forgive me if I do not answer them all. I will endeavour to write back and answer any specific questions that I am not able to answer now.

Given that we are in the process of delivering the census, I welcome the tone and content of Sarah Boyack's questions. She, too, has been a strong voice for participation in the census. With the continuing promotion and participation of MSPs of all parties, I am confident that we will help to boost the numbers considerably in the days ahead.

On the issue of digital versus paper returns, Sarah Boyack and other members will be aware that this census is the first that has significantly focused on trying to maximise digital returns. The figures are running at around 90 per cent of returns being made via digital means, and 10 per cent being paper returns. Anybody and everybody who would prefer to make a paper return can do so.

One element that Sarah Boyack omitted in her questions relates to the rate of return from people who have been issued with paper returns. That is one of the lessons that we are having to learn. We are trying to understand that right now. The issue of non-returns or non-returns before the 1 May deadline—obviously, we still have a number of days until then—does not relate to just digital technology. There are literally tens of thousands of people who have been sent any number of written interventions encouraging them to take part and

have gone as far as ordering a paper census copy, but have not yet returned it. We can all consider the different reasons why that might be the case.

Sarah Boyack pointed to something that is quite important. We need to get to the bottom of why people who have been repeatedly encouraged in paper form and by house visits to reply have not yet replied. We will have to understand that better. Research on that is on-going, and research is being commissioned to try to understand that better.

Sarah Boyack will understand that we are now in a golden hour in which there will be heightened awareness of census returns. Now is the time for us to send the message as loudly and clearly as we can to people out there who have yet to return their census form: "Please do it. Now is the time."

There are many lessons to be learned, some of which Sarah Boyack has pointed to. In particular, she made points about who is conducting different bits of the process. It would be most welcome to have any detail that she might have on any areas in which it is apparent to her that there are shortcomings in the process because, obviously, if it is possible to do census collection in the future within the defined timescale, that is eminently preferable to having to extend the timescale. However, as I have already pointed out, extending the census deadline is becoming ever more the norm in a number of countries, including other nations on these islands.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): For the benefit of people at home or people who may be watching this later and who have not yet completed the census, will the cabinet secretary outline how completing the census benefits people in Scotland and aids policy making?

Angus Robertson: The census is incredibly important. It takes place only every decade—every 10 years—and it is the official count of every person and household in the country. Scotland has relied on the information that the census provides for more than 200 years. It remains the best way to gather vital information that the Government, councils, the national health service and a range of users in the public, private and third sectors need, and the results help local authorities, businesses and the Government to plan a wide range of vital public services to improve the lives of those who live and work in Scotland. That is all the more reason why any people who are wondering why it is so important for them to return their census should do so in the days ahead and should not delay. We are doing everything that we can to drive up the participation numbers in the 2022 census. Anybody who is listening to our deliberations now has a better

understanding of why it is so important and I appeal to everybody to take part in the census as a matter of priority.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): England and Wales, which held their censuses as normal, have seen high levels of returns—in fact, they saw a 97 per cent return rate, which was above their expected target of 94 per cent.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has more than 600,000 outstanding households—a staggering 23 per cent of the population—and has had to extend the deadline by a month. That is only the latest in a long line of SNP communication failures.

My colleague Maurice Golden warned the SNP of that impending disaster but was ignored. Clearly, the current approach is not working, so what further incentives and targeted support is the Scottish Government offering to respondents?

Angus Robertson: Forgive me, but I do not know whether Sharon Dowey was in the chamber at the start of the statement, when I pointed out that, even in the census—[*Interruption.*] She was here, so she will have heard that, in the census in England and Wales that she cites, there was an extension for institutions. The issues are not specific to Scotland. There is a wider list of other countries that have had to make use of an extended period to reach census targets. That is becoming the norm. That is point 1.

Point 2 is more important. What targeted measures can be used to ensure that people are aware of the deadline and that they understand that they have a legal requirement to take part in the census and that there are potentially serious consequences to not taking part in it? One of the reasons for extending the period is that I would far prefer to encourage people to take part. They still have the days until 1 May, although I would prefer that people do it before 1 May. However, even if we do that we would not reach the required targets. That is why the time period has been extended.

I would be happy to write to Sharon Dowey, to go through the full list of interventions that are under way, because I probably do not have enough time now. She can take it from me that we are doing everything that we can to help to get responses. I encourage her and her colleagues, many of whom write columns every week—there is plenty of content in the matter for the next four weeks—to encourage their readers and supporters to take part in the census to ensure that it is as representative as possible. I look forward to reading all their columns with great interest in the weeks ahead.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): How many people have started their census returns online but not yet completed them?

Angus Robertson: That is one of the really interesting and curious aspects of the census process that we are trying to understand. Approximately 68,000 people have started the census online and not completed it. People might have different understandings of why that has happened. National Records of Scotland estimates that about 600,000 households have yet to return a completed census. The good news is that, so far, 2,045,000 households have returned their census forms.

One of the jobs that we have to do is to encourage people who have started the census form to finish the process. They should check that they have clicked send to submit it. Equally, people who have started the process with a paper version should make sure that they submit it. Everybody else who has not yet started should do so as a matter of priority.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To pursue the previous question, my understanding—admittedly from subjective evidence—is that some people who started their census returns online struggled to get back into them because of the problem with the passwords but then started a fresh one, which they managed to complete in a single sitting. Is the cabinet secretary confident that we do not have duplicated figures, with the same person being counted as both having returned and not having returned their census form?

Angus Robertson: Martin Whitfield asks a very important question. I have been asking for confirmation that there is no chance of duplication. I assume that every member present has submitted their census form—I hope that they have—and that they are aware that there is an individual code that relates to a household. I do not believe that it is, in an IT sense, possible for somebody to submit again with the same code. That is one of the points that can and will be considered.

The issue of IT is a wider one. The member made a point about what he conceded was subjective information about some people having experienced IT challenges—and no doubt, as we all have IT challenges with all kinds of systems. I therefore wish to take the opportunity to say that, if anybody has any question about anything relating to their submission, they should call the census hotline, which can explain, help and support. Again, the number is 0800 030 8308. People can also visit the census website at census.gov.scot. Let us use every opportunity that we can to explain to people that it is not a complicated

process, and it does not take a lot of time—but please, get it done.

For anybody who has any problems—and we know that all kinds of people have linguistic or IT-related issues, for instance—there are a series of interventions and support measures in place. Please use them, so that we can complete the census successfully.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will recall that I previously raised the issue of the census question on the use of Scots, which some constituents found unclear. He quite rightly directed me and others to consider the guidance, which is helpful. I ask the cabinet secretary to repeat some of the languages that come under the umbrella of Scots, so that people know what to put in. For Jackie Dunbar's benefit, I can say that Doric is included.

Angus Robertson: Indeed. The census 2022 question helps respondents in that it says that it is up to them to decide whether they and those who they are responding for can understand, speak, read or write Scots, and to select all that apply. The question help states that Scots is spoken all over Scotland; it is the collective name for Scottish dialects such as Glaswegian, Doric, Buchan, Dundonian, Shetland and many others. As I said to Martin Whitfield, where respondents remain unsure about that or any other question, they should visit the website or call the helpline. There are also audio clips at www.ican.com related to Scots. There is a lot of information out there, and there is really no reason why people should not be able to have the information that they require to complete the census.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I seek advice from the cabinet secretary on what support is available for those with a hearing impairment to complete the census, given the correlation between hearing impairment and older age and the correlation between that and lack of digital access. There is a group of people in Scotland, including a number of constituents who have contacted me, who are unable to receive support either online or via the advice line.

Angus Robertson: That is a very good question from Ross Greer. National Records of Scotland has ensured that people are able to access a range of help and support to help them do that. That includes individual question help, advice on how to complete the census online, mechanisms for ordering paper and individual forms and, specifically, language and accessibility support in British Sign Language, EasyRead, audio, Braille and large print, as well as translated guidance and language support.

In addition to that, census field staff are providing further face-to-face support, as required. Anybody who needs that kind of support should avail themselves of it. It is there, and people are there to help. People should not feel that they are alone. If they have any of those impairments, they should get the support and complete the census, because we want everybody from all parts of Scotland with all kinds of lived realities to be reflected fully in the census. That includes people who have the kinds of impairment that Ross Greer rightly highlights.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Not everyone will be able to or will wish to complete their census online. Can the cabinet secretary advise how someone can request a paper copy?

Angus Robertson: The simple answer to that, which I think I have mentioned a number of times now, is to call the helpline to ask for a copy to be sent. I should mention, in part reflecting an earlier question from the Conservative benches, one of the mitigations and interventions that is taking place: a significant number of print copies of the census are being sent directly to households that have not requested them but that have not taken part in the census thus far. Not only can people order them and call the helpline to get support; copies are also being sent out by post to a significant extent.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): The census once again shows that the Scottish Government has a serious problem with public awareness campaigns, as with interlinked fire alarms, which nearly half of people did not install on time, and as with FACTS, as a poll found that only 1 per cent of people could identify the meaning of all five letters. Why?

Angus Robertson: Maurice Golden has asked a good question, given that households have received an initial contact letter, a postcard, an online reminder letter, a household reminder letter, a household gentle reminder letter, a household firmer reminder letter, an online reminder, information about an individual access code request and a second internet access code request letter. There are further publications—I could go on.

Every household has received significant information about the importance of the census, the responsibility to take part and the guidance about how one might do that. We are having to communicate more because, for some people, clearly that has not been enough. We have to learn the lessons about why that is, because it seems to me that receiving so much information would be enough—we would have hoped—to inform people and encourage them to take part in the census. Clearly, that has not been enough, and lessons need to be learned from that.

It is not just that direct communication has been made to households; we have also had a very significant public information campaign. Maurice Golden is right to say that there are people who have not heard that or have not responded to it. Both things may be true. We need to learn the lessons from that. I made a point in my initial statement that this is not just a scenario that has taken place in Scotland—the same has happened in England and Wales, where an extension was deemed necessary for certain classes of respondents, and in a number of countries, including the United States of America, there was also an extension. No doubt, there are lessons to be learned, but it is not as simple as suggesting that, for some reason, there has not been enough public information. There has been a lot of public information. The question is, why have people not responded in the way that one might have hoped and expected?

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To follow on from the last question, can the cabinet secretary confirm that community and stakeholder engagement to promote Scotland's census will continue until the end of May?

Angus Robertson: The simple answer is yes. The relationship with external stakeholders is one aspect of the census process in which a lot of weight has been invested. I take the opportunity to thank the likes of Scotland's local authorities, the national health service and many other bodies that have been trying to amplify the public information message about the importance of taking part in the census. An engagement process about the extended period for census returns will be rolled out to make sure that all our stakeholders and third-party partners that are promoting the census and participation in it will play their full role in the next few weeks ahead. As I have already said, that includes MSPs across the chamber. All those parties will help to make sure that the message is getting through to everyone and that there is an understanding that we must all take part in Scotland's census 2022.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned that an extra £10 million will now have to be spent on trying to get the census completed. Can he explain which budget line that extra £10 million will come from? Will he apologise to the people of Scotland because, once again, the Government is over time and over budget?

Angus Robertson: I take it from Duncan—forgive me, I mean Douglas—Lumsden's question that he is keen that the census is successful and is completed and that we reach the targets. On that basis, given the evidence that I shared earlier about the value-for-money nature of the census, I think that it is money well spent to make sure that

we complete it. The money will come from the Scottish Government's budget. People in National Records of Scotland are working hard to try to make sure that we do not need to draw down the full extent of the funding that has been allocated. That is a significant part of why I am taking this opportunity to ask, repeatedly, that we all please do as much as we can to make sure that, in the parts of society that we reach in different ways, we encourage people to take part.

This is not a politicised exercise; it is about good public administration. The fact is that there is cross-party support for the census— notwithstanding the tone of some interventions. I think that it is still the formal position of the Conservative and Unionist Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Greens and the Scottish National Party to support the census. Given that, I would be grateful for the member's support and I look forward to reading his column on the subject in the weeks ahead.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on Scotland's census 2022.

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

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-04162, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

15:25

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I am pleased to open the stage 1 debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 14 December 2021.

Non-domestic rates play a key role in balancing the need to deliver a competitive and sustainable tax environment with ensuring that we have sufficient resources to fund public services. The aim of the bill is to deliver fairness to all ratepayers by ensuring that any effects of Covid-19 are considered for all properties at revaluation, rather than through use of “material change of circumstances” provisions. Outside a revaluation, the rateable value or net annual value of a property can be amended—for instance, to reflect material changes of circumstances. A material change of circumstances is typically a physical change to a property, such as an extension or demolition, or it could be a major change in the specific area where the property is located, such as with the tram works in Edinburgh.

Under the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020, the definition of “material change of circumstances” was amended, with effect from 2 April 2020, to exclude changes in general economic circumstances. That reflected the fact that we are moving to three-yearly revaluation cycles and a one-year tone date, which will allow valuations in the future to be more closely aligned to current market values, thereby removing the need for appeals on the basis of a change in general economic circumstances.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, more than 40,000 appeals on non-domestic properties have been lodged. That abnormal spike at this point in the revaluation cycle indicates that most appeals have been lodged because of the pandemic.

We do not believe that the provisions on material changes of circumstances are appropriate in relation to Covid-19. Any impact on rental values arising from Covid-19 or Covid-19 restrictions is part of general market conditions and therefore should be considered at revaluation, when all relevant impacts on values across all

properties will be taken into account. That view is shared by the United Kingdom Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly. We announced on 23 June 2021 that we intended to take measures to rule out Covid-19 appeals.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

The minister has made it clear that, in the next revaluation, impacts of Covid that might occur in the longer term can be taken into account as part of the general market situation. Will he encourage the assessors—who are, of course, independent—to engage with industry sectors that believe that they have been impacted severely and for a long time by Covid, to make sure that assessors are aware of such serious factors, which are extremely important in arriving at the correct rateable value?

Tom Arthur: Mr Ewing is absolutely correct to acknowledge the independence of assessors. We all recognise the significant impact that Covid has had, and continues to have, on general and prevailing economic conditions. I have no doubt that all of us, in all our roles and responsibilities across society in Scotland, will take that into account.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Economy, the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise and I carried out, over summer 2021, an extensive consultation and engagement exercise with all the major business representative bodies. The meetings provided an opportunity to discuss our approach to supporting business during the pandemic and its priorities in the recovery period. The matter of appeals was not raised as a substantial concern.

The bill builds on the Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021, which came into force on 1 December 2021. The order specifies that, in calculating the rateable value of properties in the 2017 valuation roll,

“no account is to be taken of any matter arising on or after 1 April 2021 that is directly or indirectly attributable to”

Covid-19.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Tom Arthur: I will in one moment. Primary legislation is, however, required in order to go back further and to extend the rule to net annual value, from which rateable values are derived.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not also right that, during that consultation, the specific intentions of the bill were not raised with industry and other stakeholders?

Tom Arthur: We have had a process of engagement, which we announced on 23 June last year. We also had the order, which went

before the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and which could only go back as far as April 2021 because it was secondary legislation; primary legislation is required in order to go back further. There was engagement with business, and there was the work that the parliamentary committee undertook.

We also undertook to do a partial business and regulatory impact assessment. Considered work has been done to ensure that business has been engaged and consulted, and the views of business have been taken into account.

We have to make some progress. The bill that is under discussion provides that in calculating the net annual value or rateable value in relation to any property in the 2017 valuation roll,

“no account is to be taken of any matter occurring on or after 2 April 2020 that is (whether directly or indirectly) attributable to coronavirus.”

That date aligns with the date from which the definition of “material change of circumstances” was clarified by the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020.

The bill does not apply in respect of changes to the physical state of a property or to the question whether a property should or should not be included in the valuation roll—for instance, if someone started working from home as a result of the pandemic—nor does it remove the right of appeal. Rather, it will provide clarity, consistency and fairness to all ratepayers by ensuring that any effects of Covid-19 are considered for all properties at the next revaluation in 2023.

In fact, we intend to delay the disposal deadline for appeals by one year, to 31 December 2023, so that appellants who made a Covid appeal can make an informed decision, once Parliament has finished considering the bill, on whether they wish to pursue or withdraw the appeal.

Although appeals have been submitted for over 40,000 properties, that is less than one fifth of all non-domestic properties in Scotland and, as the Federation of Small Businesses has pointed out previously, not many small businesses are among them. That fact might reflect our generous support package for small businesses, but it likely also reflects the fact that well-resourced and professionally advised property owners and occupiers are more likely to know about the “material change of circumstances” provisions and, therefore, to have appealed. Meanwhile, a number of large and multinational firms that have been largely unaffected by, or have even been successful during, the pandemic have also made appeals against their properties’ valuations.

This is a hugely complex issue, and the outcome of any appeal is uncertain. It cannot be assumed that appeals would be successful. We

believe that the right time for market-wide economic changes to be reflected is at revaluation.

We are strengthening revaluations following the independent Barclay review of non-domestic rates, to ensure that they more closely reflect market circumstances. First, we are increasing the frequency of revaluations from every five years to every three years, and we are reducing the time between the tone date and revaluation. Secondly, we have delayed the next revaluation by one year, to 2023, and brought forward the commitment to a one-year tone date, which will be 1 April 2022. Both of those measures have been welcomed by the business community in Scotland.

As we all know, Covid-19 has had a major impact on the economy. We responded swiftly and on an unprecedented scale to support business through the pandemic. Businesses have benefited from over £4.6 billion of support since the start of the pandemic, and that has included around £1.6 billion of Covid-related rates relief. For the past two years, we have provided 100 per cent relief for retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation, with no financial cap. We were the only Government in the UK to do that. We are preventing a cliff-edge return to full liability for businesses in the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors by continuing relief at 50 per cent for the first three months of 2022-23, which is capped at £27,500 per ratepayer.

I am grateful to the convener and members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for their scrutiny of the bill. I welcome the committee’s support for the general principles of the bill, and I have responded in writing on the various issues that were raised in its report. As the committee recognised, the realities of dealing with Covid-19 were challenging and we had to act, both to mitigate the impact on assessors of large volumes of appeals and to protect the public finances more generally. We acted quickly to support the business community when it needed it most and we have continued to support businesses throughout the pandemic.

I return to my opening comment that the bill seeks to ensure fairness for all Scottish ratepayers while maintaining the integrity of the non-domestic rates system and the stability of public finances.

Therefore, I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: Members may wish to be aware that there is time in hand for me to give time back for interventions.

15:35

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am pleased to speak in the debate on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and to follow the minister's opening speech. I thank him for responding to the points raised in the committee's stage 1 report and for providing a written response to our conclusions in advance of the debate.

As was noted by the minister, the primary purpose of the bill is to ensure that no account can be taken of any matter that is directly or indirectly attributable to coronavirus when calculating the rateable value of business premises for the period from 2 April 2020 to 1 April 2021. That is, in effect, an extension of changes that were made through the Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021, which applied from 1 April 2021.

Primary legislation is required to give effect to the extension, as the order could not be applied retrospectively. The committee recognises the real risk that, in the absence of these legislative changes, successful appeals would reduce non-domestic rates income and impact adversely on public finances. Although we have no way of knowing what the outcome of such appeals might be, the bill's financial memorandum provides illustrative examples that show that a 50 per cent reduction in rateable values could reduce council revenues by more than £550 million and that even a 5 per cent reduction would reduce revenues by £56 million.

The committee appreciates that, if it is passed, the bill will protect council revenues. In doing so, it will also protect the Government from the risk of having to reimburse councils for lost income resulting from reduced valuations based on factors arising from the pandemic.

It has been a slightly unusual stage 1 experience, as our scrutiny of the bill has, in essence, repeated our previous scrutiny of the Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021 in the autumn of last year. We gave detailed scrutiny to the order at the time and no new issues of significance arose in our evidence taking on the bill. Nevertheless, I am grateful to the stakeholders who provided written evidence to the committee to assist our scrutiny and to the minister for his oral evidence. I also thank the other members of the committee for the constructive manner in which they approached our scrutiny of the bill.

Turning to the bill itself, the committee recognises that the difficult realities of dealing with the economic impact of Covid have meant that the Government had little option other than to act, both to mitigate the impact of large volumes of appeals on assessors and to protect the public

finances more generally. We received comments from some stakeholders about what they saw as a lack of consultation and engagement on the bill. The absence of a business regulatory impact assessment was also highlighted in written evidence. However, we understand that the Scottish Government's intentions were made clear in June last year and that the Government has engaged widely with the business community on its approach to supporting businesses through the pandemic.

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Ariane Burgess: I will in a moment.

I thank the minister for confirming that a BRIA had, indeed, been published, but I note that that happened only in late January, more than six weeks after the bill was introduced and towards the end of our consultation period.

Martin Whitfield: I compliment the committee on its two reports, the earlier of which dealt with the order. Is it not true that both reports mentioned concerns about consultation? Does the member think that, between the order and the bill, that issue has been satisfactorily addressed?

Ariane Burgess: Yes, speaking for myself and on behalf of the committee, we think that that has been sufficiently addressed.

During our scrutiny of the bill, we also considered the Government's approach to taxation based on Adam Smith's four principles of taxation. In addition to the principle of engagement, which I have already touched on, we were particularly interested in the principle of certainty.

In "The Wealth of Nations", the Kirkcaldy-born philosopher who came to be known as the father of modern economics wrote:

"The tax which each individual is bound to pay ought to be certain, and not arbitrary. The time of payment, the manner of payment, the quantity to be paid, ought to all be clear and plain to the contributor, and to every other person."

The fact that the bill makes retrospective changes to tax policy by removing the rights of ratepayers to challenge their rateable value due to a material change of circumstances caused by public health emergency measures appears to go against that principle. Indeed, stakeholders—including the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Scottish Property Federation—highlighted their strong opposition to the change in their written evidence to the committee. The Chambers of Commerce, for example, described it as being

"completely at odds with key principles of certainty and fairness in a modern taxation system."

The committee is clear that we would not want to see this policy decision as setting any kind of

precedent in terms of retrospective changes, and we welcome the minister's assurances that the principles of certainty and engagement would underpin future non-domestic rates policy. However, we also recognise that the challenging realities of dealing with Covid-19 left the Government with little option other than to act.

We also welcome the decision to respond to what the minister described as stakeholders' "key ask" in avoiding a "cliff edge" on 31 March by maintaining 50 per cent relief for the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors for a further three months. However, we are mindful that that relief benefits only certain sectors of the economy.

We also heard from the minister that around £4.5 billion was provided in support to businesses during the pandemic, which we very much welcome.

On the workload of assessors, we note that more than 40,000 material change of circumstances appeals have been lodged since the start of the pandemic. We welcome the Scottish Government's proposal to extend the disposal deadline from 31 December 2022 to 31 December 2023 and look forward to considering the relevant secondary legislation in the coming weeks. However, we remain concerned about the potential volume of work that assessors may face during the coming years. Although we appreciate that it is not for the Government to direct assessors on how they manage their workload, we would welcome updates on the numbers of appeals withdrawn and the overall volumes of material change of circumstance appeals that assessors have to dispose of. I thank the minister for confirming that his officials will explore with the Scottish Assessors Association how best that information can be provided.

I will draw my remarks to a close by confirming that the committee recommends that Parliament support the general principles of the bill. I look forward to hearing other members' contributions to the debate and to further considering the bill at stage 2 in the coming weeks.

15:43

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the organisations that have contributed to the work of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I also thank the committee clerks—they are sitting right beside you, Presiding Officer—for the work that they put in to help us with the bill.

As we emerge from the pandemic and the focus, rightly, shifts to economic recovery, it is important that we look to create the most supportive and dynamic business environment. We are all acutely aware of the significant impact

that the pandemic has had on businesses, local government and the workload of assessors, and the significant and unsustainable backlog that has built up.

During the pandemic, there have been 49,400 non-domestic rates appeals; in comparison, pre-pandemic, only 5,774 appeals were lodged.

The Scottish Conservatives accept one of the main principles behind the bill, which is

"to extend this rule to cover both net annual value and rateable value and to cover the period back to 2 April 2020, the date on which the Scottish Government amended the definition of 'material change of circumstances' to exclude changes in economic circumstances."

The bill is a sensible measure to update Scotland's non-domestic rates and appeals system. As we have heard, that has taken place in England and Wales to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee agreed that, because of the level of scrutiny that had already taken place on the order, an extensive programme of evidence taking was not necessary.

We heard a number of views from stakeholders throughout the period, and it is clear that there is a need to look at improving the appeals system in Scotland, which I hope that the minister has taken on board. He has given an assurance that the bill will not remove the right of appeal, and he has confirmed that the Scottish Government intends to

"introduce legislation to extend the disposal deadline by a further year beyond 31 December 2022."—[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 15 March 2022; c 4.]

The committee highlighted the absence of a BRIA. It was unusual for no BRIA to accompany the bill, and that is a departure from the Scottish Government's guidance. As the convener stated, we said in our report that we would welcome assurances from the Scottish Government, which we have now received, that that does not set a precedent for future bills that are introduced to the Parliament.

The UK and Scottish Governments have provided significant support to Scottish businesses throughout the pandemic. The UK Government provided 100 per cent rates relief for all eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties, which was extended by the Scottish Government. That relief was worth around £10 billion in 2020-21. The Government announced that it would extend the scheme for the first three months of 2021-22 at 100 per cent, followed by a nine-month period of relief at 66 per cent, subject to a cash cap for businesses. Taken together, those support measures for business rates relief have been

worth £16 billion for retail, hospitality and leisure properties.

During the committee's consideration of the bill, I put on record my concerns around the administration of support schemes in some cases and that the schemes have not been transparent. Businesses have reported to MSPs the various winners and losers in accessing the schemes, which the minister has acknowledged. Although every Government was driving hard to get money out to support businesses, we should pause as part of this work and look at how schemes were administered by different local authorities.

Moving forward, it is important to look at how the Scottish Government intends to target additional resources that result from UK Government measures to support businesses, especially when it comes to those that are most in need of support and, in particular, small and medium-sized enterprises.

I turn to the important issue of support for businesses. Scottish National Party ministers offered rates relief of 50 per cent for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses for three months only, and capped that at £27,500. Scottish Conservatives have called for 75 per cent relief for those sectors, and I hope that ministers will take that on board and look at what additional support can be provided to those key sectors of our economy. Scottish retailers have called for ministers to permanently lower business rates in Scotland. Firms from the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors were fully exempt from non-domestic rates during the pandemic until 31 March.

I agree with the point that Fergus Ewing made. We must consider how we can support businesses and ensure that any changes are as straightforward as possible, so that businesses understand any new business rates environment that might emerge in future financial years.

Today's debate is a welcome opportunity to look to the future. Recovery from the pandemic and driving economic growth must be key priorities for not only the Scottish Government but local authorities. With the council elections less than a week away, it is clear that local councils face significant financial pressures, which will only increase in the coming years.

Our town centres and high streets took a major hit during the pandemic. Local businesses that thrived before Covid have closed or are struggling to pay their bills. Many shops, restaurants, pubs and hotels have still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels of business.

During the pandemic, local councils played a major role in supporting businesses by distributing essential grant funding to them. It is important that,

as we continue to recover from the pandemic, local councils remain a key player in driving local growth. They must continue to have the flexibility to support businesses that fall between the cracks of national schemes and to support local partnerships in the rebuilding of local economies across the country.

It is still not clear how consumer habits have shifted because of Covid. There has been a move by many retail outlets towards online shopping and deliveries of goods and food. It is clear that we need more support for businesses to rebuild their customer base and to encourage footfall in our town centres.

The UK and Scottish Governments and our councils need to respond to the short-term and long-term changes in consumer habits. They also need to look towards how they can support any challenges that such changes present, so that businesses that want to continue to have an online presence can get additional support to manage that and set up the necessary information technology projects and teams.

Scottish Conservatives want the Scottish Government to keep business rates relief in place for the coming financial year and to consider introducing longer-term discount schemes for businesses, especially, as I have highlighted, those in traditional town centres and high streets, which have faced such huge pressures. Business Gateway services are essential for business start-ups and scale-ups, which is why Scottish Conservatives have called for and support the further development of the Business Gateway.

Scottish Conservatives will support the bill to update Scotland's non-domestic rates legislation. We also support the committee's recommendations. The legislation is similar to what has been put in place in England and Wales, and it is the most straightforward way of sustaining an already overwhelmed appeals system.

I hope that today's debate gives us the opportunity to put on the record a number of concerns about further support for assessors and some of the other points that were put to the committee during stage 1. I hope that the Scottish Government will address those concerns and that we make sure that businesses across Scotland are now given all the support that they need to come back from what has been an awful time during the pandemic.

15:51

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. If it is passed, the bill will ensure that the impact of Covid-19 between 2 April 2020 and 1 April 2021 cannot be used while

determining the rateable value of non-domestic property unless it resulted in a physical change to the state of the property. Labour supports the bill.

As the minister said, the bill does the same thing for the period between April 2020 and April 2021 as the Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021 does for the period from 1 April 2021 onwards. Labour supported that order at committee and, therefore, Labour also supports the general principles of the bill. It seems to be the most sensible way of proceeding, given the level of appeals that have been made.

With that said, it is always important to look at the concerns that stakeholders have raised about the bill and the order. A number of concerns were raised about lack of consultation on the original order. It is essential that the Government makes it clear that that omission does not set a precedent for future legislation.

It was also noted that there are fears that the policy decision sets a precedent for retrospective changes to tax policy. Again, it is therefore important that we have clarity. The Government has assured the Parliament that the principles of certainty and engagement will underpin future non-domestic rates policy, and Labour will hold the Government to that commitment.

More concerning than all of that should be the state of our high streets. As other members have said, before the pandemic, we would only need to walk into our local town centres to see the problems—a lack of diversity of business, high vacancy rates and a lack of footfall, leading to what many reported as the death of the high street.

With almost 20,000 small businesses being lost during a single year of the pandemic, it is critical that we look at what we can do to support the rebirth of our high streets. At the heart of that must be support for businesses that are coming out of the pandemic. Part of it must be a review of non-domestic rates and the approach to the calculation more generally.

As the subject has been raised on many occasions, I revisited the last time that I spoke on it, which was in 2019, and I am concerned that the problems that I raised three years ago remain. The revaluation process remains too complex and difficult for the majority to understand, and the Government has still not addressed the workload pressures for assessors, which, by the start of the pandemic, had led to a perfect storm. I said at the time that it was ridiculous, and it remains ridiculous, that a business would struggle to understand the revaluation process. The process should and, indeed, must be totally transparent to all businesses.

When businesses do not understand the process, is it any wonder that 40,000 properties lodged an appeal in relation to the impact of the pandemic between January 2020 and March 2021? Would we expect the same number of appeals if business owners understood the revaluation process and felt that they were being treated fairly and being engaged in the process? Does the situation not indicate that there is a need for more support for businesses as we come out of the pandemic?

By clearing up confusion about the revaluation process and providing further targeted support for the businesses that have been worst hit by the pandemic, we could reduce the workload pressure on assessors by simply removing the requirement for businesses to appeal in the first place.

Scottish Labour is calling for retail, hospitality and leisure properties in Scotland to receive the same 50 per cent rates relief as is being offered in England this year, so that they are given equal support on the road to recovery. That is one small step that the Scottish Government could take today to support the bounce-back of the high street. Is the Scottish Government ready to do what is required?

Businesses out there are keen to recover. Small and medium-sized enterprises account for the highest share of employment in Scotland, so it is important that we all do what we can to support the growth of SMEs across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. I advise members that, as we have quite a bit of time in hand, I can be very generous.

15:57

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): As a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, I am delighted to contribute to the debate.

When the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth gave evidence to the committee, he explained that the aim of the bill is

“to ensure fairness for all Scottish ratepayers while maintaining the integrity of the non-domestic rates system and the stability of Scottish public finances.”

He also said that the bill provides ratepayers with “clarity and consistency” on the policy around material change of circumstances appeals. He explained:

“Typically, the term ‘material change of circumstances’ has been used to reflect either physical changes to a property, such as an extension or demolition, or certain major changes in a specific area, such as the tram works in Edinburgh. The intention of the change in definition”—

which was introduced by the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020—

“was to reflect recent case law and the move to a three-year revaluation cycle by restricting the circumstances in which general economic factors can be regarded as being relevant to a change in valuation.”

With more than 40,000 MCC appeals having been lodged since the start of the pandemic, the Scottish Government’s view was that economic changes to rateable values that had resulted from Covid-19 should be considered at revaluation rather than under the MCC provisions, at which point the impact across all properties would be taken into account. It is key to note that that view was shared by Administrations across the UK.

The minister also made it clear that the bill would not remove the right of appeal and that it would be for appellants to decide whether they wanted to pursue or to withdraw their Covid appeals. Given that such appellants might not feel that they will be in a sufficiently informed position to take such a decision until Parliament has finished its scrutiny of the bill, the minister confirmed that the Scottish Government intended

“shortly to introduce legislation to extend the disposal deadline by a further year beyond 31 December 2022.”— [Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, 15 March 2022; c 5, 2-3, 4.]

The committee welcomed the Scottish Government’s intention to extend the disposal deadline from 31 December 2022 to 31 December 2023, and it looks forward to considering the relevant legislation in due course.

The bill has three guiding principles. It provides clarity and consistency, and underlines the fact that the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic on the business community will best be addressed by Scotland’s new three-year business rates revaluation roll. The approach that is taken in the bill ensures the fairest route forward for all ratepayers.

The bill will also protect the revenues of local authorities, thereby avoiding putting unnecessary pressure on public services. At this point, I should declare that I will remain a serving councillor for one more week.

It is also worth highlighting that, since the start of the pandemic, co-ordinated Scottish Government support for business has reached more than £4.5 billion. As we know, Covid-19 had a major impact on the economy. The Scottish Government responded swiftly, and on an unprecedented basis, to support businesses through the pandemic. It introduced 100 per cent retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation relief for 2021-22 and continued relief at 50 per cent for the first quarter of 2022-23 for the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors.

The minister also explained that, following the Barclay review of non-domestic rates, the Scottish Government had strengthened revaluations to ensure that they would more closely reflect market circumstances by increasing the frequency of revaluations from five-yearly to three-yearly and reducing the time between the tone date and the revaluation. As the minister said, the next revaluation has been delayed by one year to 2023 and the Scottish Government has brought forward its commitment to the introduction of a one-year tone date to 1 April 2022. Both measures have been universally welcomed by Scotland’s business community.

It is important to note that the ruling out of coronavirus considerations does not apply to changes to the physical state of a property.

The bill gives businesses and local authorities clarity and consistency for the next few years. Challenges remain as we recover from the pandemic and deal with the cost of living crisis. Our high streets are at the heart of our communities, and I know that the minister is working closely with businesses, with the retail strategy being one example of that. We all have a duty to work closely with our business communities in the next few years.

Please support the bill.

16:01

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Probably for the last time, I remind members of my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I am a councillor on Aberdeen City Council. It has been a huge honour to serve as a councillor for my home town, where I was also lucky enough to be co-leader of the council. I pay tribute to all the staff at Aberdeen City Council, which was the UK council of the year in 2020.

Over the past five years of my being a councillor, the issue of non-domestic rates has been one of the biggest that the north-east has faced. I have spent much time on the topic, meeting local businesses and trying to understand the issues that they face. I will say more about that later.

The Conservatives welcome the bill as a sensible measure to update Scotland’s non-domestic rates and appeals, as England and Wales have already done. However, what we are supporting is a very small sticking plaster for a system that is fundamentally broken.

The bill that we support today will not help the thousands of businesses in the north-east that have been failed by the business rates system. In 2017, businesses in the north-east faced huge

increases in their rates bills when the valuation was assessed at the peak of oil and gas activity, only for new bills to arrive just as the sector faced one of its biggest slumps, which also impacted on the area.

We now have a crazy situation in which the non-domestic rates income from businesses in Aberdeen is more than that from businesses in Edinburgh, which is staggering when we consider that Edinburgh is much larger and has a far bigger population than Aberdeen has.

Back in 2017, after a huge outcry, the then finance minister Derek Mackay had to announce a £40 million package of rates relief for the office and hospitality sectors in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire to mitigate extortionate rises of sometimes up to 400 per cent in non-domestic rates. Although it was welcome, that rates relief package helped only certain sectors and still burdened them with increases of at least 14 per cent each year.

Amazingly, businesses were told by the courts that no material change of circumstance had taken place and businesses in the north-east were told by the Scottish Government that they would have to wait for the revaluation to take place to fix the discrepancy. Along with Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, I campaigned for the revaluation date to be brought forward, but those calls fell on deaf ears in Government. Businesses were then dealt another slap in the face when the revaluation date was delayed.

This bill means that businesses that made improvements to mitigate the effects of Covid will not be penalised for those. However, the fact that we need the bill shows one of the biggest flaws in the non-domestic rates system, which David Lonsdale of the Scottish Retail Consortium highlighted at yesterday's meeting of the Economy and Fair Work Committee: businesses are penalised for investing in and upgrading their premises. We are now in a position in which a business may be struggling and its owners may want to invest to protect the business but know that the stakes and risks will be higher. That must be a near impossible position for many businesses.

Something needs to change. The rates system that we have at present is killing our high streets. Just today, we have seen an article in *The Press and Journal* that tells how a local businesswoman, Julie Hulcup, opened a hair and beauty salon on Aberdeen's Union Street. It explains that she overcame obstacle after obstacle over the past two years but her rates bill proved to be the final straw. Faced with a tax bill of over £1,900 per month, she has thrown in the towel, and she fears that more businesses could soon go the same way. We need such local independent businesses

on our high streets, but the Scottish Government has failed them.

The rates system is killing our high streets. It is driving businesses away and stifling investment. There is a downward spiral that has been accelerated by Covid, and this devolved Government needs to take its head out of the sand and act quickly.

Tom Arthur: I am grateful to Mr Lumsden for giving way. I ask this question in a spirit of genuine engagement. He raises and articulates his concerns and those of his constituents about the non-domestic rates system. He will be aware that we had the independent Barclay review several years ago and that the UK Government recently published a fundamental review of the business rates system for England. That ultimately articulated measures that we have already started to implement in Scotland, such as a move to three-year valuation and a relief similar to our business growth accelerator. However, that review recognised that a tax on commercial property is a fundamental part of a balanced business tax system.

The member has articulated a range of concerns. I am genuinely interested in hearing his views on reform. Are there particular measures that he would like to be implemented? Does he believe that there should continue to be a property-based tax? Does he believe that there needs to be an alternative means of taxation? What are his views? Does he believe that the system should continue to exist as it is but that there should be a different set of reliefs?

I am taking advantage of the time in hand, Presiding Officer, but I am very keen to hear the member's views on how the system should be reformed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Mr Lumsden, I note that I have been generous because I indicated that we have a bit of time in hand. That is the only reason.

Douglas Lumsden: Absolutely, Presiding Officer.

It is good that the minister mentioned the Barclay review. That is one of the areas that I have spoken to businesses about quite a lot over the past five years, and those businesses felt that the remit of the Barclay review was too tight. It was only about tinkering around the edges. It would have been better if there had been a review that was more wide ranging than Barclay was allowed to be. Such a review could have engaged with businesses and brought out better ideas on how we could have a fit-for-purpose system that will help to improve our high streets.

The Government must not just cross its fingers and hope for the best. That will not work. Urgent action needs to be taken now, before more retail businesses go to the wall. The Covid business rates support packages were, of course, welcome, but they delayed and masked the issues that we now face.

We welcome the bill as a first small step, but more needs to be done. The Scottish Government has the powers; it now needs to stop sitting on its hands and use them.

16:08

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I will continue to be a serving councillor in South Lanarkshire for the next week.

The Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill will ensure fairness for all Scottish ratepayers while maintaining the integrity of the non-domestic rates system and the stability of the Scottish public finances. In considering the bill, there are some key points that we must note about the non-domestic rates landscape. First, the purpose of the bill is something that has been supported by the Scottish Assessors Association, and it will be implemented in England by the Conservative Government and in Wales by Labour.

Secondly, we must consider the bill alongside the Scottish Government's wider support for businesses and other organisations that are liable for non-domestic rates. Under the SNP, Scotland has the lowest business rates poundage in the UK. Furthermore, the SNP Government's continuation of the small business bonus scheme over the current session of Parliament will ensure that 100,000 business properties in Scotland pay no rates.

On top of that, when Covid struck, the Scottish Government froze poundage rates, in effect, and implemented 100 per cent rates relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. For the first quarter of the new financial year, the Scottish Government has introduced a 50 per cent relief for those sectors. I am sure that that will be a welcome buffer as we look forward to what I hope are better months and years ahead.

As well as reliefs, the revaluation of premises in a timely manner is important for businesses and local authorities. The Scottish Government has already implemented shorter revaluation cycles. It is important that the impact of the current economic climate on rateable values across all properties will be taken into account during the upcoming revaluation period. Ratepayers will continue to have the right to appeal decisions by

valuation boards and to request reviews following changes to premises.

Over the pandemic, co-ordinated Scottish Government support for businesses has totalled £4.5 billion.

For local authorities, non-domestic rates, alongside council tax, are an important revenue-raising tool. However, it is also important that there are opportunities to tailor business rates according to local circumstances. That includes discretionary relief powers for the third sector and sports organisations. Furthermore, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 gave councils a new power to create and fund their own localised business rates relief schemes, in addition to existing national schemes.

Douglas Lumsden: I welcome the ability for councils to have rates reduction schemes but, given that councils have so little money, it is difficult for them to do anything with that. Does the member agree that it would probably be more beneficial to allow councils to have more flexibility when it comes to business rates, so that they may raise more money and can make their reduction schemes more effective?

Collette Stevenson: The current discretionary powers of local government are not being fully utilised. I would like to see more of that and more talks with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The relief schemes allow councils to better reflect local needs and to support communities.

Another useful tool is the business rates incentivisation scheme, which encourages councils to grow their local business tax base and maximise income. That scheme was suspended during the pandemic, but its reintroduction could perhaps help to support economic recovery as we move forward.

In conclusion, the bill is necessary in order to support public finances. As I have mentioned, it is just one part of the wider non-domestic rates landscape in Scotland. Under the SNP, Scotland benefits both from the lowest business rates poundage in the UK and from the most generous relief schemes. Given the consensus from Governments across the UK that the policy is necessary, I hope that the general principles of the bill will be agreed today. I support the motion.

16:13

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The topic of business rates is arcane, esoteric and drier than the Saharan sands—and it attracts certain anoraks, not excluding myself, to contribute to debates, as I am doing today.

Nonetheless, it is hugely important to business and to the Government. That struck me many years ago—in 2008, I think—when we introduced the small business bonus scheme. I was visiting a lady hotelier in Kingussie, who asked what it would mean for her. I told her to get her rates bill so that I could calculate what she would save. She brought the bill to me. I looked at it, did some calculations—I hope that I got them right—and said, “You are going to save several thousand pounds.” She looked at me and said—the only time that it has ever happened in rather a long political career—“Mr Ewing, I love you.” I enjoyed that moment. [*Laughter.*]

To be serious, I will make a few brief reflections and one plea to the minister. The reflections are as follows. Are the forecasts of future total non-domestic rates revenue somewhat optimistic? They went down to £2 billion last year, they are £2.8 billion this year, and they are going up to £3.2 billion, £3.1 billion and £3.2 billion. When retail is suffering, online business is growing and offices are not being used for much, I wonder whether we can make such optimistic forecasts. If we get the figures wrong, ordinary individuals will have to pay through their taxation.

I also wonder whether the assessors will be able to perform the work within the time limit in the three-year cycle of revaluation and whether it might be sensible to discourage frivolous appeals. When I was in business, I made several of those because I thought that I would just chance my arm and see whether I could get some money off, as all businesses do. Cost recovery is the normal principle. A small fee of £50 or something like that would discourage completely frivolous applications, which simply clutter up the system.

I come to the main point that I want to make. I want to make a plea. True to my anorakish tendencies, I have waded through the bill and the explanatory memorandum, and I have studied the evidence session in which Marc Crothall, Paul Togneri, Leon Thompson and others gave evidence. It is well worth considering seriously the import of what they say with regard to the next revaluation.

Every revaluation brings major change. The last one hit the small hydro sector hard. There were absolutely stratospheric increases, and we have had to bring in relief to 2032 to counteract that. The system is not really supposed to work like that.

The key issue is that Covid has had short-term impacts—we have discussed that today—but it will also have serious longer-term impacts. For example, I know from many hours of discussion with many people in tourism, including Marc Crothall and Leon Thompson, and especially with people in inward-bound tourism—people coming

to Scotland from other countries—that that sector, which includes tour operators, airports and visitor attractions, such as the whisky centre, which is a brilliant attraction but is entirely dependent on foreign visitors for a very large proportion of its customers, is finding that they are thinner on the ground. Is it not the case that there has been a long-term change in patterns, so that fewer people may have foreign holidays both from here and inbound from other countries? That is probably the case.

When Paul Togneri gave evidence to the committee, he argued with force that the way of calculating rates for licensed premises is particularly harsh. The point was also made that the total cumulo increase in debt in coronavirus business interruption loan scheme loans and coronavirus large business interruption scheme loans—CBILs and CLBILs—and bounce-back loans was £4 billion across the whole business world. If the debt of Scottish business as a whole has increased by that amount because of Covid, that will, of course, have long-term consequences, as money that is borrowed has to be paid back.

I will conclude, Presiding Officer, because, obviously, I do not want to get into bother with your good self.

My plea to the minister is that, although the assessors are entirely independent—and rightly so—that does not mean that they cannot engage with and listen to business. Will the minister encourage them to do so, particularly with regard to those sectors that feel that they have a strong case to say that Covid has not, sadly, just delivered short-term pain but caused them very serious structural and systemic difficulties that surely must be taken into consideration at the next revaluation?

16:18

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow Fergus Ewing—although I hope that it is not quite the same pleasure that his constituent had. His speech was powerful, and it raised some important issues to be addressed—not just today, but going forward—about how our business structure has changed as a result of Covid. Many members across the chamber will have heard exactly the same cries from various areas of business about the challenges that they face.

It is a pleasure to contribute to this stage 1 debate. I echo Alex Rowley’s comment that the Labour Party will support the bill at this stage. However, it is a missed opportunity. Scottish Labour believes that the Government could do much more to support our towns and high streets through Scotland’s local tax system. We lost

almost 20,000 small businesses during a single year of Covid, and many more are likely to follow if the SNP fails to support small business adequately in the recovery.

The bill deals with the specific problems and challenges that businesses face on our villages' and towns' high streets and, indeed, in the cities. The economic climate and the Government have, between March 2020 and March 2021, overseen a reduction by 19,805 in the number of businesses in Scotland—a drop of 5.4 per cent. There is the lowest number of enterprises in Scotland since 2014. Our business enterprises have been stretched to breaking point by the crisis, so renewed help is urgently required from the Scottish Government.

I will take the opportunity to hint at some of the procedural failings in the bill—not simply to highlight them, but to make the plea that, when we go on to restructure non-domestic rates, we include in the process people who understand. We should include industries that have reflected the changes and experts who have lived experience, who can help to guide and create a system that will work.

I am grateful to the convener for taking my intervention on the committee's reports, both of which are excellent. In its report on the 2021 order, the committee expressed concerns about stakeholder engagement and a lack of consultation. Stakeholders again raised concerns about that with the bill, especially in relation to the business and regulatory impact assessment. It has now been published—a few days ago—but it was published late and it sits at the core of our consideration. Those documents should feed into decision making by committees and members in the chamber about whether they want to support a bill at stage 1.

When he was before the committee, the minister said:

“I am confident that there has been sufficient opportunity for engagement and consultation in the extensive process that I have outlined. The process has allowed issues to be aired and considered, and business has had the opportunity to feed into it.”

He went on to say that, in his experience, throughout the

“extensive engagement with the business community ... the issue ... was not raised to any meaningful extent.”—*[Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, 15 March 2022; c 7.]*

I welcome the letter from the Government dated 26 April, which, in a paragraph headed “Consultation and Engagement”, simply talks about the failure to publish the business and regulatory impact assessment. There is no real explanation for the lack of engagement when the

bill was introduced or about the specific points that were raised. That concerns me. Industry and stakeholders have expressed concern about the level of input that they had. Their input will be crucial to how we redesign the system. They are the experts and we should listen to them.

The committee now accepts the level of consultation. It is right that I draw attention to that, because I was going to criticise it. However, I ask the minister whether he can provide assurance about the level of consultation. I also ask him for an assurance about retrospective alteration in tax procedures. I know that that has been given in writing, but I would be grateful if he could put it on the record.

16:23

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I really enjoy speeches by my friend and colleague Fergus Ewing. He can certainly brighten up a dull day. He should be selling a course of 10 speeches. Many members would learn a lot if they came here to listen to him.

I recall other colleagues' speeches. I always came to the chamber to listen to David McLetchie's speeches because they were excellent. I also used to come to listen to Tom McCabe from Labour, who used to sit up the back. Their speeches were wonderful.

This is a fairly short debate in which the speeches are probably longer than the bill. However it is important and it is worth emphasising that, as some members have described, the purpose of the bill is to ensure fairness for all non-domestic ratepayers in Scotland and to maintain some stability in the public finances.

The bill ensures that the effects of Covid cannot be used as a material change of circumstances to lodge an appeal. As other members said, that has happened in Wales, Northern Ireland and England. That MCC route can still be deployed, of course, but only when physical changes are made to a property or major changes occur in an area.

At the outset of the committee's consideration of the bill, we heard about the potential for a huge number of Covid-related appeals, which, if they were permitted, would put serious pressure on assessors' ability to get through the workload. If such appeals were successful, they could significantly reduce public finances for our local services. The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth addressed that and said in his response letter to the committee's report that he has extended the disposal deadline for all the permitted appeals, which is to be welcomed.

We heard from the Federation of Small Businesses that there are not many smaller businesses among the appellants, while larger multinationals that perhaps enhanced their profitability during Covid could have been in for an unwarranted windfall if they had been successful in their appeals. The committee agreed that the Scottish Government's proposal, in line with other jurisdictions that have been mentioned, was the right and, probably, the only approach to take.

Some of the issues that cropped up during the committee's deliberations focused on consultation and engagement, which have been mentioned by a couple of members today. Some respondents said that the proposals were not sufficient. The minister was pressed on that at committee; he explained then, as he did in his opening remarks today, that he had intimated his intentions as early as June 2021 and that extensive consultations had, in fact, taken place. I think that it is fair to say that, on balance, the committee accepted that explanation from the minister.

As I recall, the other main consideration was whether the BRIA that has been mentioned by a couple of members should have accompanied the bill. The committee noted that that was a departure from the norm. In his response to the committee's report, the minister reminded us that

"A Business and Regulatory Impact Assessment (BRIA) was published on the Scottish Government website".

The Government might have made that a bit clearer, however, and it could have drawn the committee's attention to it. That remark was welcome.

As the committee's convener made clear in her speech, it is an unusual step to take to change tax policy retrospectively by removing rights of appeal in certain circumstances. However, the committee agreed that, on balance, there was not really any other option open to the Scottish Government to enable it to deal with the issues that have been thrown up by the pandemic.

As we know, non-domestic rates relief has been a feature of the Scottish Government's approach to taxation, and it has taken more than 100,000 small businesses out of the rates system altogether, which has been described as "a lifeline" by the Federation of Small Businesses. Retail, hospitality and leisure businesses have been given 50 per cent relief for a further three months into 2023, which follows on from the full 100 per cent relief that they have had over the past two years.

An interesting but important aside, which was noted and is hidden away in paragraph 65 of the committee's report, recalls the announcement that was made by the UK Government, the day after this Parliament went into recess in March 2021 for

the Scottish Parliament election, that £1.5 billion was to be made available for business support, and that Scotland's consequential share of that would be £145 million. As the minister will recall, I continually sought confirmation of whether Scotland had received that support. In the most recent committee meeting, the minister made it clear that, in his opinion, that cash has now been received. That is very welcome, even if it was more than a year late in coming.

Our committee recognised that the Scottish Government has had to act rapidly to get help out to businesses and to mitigate the potential significant and serious impact of tens of thousands of appeals.

With that, I am content to recommend that Parliament support the general principles of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. I call Alex Rowley to wind up on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:28

Alex Rowley: There is broad agreement across the chamber that it is necessary to take the steps that are being taken today. However, there is also broad agreement around a few issues. When the minister was speaking, Fergus Ewing asked him about encouraging assessors to engage with businesses. I am not sure that the minister answered that, but my experience before Covid was that many businesses found it difficult to understand how assessors had reached the conclusions that they had reached. When they tried to engage with them, they were quick to point out that they are independent. However, being independent does not mean that assessors should not be engaging with businesses or that they should not be having discussions with businesses, and businesses should be able to understand why they are being asked to pay the sums that they are being asked for. That is a clear message when it comes to looking forward.

The minister asked somebody what steps they would take to address the replacement or to make the system fairer. I would say to the minister that the first step must be to ensure that the system is transparent. Businesses have to understand why they are being asked to pay what they are being asked for.

That raises the wider issue of business support. Over many years, local authorities have been cutting back local economic development services and local business services. Douglas Lumsden said that the bill would be like putting a sticking plaster on a broken system. Part of the process has to be to look at what support businesses need. We all accept that the pandemic has had an

impact on businesses, and Miles Briggs made that point. It has been a dreadful time. At this stage, we certainly could not say with confidence that pre-pandemic levels of business will resume. Many people's lifestyles—the way that they shop and so on—have changed. We do not know what the final impact of the pandemic will be, particularly on our high streets. Local authorities are ill equipped to put in place the levels of support that need to be in place.

There could be a wider strategic review that looks at working with business, particularly high streets. A few years ago, the then finance secretary, Derek Mackay, made a big thing of announcing, at the last minute, £50 million of investment for high streets in his budget, which got a lot of positive press. At the time, my response was, "How much more street furniture and cobbles can we actually make to make places look better?" I do not know whether David Torrance is in the chamber, but my classic example of that would be Kirkcaldy High Street. There has been masses of investment there by Fife Council, looking at the street furniture and pavements, but the fact is that the shops still sit empty. The John Smith business park, which is expanding, is up the road. There is masses of free parking and there has been huge investment there. The footfall is massive. At Christmas and at other busy times, we cannot get near it. There is the comparison. That is because decisions were made on a planning policy level—I am referring to a previous planning policy—that have resulted in the high street being killed. I have talked to the minister about this and he is keen to look at how we move forward. If the Parliament is going to have the discussion, instead of simply throwing money at high streets, let us have a wider discussion with businesses and local authority partners about how we revive town centres. Otherwise, I fear that we will throw more money after more money and end up with the same result.

Business Gateway services and economic development services should be strengthened at a local level. We should have local and regional economic development strategies across Scotland that link skills and opportunities and work with businesses. We really need to have a fresh approach if we are going to create the businesses of the future and invest in them. If we do not, we will not grow our economy—it is as simple as that. The priorities must move forward. Fergus Ewing mentioned the structural difficulties that are in place at the moment.

Presiding Officer, I have reached my five minutes. I am sure that there will be consensus. We will support the bill.

16:33

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mr Ewing is on fine form in the chamber these days, which must be because he is free of his ministerial shackles. He entertains us on a regular basis. He made an important point that the debate is for anoraks but it is nonetheless an important one. He is absolutely spot on. One could easily argue about the complexities and the difficulties of the debate, but it really matters, especially if we are going to help businesses get back on their feet and recover from what many inside the community say has been the most difficult period in their history. It is wholly understandable that Covid-19 has created numerous concerns for businesses, not least because of the effect of the virus and the accompanying restrictions on the ways that they have had to reorganise themselves.

Of course, that has had huge implications for the rateable value of many properties. In turn, it is not at all surprising that there have been a large number of material change in circumstance appeals lodged on the grounds of, for example, social distancing measures, increased home and hybrid working, or, in many cases, the requirement to actually close down businesses altogether, which has sometimes been temporary but sometimes has not. All of those have had huge implications for property valuations, and we have to be cognisant of the fact that that is very serious for a range of businesses.

When he was speaking on behalf of the Conservatives at the start of the debate, Miles Briggs made the point that the number of appeals related to the pandemic is just under 50,000, which is obviously a huge increase in comparison to 2018-19, when, if my memory is correct, the total was something around the 5,700 mark. That is a huge difference, and the Scottish Government—quite rightly, in my opinion—concluded that the majority of those appeals relate specifically to the implications of the Covid pandemic. We are keen to support the Scottish Government on that basis.

The just under 50,000 properties that are the subject of appeals have a combined rateable value of £3,929 million, which corresponds to an estimated total of £1,117 million in net rates income in 2021, so we are obviously not talking about low levels of money. That is why the legislation is so very important.

As others have mentioned, if the bill is passed, it will mean that no account can be taken of any matters relating to coronavirus when determining the net annual rateable value of non-domestic property. That means that, for any appeals that are lodged, a change in rateable value could not be considered on the ground that the value of the

property has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, with effect from 2 April 2020.

The Scottish Government, like the UK Government, is absolutely right to be of the opinion that any impact on rental value arising from Covid-19 or the restrictions forms part of the general market conditions and therefore should be considered as part of the wider revaluation. Martin Whitfield and Fergus Ewing raised important points about the engagement process that has to take place. That is essential, and it is quite right that if appeals on the ground of Covid-19 were permitted in relation to material changes of circumstances, rateable value would have to change constantly, which is surely neither sensible nor practical.

There is widespread agreement on the principles of the bill. The fact that no significant issues were raised in the submissions suggests that there is also widespread support for the bill across the business sector. What is interesting—this has come out in the debate this afternoon—is that the general discussions about the bill have revealed other issues.

My colleague Douglas Lumsden made interesting points about what has happened in the north-east. Twice this afternoon, Alex Rowley raised serious questions about what is happening in our high streets and the planning that goes alongside that. We have had comments about the Barclay review—its intentions and implications—and Miles Briggs referred to the fact that perhaps we need to review the appeals process.

Of course, the bill has reignited the debate about future reform of non-domestic rates, especially that it is an outdated and overly complex system that is tied up with far too much red tape, and the debate will, no doubt, continue. As we approach revaluation—pandemic permitting—it is in no one's interest to delay reform for too long. The consideration of reform is as important as the revaluation. As Liz Cameron quite rightly said to the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the current business rates system is just “not fit for purpose”. She made the point that the pandemic has done untold damage to our high streets, so reform is desperately needed to breathe new life into local economies.

Returning to business post-pandemic is, of course, not going to look like business before the pandemic. She is right to argue for simplification of what is a highly complicated system. I think that David Lonsdale also made that point yesterday at the Economy and Fair Work Committee, and I am sure that there is a debate in there for another day. However, the bill has reminded us of the deep-seated concerns of the business community, and we really cannot ignore those for too much longer.

Likewise, to accompany the discussions that are taking place in the Finance and Public Administration Committee about the impending fiscal framework renegotiation, there is discussion about what constitutes fair taxation. Ariane Burgess mentioned the principles of fair tax and the principles of Adam Smith, but I think that we have to apply those principles with a more modern approach. The Finance and Public Administration Committee and perhaps the Economy and Fair Work Committee have to be very keen to do that as quickly as is possible.

I will sum up by saying that we welcome this afternoon's debate. We see it as essential to the business community, and I repeat that the Scottish Conservatives will support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Tom Arthur to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Government. Minister, you have seven minutes.

16:41

Tom Arthur: I begin by thanking members from across the chamber for their constructive, considered and thoughtful contributions. I also strongly welcome the support of parties across the chamber for the general principles of the bill.

As Liz Smith touched on, a bill such as this, and particularly one for which there is broad consensus in the Parliament on its general proposition, will invite consideration of a broader range of issues. I note those points regarding wider reform of non-domestic rates and, indeed, the issues around our town centres and high streets. I intend to touch on those points in a moment.

I will reflect initially on some of the key points pertaining to the bill. A number of members have mentioned scrutiny and consultation, and I take those points very seriously. At committee and in my written response to the committee, I sought to provide some of the reasoning and rationale for that issue. I think that we recognise that the bill is born of an extraordinary and unprecedented period in all our lives—the Covid pandemic. That has necessitated actions that have perhaps been considered unique and unusual across legislatures on these islands. I note that the UK Government was in a position in which the subordinate legislation on Covid-19 appeals, which preceded its own primary legislation, was introduced and passed in the space of two days.

We have sought to give as much clarity as possible; hence we alerted Parliament to our intentions in June of last year and proceeded with the order where we could, with regard to subordinate legislation, before the introduction of the bill that we are considering. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

convener's comments suggest that the committee is now satisfied that there has been a degree of consultation. I also recognise the point, which I believe that Mr Briggs made, that the process of scrutiny that was undertaken with regard to the order obviated the need for more extensive scrutiny when the bill came before the committee for consideration.

I reiterate that I recognise that this is perhaps a unique set of circumstances, which have arisen ultimately in response to the unprecedented set of circumstances that we have faced with regard to the pandemic.

I want to be clear that, as I said in my opening remarks and to the committee, the bill does not remove any existing rights of appeal. Indeed, we have extended the disposal deadline to ensure that appellants are not negatively impacted and that they will have that opportunity to consider once the Parliament has completed its deliberations on the bill.

I will turn to a few of the contributions. I commend my friend and colleague Fergus Ewing for what is an art and a skill requiring years of parliamentary experience: bringing humour to a debate on non-domestic rates.

More importantly, I thank him for his informed and considered contribution to the debate. I take his points very seriously. I am sure that, as a long-serving minister, he fully understands that I have to respect the independence of assessors. However, I note that members have made their views on that very clear in the chamber this afternoon. I remind members that the Scottish Government continues to engage with assessors regularly on a range of issues, particularly around workload. We would expect assessors to notify us if there were any particular resource implications arising from their workload.

Douglas Lumsden: Does the minister share Fergus Ewing's concerns around the intake of non-domestic rates in the next three to four years?

Tom Arthur: That point was well articulated.

Moving on to broader consideration of the prevailing economic circumstances that we are inheriting from Covid, it obviously had unique impacts and the health protection measures that were introduced will have had unexpected impacts. However, looking broadly at the impact on town centres and retail, it has been recognised that Covid accelerated existing trends. In the steering group that worked on the development of the retail strategy, one contribution noted that potentially 10 years of change had been compressed into the space of 14 months. We have to respond to that.

I recognise the points that Alex Rowley made. Although I recognise the importance of the taxation system in relation to the viability of our town centres and high streets, we all recognise that it goes far beyond that. There are three areas of responsibility that I lead on in Government where action has been taken to address the concerning issues regarding the viability and future of our town and city centres.

First, we have published the retail strategy and, in due course, I will announce the composition of the industry leader group for that strategy, which has been broadly welcomed.

Secondly, we have recently published a second town centre action plan, which responded to the independent review. That is a call to action that has been published in partnership with COSLA and will be delivered jointly.

Thirdly, we have just completed the consultation phase of the draft national planning framework 4, which members had an opportunity to consider in full last week. I reiterate that my door is always open to discuss any aspects of NPF4, including policies around town centres and town centre first assessment. I am very keen to hear views on that.

We are also taking action around funding for our town centres. We have the place-based investment programme of £325 million over five years. Mr Rowley made reference to town centre funds, and £25 million of the PBIP is the regeneration capital grant fund. We also have, for example, the vacant and derelict land programme, which is worth £50 million over this session of Parliament, and the Scottish land fund, which we are doubling to £20 million per year. Since 2016, that has been open to urban settings as well, and I have seen at first hand some of the impact that it has had.

Liz Smith: The minister is absolutely right—I am sure that members would have lots of debates about what is the right tax and what the levels of taxation should be. However, does he agree that the biggest complaint from a lot of the business community concerns the complexity of the system? They are seeking considerable simplification of a lot of the tax measures. Does the minister see that as an important part of the consultation? It does not matter what political flavour we might discuss; does the minister accept that that is the key issue for a lot of businesses?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you start to bring your remarks to a conclusion?

Tom Arthur: Certainly, Presiding Officer.

I recognise the point that Liz Smith is articulating. The Barclay reforms that we are in the process of implementing will go some way towards leading to simplifications, particularly around

appeals. I give an undertaking to reflect and to engage regularly with business on those matters.

I reiterate my thanks to all members across the chamber for their contributions to the debate and welcome the Parliament's support for the general principles of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-03794, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a financial resolution for the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any increase in the revenue from non-domestic rates arising in consequence of the Act in relation to which Rule 9.12.3B(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders applies.—[*Tom Arthur*]

Motion without Notice

16:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The question on the motion will be put at decision time. In that regard, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, to move decision time forward to now.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time on Thursday 28 April be brought forward to 4.49 pm.—[*George Adam*]

Decision Time

16:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-04162, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-03794, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a financial resolution for the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any increase in the revenue from non-domestic rates arising in consequence of the Act in relation to which Rule 9.12.3B(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders applies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:50.

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