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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 17 May 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Sarah Brown, from St Machar's cathedral in Aberdeen.

The Rev Sarah Brown (St Machar's Cathedral): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, Saturday sees the beginning of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in a week when we will meet to make decisions about our future. It is an annual meeting of a unique kind that brings together island and mainland representatives, overseas missionaries, delegates from partner churches, and ministers, deacons, elders and youth with a breadth of age and experience.

Like the Scottish Parliament, the assembly is a place where voices from local communities can be raised so that they can be heard by those in power. Those of you who have been elected to your roles will know the weight of responsibility that comes from the power that you hold, and the way in which you can change lives for ill or for good. Unlike members of the Scottish Parliament, general assembly commissioners come together from congregations to be the power and then disperse after our week of meetings, in which we aim to discern the will of God in how our church moves forward towards the ever-changing challenges that are before us. Then we have a shared responsibility for implementing those decisions across the Kirk.

As our church changes shape and responds to the challenges of decline, we look for God's presence in new ways that are before us. Reconciling the number of churches with the decreasing number of ministers is not an easy task, nor is it happening at an easy time of transition. It comes at a painful time as we still wrestle with Covid and the grief that surrounds many people following the past two years in which we have had a different way of life.

Jesus, in his humanity, knows and understands grief and loss, which are perhaps the most powerful experiences that we can travel through in life. He knows that the answer is love, but that even with love all around us we will still experience anxiety, overwhelmingness and pain when we

encounter death and change. His words in John's gospel were:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

A deep breath is what we are gifted. It is a moment of stillness; a bit of calm in the waves that can wash us under; a reminder that where we are in any moment of change and loss is not where we will stay; and a space where the presence of God can dwell, which reminds us that we never travel this world alone. Today, I pass that peace on to you. Be brave.

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions, and responses to match.

Neonatal Deaths

1. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the investigation into the recent spike in deaths of newborn babies. (S6T-00711)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): First, I offer my condolences to all the families affected. Although we might expect to see natural fluctuations throughout the year, given the high level of deaths noted in March, we intend to investigate further.

All national health service boards use the perinatal mortality review tool to support high-quality, standardised review of each neonatal death. In addition, some deaths may be subject to a more in-depth review as part of the "Maternity and neonatal (perinatal) adverse event review process for Scotland".

In addition to those local reviews of each case, the Scottish Government, jointly with Healthcare Improvement Scotland, the Scottish Perinatal Network and Public Health Scotland, will undertake further investigations into the potential causes of the increased neonatal deaths to understand and address any possible contributing factors, so that we can continue to improve the care of the smallest and sickest babies in Scotland.

Sue Webber: I, too, pass on my condolences to all the families who are affected.

Although so little is known about the deaths, it is important that health visits run as normal, despite the huge pressures facing our national health service. Do we have the right resources in place to deliver the three home visits, as outlined in the health visitors home visiting pathway? What mitigations are being put in place while we investigate the causal factors behind these tragic baby deaths?

Maree Todd: Throughout the pandemic, although staff were being moved around at all times, maternity, neonatal care and family care were prioritised. Therefore, people in midwifery and health visiting roles were not moved to the same extent as people in other roles in hospitals, because we know just how important their work is.

Although the deaths are absolutely tragic, the number is thankfully small, which makes it particularly difficult to pick up on trends and what the underlying causes might be. However, we are looking carefully at the rate of death in March, and we will absolutely learn any lessons that can possibly be learned. We will ensure that, if any particular institutional lessons need to be learned, they will be taken forward.

The Presiding Officer: I call Sue Webber.

Sue Webber: Unfortunately, Presiding Officer, I had only one supplementary question.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Webber.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I, too, send my condolences to anyone who has lost a baby—these cases are indeed tragedies.

The Government is right to make it clear that there is no link to neonatal Covid or to the Covid-19 vaccine, but Dr Sarah Stock, who co-led the Covid-19 in pregnancy Scotland study, has said that further research is required to understand the effects of Covid-19 in pregnancy, because it can cause complications such as early birth. She has also said that the wider impacts of Covid-19 on the NHS workforce and services need to be looked at.

Can the minister confirm that the inquiry will examine those issues? When does she anticipate updating the Parliament further on the matter?

Maree Todd: Several surveillance programmes are under way that are focusing on the direct impact of Covid-19 on pregnant women and babies. Those include the CoPS and British Paediatric Surveillance Unit studies, both of which are looking in detail at population-level monitoring and analysis of the occurrence and outcomes of Covid-19 infection in pregnancy.

Worldwide, the vaccine has been used in millions of pregnant women. I know that there has been a lot of concern about using the vaccine in pregnancy, but the evidence thus far suggests that the virus is significantly more dangerous to pregnant mums and babies, and that the vaccine improves safety. I want to give reassurance on that front.

Undoubtedly, the situation is evolving and it is important that we think about all the factors that might have contributed to the current rise in neonatal deaths. Those include the pressures on the workforce, given that the peak in deaths occurred when the workforce was under the most immense stress that it experienced throughout the pandemic. We will look at those issues as well.

It is important that we learn lessons and make changes, as far as we can, to ensure that we deal with any preventable factors that may have contributed to the neonatal deaths.

Police Scotland (Compensation Payments)

2. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its reaction is to the reported awarding of almost £1 million compensation from Police Scotland to an ex-officer following an employment tribunal ruling of victimisation. (S6T-00722)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): The Scottish Government takes extremely seriously any concerns that are raised about Police Scotland, whether they are raised by the public or by officers. When things go wrong and mistakes are made, the police must be held to account, lessons must be learned and improvements must be made.

The findings of the employment tribunal clearly demonstrate that Ms Malone's experiences were wholly unacceptable, which has been fully recognised by the chief constable. He has apologised to the claimant, making it clear that misogyny, sexism and discrimination of any kind are deplorable and have no place in society or policing, and emphasising his personal commitment to leading change in policing in Scotland.

Daniel Johnson: The minister is right: the police must be held to account. The situation that Rhona Malone faced—bullying, harassment and, ultimately, the suppression of her complaint—was underpinned by a culture that was described at the tribunal as an “old boys club”.

Nobody should be under any illusion that the situation was isolated or unavoidable. Dame Elish Angiolini's report on complaints handling highlighted the treatment of minority groups and officers leaving on account of the culture that they faced. It is avoidable. I personally took the account of a whistleblower to the most senior levels of the police, including to a meeting at which I described the situation to the chief constable, yet nothing took place.

Although I acknowledge the chief constable's commitment to change and the forthcoming report by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, I have written to ask him to review the circumstances that led to Ms Malone's departure from the police force and to hold to account those who failed to examine her complaint and those who suppressed it. Will the minister and the Scottish Government join me in making that call on the chief constable?

Ash Regan: I thank Daniel Johnson for raising his personal experience with Police Scotland in reporting an incident such as this. I would expect the chief constable to reflect carefully on what Daniel Johnson has said in the chamber today.

On the substance of the question, in the days after the judgment was issued, the chief constable

made the commitment to commission an external police service to carry out an independent review of this particular employment tribunal decision and to make recommendations on performance, culture or conduct that will require action by Police Scotland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland is finalising that work.

Police Scotland has recognised that improvements are needed, and it has established a strategic oversight board to push forward the progress that is needed on equality and diversity in policing.

Daniel Johnson: We must enhance complaints handling procedures for police officers who make complaints about the service in which they serve. The Angiolini review made some good points, but the latest thematic progress report was published at the end of 2021.

In this circumstance, at least one other police officer has left directly because of these complaints, and other officers have left armed policing. Will the minister commit to expediting implementation of the recommendations of the Angiolini review, with a renewed focus on complaints handling and whistleblowing, and the creation of a third-party organisation to handle that? Will she commit to enhancing the powers of the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner around practice and policy review and the power to call in complaints when the PIRC no longer has confidence in the police force's handling of them?

Ash Regan: Many of the things that Daniel Johnson has just mentioned are under consideration by the Government. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans to respond in detail to the points that Daniel Johnson has raised.

The Angiolini review was an action that the Scottish Government took—in 2018, admittedly—to review police complaints handling, investigations and misconduct in Scotland, recognising that there was a potential issue in that regard. The Scottish Government accepted the majority of the recommendations, and we will shortly consult on legislative proposals with a view to delivering new laws to improve transparency and further strengthen public confidence in the police. We will consult on areas such as the duty of candour and co-operation, gross misconduct proceedings and adopting barred and advisory lists to strengthen Police Scotland's vetting processes. Those measures would aim to ensure that anyone who did not meet the required high standards would not be able to continue working in policing.

I note Daniel Johnson's comments about the implementation of the Angiolini review

recommendations, although I gently note that it has been less than six months since the latest thematic report. A significant amount of work has been under way on implementation, with 34 of the recommendations having been implemented to date.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I have been investigating Scotland's police complaints system for years. It is broken and unjust, with taxpayers' money being used to crush and silence officers and the public. Police Scotland tried to buy Rhona Malone's silence with a non-disclosure agreement. Other officers signed gagging orders because they did not have the strength or the money to fight for justice. Given that safeguards already exist to protect victims and sensitive information without the need for NDAs, will the minister commit to ending their use in policing?

Ash Regan: It is my understanding that no NDA was used in the final settlement of the case that we are discussing. I would also say that the use of NDAs is part of United Kingdom employment law and that there are some legitimate uses for NDAs, but they should not be used to cover up discriminatory behaviour, misconduct or anything of that nature.

The chief constable has responded to this particular case by apologising to the claimant, making it clear that sexism and discrimination have no place in policing and making a personal commitment to lead change in policing in Scotland.

I think we would all agree that the majority of police officers work hard to protect our communities. However, the member is right that, when things go wrong, as they have done in this case, we must have robust and transparent mechanisms in place to investigate complaints. A great deal of work has already been done—I have responded to Daniel Johnson regarding the Angiolini review—but more must be done. The service has accepted that. We will keep Parliament informed of the work done and progress made.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As the minister said, the Scottish Government has already taken steps to improve transparency by introducing the organisational duty of candour in 2018. Will the minister outline the further steps that the Scottish Government is taking to improve transparency and to further strengthen public confidence in the police? As she has suggested, when the standard of delivery in public services falls short, individuals and their families should rightly be able to get answers and justice.

Ash Regan: In 2018, we commissioned Dame Elish Angiolini to review police complaints

handling investigations and misconduct in Scotland. Her recommendations provide a strong platform from which to drive forward meaningful improvement in collaboration with our partners across the policing sector in Scotland.

We will soon consult on further legislative proposals, with a view to delivering new laws that will improve transparency and further strengthen confidence in the police. Those measures will aim to ensure that anyone who does not meet the high standards that are required will not be able to continue working in policing.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

This issue is only the latest such example in Police Scotland, and there are many cases of bullying and victimisation of whistleblowers in other public services, including, as has been widely reported, the national health service. Does the minister agree that those examples make the case for the establishment, by statute, of an independent office of the whistleblower for Scotland?

Ash Regan: I would have to give that proposal some consideration. I will come back to the member on that point.

In general, we have a high-quality police service in Scotland, but it is right that Police Scotland must be held to account and lessons must be learned when things go wrong. I assure members that the chief constable has taken responsibility and has personally committed to driving and leading change in policing in Scotland to ensure that lessons are learned and improvements are made.

Ferries (Delivery Date)

3. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the anticipated delivery date of the ferries under construction at Ferguson Marine, in light of recent reports that the number of faults in the two vessels has risen. (S6T-00713)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): The letter sent by Ferguson Marine to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee at the end of March sets out the new timetable and costs for the vessels, following the legacy cabling issue. Critically, that new schedule has been developed in partnership with Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited, and CMAL has endorsed the timetable.

Vessel 801 will be delivered between March and May 2023 and 802 will be delivered between October and December 2023.

At the request of the NZET Committee, the Ferguson Marine chief executive updates the

committee quarterly. The next update is due at the end of June.

Jamie Greene: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. It represents a very welcome shift in tone from the SNP after the disgraceful comments that were made by one of the SNP's MPs at Westminster, who asserted that we somehow need to change the record and stop talking about ferries. I say to the Government that the islanders of Arran whom I spoke to this morning are furious and want us to do anything but change the record on the issue of ferries.

Sadly, what I heard from the minister was repetition of what we heard months ago, and was not an answer to the question about the increased number of faults in the vessels. I want a cast-iron guarantee—so do our islanders—that vessel 801 will be in service by this time next year and that vessel 802 will be in service by the autumn of next year. We all wish the new chief executive of Ferguson's the very best of luck in delivering the vessels, but our islanders want to know whether their vessels will actually be in service.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident is the cabinet secretary that the Glen Sannox will be sailing passengers to Brodick by this time next year? In the spirit of taking responsibility, will she put her job on the line, if it is not?

Kate Forbes: I remind Jamie Greene that I represent a community that is set to benefit from one of the vessels and I was on Skye as recently as Friday speaking to people there. He is not the only member who represents island communities.

I will specifically address the faults that he mentioned. A senior member of the Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd team has recently been seconded to Ferguson Marine's senior management, and CMAL's owner observation reports—which I think are what the member is referring to—are now being treated as the snagging and defects list. That is typical of any large construction or shipbuilding project. There was a list of 237 OORs in March, and as engagement and the relationships between CMAL and Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd and between the respective teams have improved, good progress is being made on clearing those issues.

The list of OORs was assessed; 119 were assessed as being category 1, with the rest being minor snagging. There are engineering solutions for 83 of the 119, which leaves 36 still being worked on. Solutions are expected progressively and without delays or impacts on the programme.

That work is being led by the FMPG compliance director. Until recently, he was also employed by Lloyds Register of Shipping—the classification society that surveys both the Glen Sannox and

vessel 802. The chief executive officer is a naval architect and a classification surveyor by background. He is also personally engaged in the process—in particular, with issues relating to stability and safety.

Solving all the issues is crucial. It is part of the programme, and I think that we have got the best people on the ground to do that.

Jamie Greene: We have good people, but we do not have an answer. There was no cast-iron guarantee and, once again, no one in the SNP is willing to take full responsibility for delivery of the project or the vessels.

Of course, this stems back to the miraculous missing email. The First Minister gleefully attributes all the blame to Derek Mackay. The email magically appeared in the opening minutes of an Opposition debate, but it still, in the eyes of Audit Scotland, does not answer key questions. Why did the contract pass two rounds of due diligence, contrary to legal advice? Why was 80 per cent of the agreed price for the ships paid when the progress on building the ships was anything but progress? Did the First Minister herself give the go-ahead for the contract to be awarded to her friend Mr McColl?

There clearly remains a very real risk that the ferries will not be delivered. It is more than five years since their due date and the cost has spiralled to more than a quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers' money.

If the cabinet secretary cannot answer those questions, which Audit Scotland wants answers to, will she answer these two from me? Will the Government commit today to the Deputy First Minister making a full statement to Parliament on his role in all this? Secondly, will the Government agree to a full public inquiry into its handling of the shambles?

Kate Forbes: I am here once again, in another week, answering questions on Ferguson Marine, so the scrutiny in this way for the past two months has probably exceeded any other form of scrutiny.

On whether there will be a public inquiry, we have, of course, accepted the recommendations in the Audit Scotland report, among which are that we persevere with getting the boats delivered, and that we do an in-depth lessons-learned exercise after they have been delivered. The Audit Scotland report comes after the cross-party inquiry that was led by the then Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. There is already a comprehensive overview of the situation, with more than 200 documents having been published.

On the specific question, I have been absolutely crystal clear on what I expect from Ferguson Marine in completing the vessels. What resulted in

delayed construction to the vessels was not a document but a question of construction. Jamie Greene does not need to believe me on that; he just needs to read the Audit Scotland report, which is quite clear that the reason why the vessels are overdue and over budget is a matter of their construction. That is why my priority—I was at Ferguson Marine as recently as last week—is to make sure that the boats are delivered not just for his constituents, but for mine.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Ferguson’s workforce is entitled to expect better than constant attacks from the Tories—given that Mr Greene was in the yard only last month and heard exactly what was said by the managing director—and from Labour, which, in the words of the GMB, has treated the issue “as a political football”?

Kate Forbes: Stuart McMillan is absolutely right. Again, this is not about what I say or what the Government says, but about what the workers say. To hear the GMB blasting the Labour Party, and the Conservatives dismissing the concerns of workers, is really problematic. I was at Ferguson Marine last week and spoke directly to union representatives and to the workers. Their morale is being eroded and the future of the yard is being questioned as a result of elements of the discussion that is going on among politicians.

It is absolutely right that the Opposition holds the Government to account, and that the Government ensures that plans are in place to resolve the issues. That is why I am here answering questions again, and why we have had several debates on the issue. It is one thing to criticise the Government; it is quite another to constantly erode the morale of the workers who have jobs that are based on their skills and talent.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware of a report in the press today of an email that was sent from Derek Mackay to Stuart McMillan. She knows that one of the issues has been the lack of a full refund guarantee. According to the email from Mr Mackay, which was sent in February 2015,

“While CMAL’s board in line with standard industry practice has a preference for refund guarantees it has on occasion taken alternative approaches to ensure that shipyards, including Ferguson under its previous owners, were not excluded from bidding for those government contracts.”

What does the cabinet secretary have to say to that, and will she explain why the Government has been taking such a cavalier approach to ferry procurement?

Kate Forbes: Because—I am sure—Graham Simpson has read the Audit Scotland report in great detail, he will be aware that it identifies areas

in which the Government has already made changes; for example, in Government investment in private companies, and in procurement. An example of that is very clearly to be seen in the most recent contract that has been awarded.

The contract was awarded by CMAL in its capacity as procuring authority. That is well known and well documented. Because of documentation that has been in the public domain for almost two years, it is also well known and well documented that CMAL expressed concerns about a full refund guarantee. It took the Opposition quite a while to find that. The critical email, of 8 October, shows that mitigations were put in place to combat the lack of a full refund guarantee, including CMAL taking ownership of all equipment and materials that were supplied to the yard, all suppliers having to ensure that they had full refund guarantees, and the schedule of payments being changed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary said that she expects the vessels to be completed next year. It is clear that islands communities expect a national ferry-building programme to create a modern and resilient ferry fleet. The next stage of replacement of the ferry fleet will be to replace smaller ferries—work that could easily be done at Ferguson’s.

On supporting the workforce, will the cabinet secretary confirm that it is the Government’s intention, assuming that current timescales are met, to award the contract for replacement CalMac ferries to the yard, or will that work be going abroad to Turkey, too?

Kate Forbes: I thank Neil Bibby for that question, because I think that it is the first time that he has asked me a question about the future of Ferguson Marine. It is critical right now that we ensure that there is a pipeline of work at the yard.

The yard is actively pursuing opportunities for future vessel contracts. I do not know whether Neil Bibby joined the cross-party delegation of MSPs that went to the yard last month, at which the chief executive probably outlined what the yard is doing to secure future work. We will do all that we can to help the yard to secure opportunities.

Neil Bibby is right to identify that a £580 million ferry investment programme is under way, which will include the small vessels replacement programme. The conversations are actively ongoing. This is the kind of territory that we should be in if we want to boost the morale of the workers.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time.

Carbon Neutral Islands

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-04428, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on supporting Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral.

14:32

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I am delighted to open the debate in support of Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral. I will outline the Scottish Government's progress in supporting our island communities in their climate change journey, not least our exciting carbon neutral islands project, which puts islands at the forefront of our climate change ambitions.

I want to acknowledge and thank members for the proposed amendments to the motion. I am happy to support the amendment from Rhoda Grant, confirming that moving to net zero requires a just transition. The carbon neutral islands project will not only benefit the environment but support local economies, green skills and general wellbeing. I am also pleased to support the amendment from Rachael Hamilton.

The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting our island communities, and the innovative carbon neutral islands project highlights islands as hubs of innovation in our move towards carbon neutrality. The project will align with wider efforts to decarbonise and will follow a threefold approach: leveraging existing net zero-related public funding, promoting public-private partnership and driving private investment. Over the summer, we will publish a report setting out the next steps that we will take to support the islands that are included in the carbon neutral islands project, as well as how the project will benefit all other Scottish islands.

I am afraid that I am not in a position to support Liam McArthur's amendment, because, as set out, it does not recognise the clear division of responsibilities between ministers and local authorities. The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the importance of the other ferry services in Scotland, including the internal ferries that are the responsibility of our local authorities. However, the replacement of those ferries is wholly the responsibility of local authorities.

On the fuel poverty points raised in Liam McArthur's amendment, powers related to the energy market are reserved, so the United Kingdom Government holds most of the levers to address the pressures on energy bills. That being said, since 2009, we have allocated over £1 billion

to tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency.

We are committed to continuing to spend more per head on energy efficiency in remote rural and island areas, where we know that installation and labour costs are higher.

The carbon neutral islands project will build on a whole host of work that is going on across our islands on climate change mitigation and adaptation. However, before turning to the project itself, I will first say a few words about climate change and our islands.

Climate change and nature loss are among the greatest threats facing our planet. Small, low-lying islands are under threat from climate change and predicted rising sea levels. Climate change is expected to increase instances of flooding and coastal erosion, while simultaneously negatively affecting water supply, food production, health and tourism, and accelerating habitat depletion. Communities on Barra, South Uist, Tiree and Sanday—to name just a few—know all too well that climate change is already on their doorstep.

However, climate change should not only be perceived as a threat. It is a threat, but it also provides opportunities. Moving towards net zero should be seen as a driver towards a more fair and prosperous Scotland, and our islands have a unique role to play in that journey. As Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, I stress my deep concern about the challenges faced by our island communities. Our islands reflect the nation that we are. They help to define how international audiences see Scotland and they contribute hugely to our economy. We simply cannot allow them to suffer the consequences of climate change.

We have declared a climate emergency and stepped up our climate action and commitments through the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019, which calls for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045—five years earlier than the United Kingdom. Scotland's climate change legislation also ensures that we prepare and adapt to the impacts that are already locked in, including rising sea levels and more extreme weather. Even before the latest scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change findings were published this spring, we knew from previous reports the very real threat and heightened risk that the climate emergency poses to our planet. It is therefore crucial that the international community takes every opportunity to raise global climate action and ambition.

The 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties was not only one of the largest events ever to be held in Scotland but one of the most important. We can be proud of the

contribution that we made towards a successful outcome. The summit concluded with the adoption of the Glasgow climate pact, which saw countries commit to increased ambition and action. The pact reaffirms the aim to cap global temperature increases at 1.5°C and take action on adaptation and finance. Further, for the first time, there will be discussions on helping developing countries to pay for loss and damage.

It is against that wider background that the Scottish Government is determined to be world leading in tackling the climate emergency. We want to promote and support the huge potential and natural capital of our islands to help us to reach our net zero and climate resilience ambitions.

It is within that wider context that we announced in our programme for government a commitment to support at least three islands to become fully carbon neutral by 2040. I was delighted to announce at COP26 that we are taking that ambition even further. We now aim to support six islands in their journey towards carbon neutrality by 2040. That will allow us to provide direct support to one island in each of our local authorities that have responsibility for islands in Scotland.

The carbon neutral islands project is underpinned by three key principles: alignment, fairness and replicability. First, the project aims to align with existing island-based climate change efforts and avoid the duplication of those efforts. Secondly, the project will support islands to become carbon neutral in a just and fair way. Thirdly, the project will provide opportunities for all Scottish islands through an effective process of learning and sharing of net zero and climate resilience-related good practice.

As part of the selection process for the islands that have been chosen as part of the project, we established an external technical working group, with the initial goal of developing a set of criteria that would inform the selection of the six carbon neutral islands. The working group is made up of local authority officers and representatives from a wide socioeconomic range of organisations, such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the University of the Highlands and Islands, the Scottish Islands Federation, the Scottish Futures Trust and the young islanders network.

The six islands were identified through a collaborative process, which started with 58 criteria suggested by the group members. That was narrowed down to six broad criteria that were then used to identify the six islands. The criteria related to: housing, fuel poverty, energy, transport, economy and carbon sequestration.

We then asked local authority members to suggest up to three islands within their territory against each of the criteria. That was followed by a request to non-local-authority members to sense check the matching exercise. Finally, Scottish Government officials analysed input from all members in order to identify a mix of six islands that could provide the greatest possible learning for all Scottish islands.

Although we are fully aware that each island is unique, we attempted to come up with a group of islands that not only matched the agreed criteria, but provided a mix of population, size and past climate trajectory. For the carbon neutral islands project to deliver on its promise of sharing learning and good practice across all Scottish islands, that mix is crucial.

Following that process, I am delighted to announce that the six islands that will be part of the carbon neutral islands project are: Hoy, Islay, Great Cumbrae, Raasay, Barra and Yell.

The key questions that anybody on those islands may well be asking themselves are what changes they will see on their island and how they will benefit from their island being included in this project. By joining the project, we believe that islands will benefit in several ways.

First, islands will receive support in carrying out an in-depth climate accounting exercise, or to build on any exercises that may have been developed previously. Secondly, they will receive support in completing a community-informed climate plan, which responds to the interests of the island stakeholders and community. That will ensure that the voice of communities will truly drive the decarbonisation and resilience-building process. Thirdly, the islands will receive support to develop an investment strategy for the implementation of the community-informed climate plan. In due course, the islands will also receive support for specific decarbonisation and adaptation projects and activities.

In terms of the support to be provided, key island-based organisations will be working with island stakeholders and communities to implement the climate accounting exercise, the community-informed climate plan and the investment strategy.

A further benefit comes from the possibility of developing peer learning among islands around the world, whereby a Scottish carbon neutral island could be matched with an island overseas, through demonstration visits, leading to strengthened relationships with our European and international colleagues.

I also want to take the opportunity to emphasise that joining the carbon neutral islands project does not put any specific burden on the island or its community. Rather, the project will work for, and

with, the communities on each of the islands at a pace that the community considers most appropriate for them.

Most islands will already be carrying out activities related to the carbon neutral islands project and by being a part of this exciting work, will receive additional support to develop good practice. By joining the project, the carbon neutral islands will become net zero lighthouse communities and will be able to support other areas across Scotland in the national journey to net zero by 2045.

A further key question that island communities may be asking themselves across the six islands is, what happens next? I will outline to Parliament what our next steps will be in the project. Following today's announcement, we will organise our first visits to the six islands to meet key stakeholders. It is important that we visit the islands as soon as possible, not only to discuss any aspect of the project that the community may wish to ask questions about, but to continue learning from island communities by actively listening to them.

During the summer, we will introduce the key partners involved in the implementation of the project, and we will continue to map the many exciting and interesting climate change-related projects that are already taking place on our islands, in order to ensure continuity and alignment and to avoid unnecessary duplication. It is our desire and goal to start developing the necessary relationships as soon as we can, in order to ensure that the carbon neutrality journey is driven by the community on each of the six islands.

Following the visits, all islands will see the development of the climate accounting exercise, the community-informed climate plan and the climate investment strategy. As I have already said, those will be developed by key project partners together with the community and any other relevant stakeholders.

Once those first three steps are finalised, carbon neutrality projects and activities will be scoped and our work towards securing the necessary funding, from both the carbon neutral islands project and elsewhere, will be carried out. This phase will start at the beginning of the 2023-24 financial year and will continue throughout the lifetime of the project.

One last thing that I wish to reiterate is that the carbon neutral islands project is intended to support Scotland's islands to achieve carbon neutrality according to their priorities and at a pace with which they feel comfortable. The project is a real opportunity for islands in Scotland to embrace the journey towards net zero and climate

resilience that they have started and, in some cases, pioneered.

I will draw to a close. I am excited to move to the next stages of the carbon neutral islands project now that we have announced that Hoy, Islay, Great Cumbrae, Raasay, Barra and Yell are the islands taking part.

Alignment is a key principle that underpins the project. The project will sit within the wider landscape and seek to build on many of the exciting things that we are already doing as a Government. Scotland is already at the forefront of climate change mitigation and adaptation at the global level, and it should not come as a surprise that net zero and climate resilience are key drivers of our work on islands. I am sure that throughout the debate we will touch on the many exciting climate change initiatives that we are working on in relation to islands.

I am very much looking forward to the debate, and to discussing the wider work that we are carrying out to support our islands towards carbon neutrality.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's announcement of the six islands that will be supported towards becoming fully carbon neutral by 2040; notes that the six islands are Hoy, Islay, Great Cumbrae, Raasay, Barra and Yell; recognises that these six islands will embrace the opportunity for island communities to lead the way in realising Scotland's climate change ambitions; notes that the project will benefit all Scottish islands, and not only those supported directly as part of the project, through knowledge exchange and good practices; welcomes this initiative, which puts Scotland's islands at the forefront of climate change policy while celebrating their unique culture and heritage, and acknowledges that the six carbon neutral islands will become international trailblazers and champions of carbon neutrality across the world.

14:46

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Helping Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral is an ambition that is, no doubt, shared by all members. Last year, the people of Scotland chose to elect a Scottish Parliament without a majority so that all parties would work together on the key issues that we face, and the urgent need to tackle climate change is one of the key areas in which there is strong party consensus. I agree with the Government that helping our islands to become carbon neutral is a step in the right direction towards our climate goals.

Scotland's islands and islanders deserve our support, not just for the transition to reduce emissions and reach net zero, but because they have been ignored, misunderstood and forgotten about by this Government.

Our island communities have faced enormous difficulties over the past 15 years of rule by this Government, including depopulation, infrastructure issues, broken promises over ferries and crofting reform, and the yet-to-be-proven islands bond scheme. I have to highlight that catalogue of failures because the Government is putting the cart before the horse. Under this Government, islanders are and have been endlessly let down. I will touch on all those points.

Putting all of that to one side for a moment, I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement today of its ambition to help the six islands. In the spirit of how we voted last year, the Government has the chance to work with all parties in the Parliament towards the shared goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2040. That goal is shared not only by all parties, but by people across the islands and the rest of Scotland. We must take the opportunity to use the proposals as a way of fixing the problems that our island communities face.

Upgrading harbour infrastructure and delivering more ferry services would be a start. The ferries community board has said that the chronic mismanagement of ferry services

“represents a real threat to our islands' ability to retain and attract people, ensure services are sufficiently reliable and at prices that permit viable communities and thereby avoid depopulation.”

Addressing those issues must be a priority when we consider how to decarbonise our islands. The Government has an ambition to reduce ferry emissions by 30 per cent, but it cannot deliver the ferries. That is what I mean when I say that it is putting the cart before the horse.

Without strong and flourishing island communities, it will be very difficult to decarbonise those areas. It is clear that the fewer people there are on the islands, the more effort it will take for them to decarbonise the islands. Last month, *The Times* reported that depopulation was the top concern among Scotland's 93 island communities according to the national islands plan. Members of the Arran Development Trust raised concerns about a forecast that the island's working-age population will shrink by 47 per cent, which will exacerbate problems in delivering essential and everyday services and could affect the long-term sustainability of some communities.

The islands are our people and the people are our islands. The Scottish Government should be in no doubt that tackling island depopulation is vital to any plans to decarbonise our islands. Getting on top of the ferries fiasco would play a huge part in that.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Rachael Hamilton mentioned the viability of island

communities. Does she feel that the viability of those communities would be significantly enhanced if, with respect to the cost of energy, the UK Government regulated the market in heating oil, which is now entirely out of control for people who live off the gas grid?

Rachael Hamilton: From speaking to communities on Shetland, for example, I know that it is not just about the issue that Alasdair Allan has raised. A whole host of things bring down energy bills. There is the viability of offshore and onshore wind energy and other forms of energy that support the communities. It is important that we look at the energy mix in the round to ensure that people can live and work and have their livelihoods protected on the islands.

I want to touch on the islands' lack of trust in the Scottish National Party's ability to manage the ferries. I listened to Kate Forbes responding to Jamie Greene's topical question, and it is almost as if it is an inconvenience that we keep talking about the issue, but it is really important to islanders. It is an absolute insult and it is outrageous that, for years, the Scottish Government has not been able to deliver ferries. It is about connectivity, lifelines, transport to health and education, tourism and jobs—and those things are all really important. For every four-person family household on the islands, the waste and the overspend on the cost of ferries was £100. That is a lot of money that could be going towards decarbonising the islands.

Another key factor that has contributed to island depopulation is the abandonment of crofters. When I asked the cabinet secretary, in a Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee meeting, when the Scottish Government planned to bring forward crofting reform, she could not provide a ballpark date. Crofters are completely ignored by the Government; it is no wonder that their numbers are dwindling. Urgent help is required from the Government to breathe new life into a once-thriving industry that lay at the heart of island communities.

Mairi Gougeon: I have to challenge the assertion that Rachael Hamilton has made, given the support that the Government has continued to provide through the crofting agricultural grant scheme and the croft house grant scheme. The Government has also committed to producing legislation on crofting in this parliamentary session. Does Rachael Hamilton recognise all those actions?

Rachael Hamilton: Between 2016 and 2021, just £11 million was promised by the Government for the croft house grant scheme and only half of that was distributed. The cabinet secretary should

reflect on her comments and realise that the Government is not delivering what it is promising.

The islands bond scheme, which promised to provide an incentive for people to stay on the islands, has amounted to nothing more than a gimmick. The cabinet secretary, who is completely out of touch with the needs of crofters and islands more generally, will not say what benefits islands bonds will have for young people in enabling them to start out in crofting or in providing an alternative way for young people to buy into a croft. That is just another example of a complete lack of understanding of those communities.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I certainly agree with the point about the islands bonds, however well-intentioned they are. What islands need are things aggregated across the community to make them more resilient, whether that is investment in transport links or broadband. Does Rachael Hamilton think that that might be a better use of the welcome additional resources that are being provided through the scheme, which would make a more meaningful and sustainable difference to island communities?

Rachael Hamilton: That is exactly in the vein and spirit of what I am trying to convey to the Government. If we, together, get all the pieces of the jigsaw in place, we can start to build to ensure the viability of the communities in the islands.

I have already said that crofters can play a vital role in meeting emissions reduction and biodiversity targets. I am not sure that the Scottish Government quite gets that, and I do not know whether it understands the points that Liam McArthur and I are making.

That is demonstrated by the way in which the 2013 petition on Iceland greylag geese, which have caused problems for island crofters, was ignored. Funding to tackle that problem has been continually reduced and has been described as not fit for purpose by Patrick Krause of the Scottish Crofting Federation.

I cannot stress enough how important crofters' involvement is. Plans to decarbonise our islands represent a golden opportunity to use crofters' expertise and knowledge of the land—after all, they are island conservationists—and to achieve the aims while providing vital support to their industry. They should be part of that.

Such knowledge would be especially helpful to peatland restoration efforts, which can play a large role in helping islands to reach the net zero target. We are way behind with peatland restoration. I have the figures to hand—21,000 hectares of peatland have been restored against an SNP Government target of restoring 70,000 hectares in four years. That is shameful.

Before I wrap up, I turn to the targets that the Government has set out. The targets are ambitious, but the SNP has missed its legal emissions reduction targets for the past three years in a row. If we are to take seriously proposals to decarbonise our islands, we need to see explicit detail of how the Government intends to deliver that aim.

The Government must be prepared to work closely with islanders. After listening to the cabinet secretary, I believe that work is on-going. However, the plans must be absolutely workable. I welcome the fact that Francesco Sindico, who is helping to lead the Government's work, has made clear the importance of engaging with island communities on the plans.

There is an understandable lack of trust in the ability to deliver the targets. I want to make sure that the six islands will be absolutely supported, which is what my amendment speaks to. I really welcome the cabinet secretary's intention to support my amendment; we will also support Rhoda Grant's amendment.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government wants to support our islands to become carbon neutral, and I hope that they will achieve that goal. We stand ready to help them and to engage with islanders, island industries and all parties across the chamber that have an interest in the subject. For reference, I say that we will also support the Liberal Democrats' amendment.

I move amendment S6M-04428.1, to insert at end:

“; calls on the Scottish Government to provide support and funding so that the islands and islanders can progress towards being carbon neutral, and further calls on the Scottish Government to publish plans for these islands to achieve these goals.”

14:57

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Government's announcement that it will assist six islands to become carbon neutral by 2040 is welcome. Those islands are among the smallest of Scotland's 94 inhabited islands, and many have already made strides towards becoming carbon neutral, which should be acknowledged and encouraged.

However, the announcement raises questions. Why is the Government targeting such a small number of islands and selecting those that are less dependent on hydrocarbons? The assistance that the Government is offering to the six islands is welcome, but it begs the question of what assistance will be available to the 88 other islands that will need to reach the same net zero target five short years later.

We must recommit to all our islands, as well as the whole of Scotland, becoming net zero. Am I being cynical in asking whether this is an attempt to divert attention from the more difficult goal? Is it something to point to at a time when our Scottish goals are not being met?

Because of their location, many of our islands are potential powerhouses for renewables, which could offset carbon production. However, there are challenges to overcome. We know that Orkney could generate much more renewable energy, but the grid is full. The same is true of many of our other islands. We need interconnectors to transport electricity to the national grid. I am sure that the Scottish Government will point out that that is a reserved issue, and of course it is, but there are things that the Scottish Government could do to allow islands to generate more renewable energy.

The Scottish Government must invest in green hydrogen. We do not need interconnectors to transport that but, because of a lack of investment in that technology, renewable development has stalled on many islands.

Shetland mainland is another area where a focus is required, with many jobs being dependent on the Sullom Voe oil terminal. To reach net zero by 2045, plans for its transition must start now. How should we reconfigure the terminal to create jobs for the future? A just transition must not simply be a buzzword; it must be meaningful. I am grateful that the Government has indicated that it will support our amendment, thereby showing its commitment to that approach, because many people who live in the islands depend on oil and gas for their livelihoods.

Shetland is an obvious example, but many other islands are also dependent on the industry. That is because the working pattern whereby people go away to work for a few weeks and then have a few weeks at home lends itself to island life. If we are to ensure that those economies are not impacted as we move away from oil and gas, we must commit to a just transition for them, too.

Courses need to be provided in those islands to retrain the workforce, and certification in renewables is difficult for small organisations to obtain. All that can be changed and developed by the Scottish Government. The Government should be creating an offshore training passport as part of its efforts to deliver a just transition. Retraining skills should not come at a cost to the employee, but should be seen as investing in all our futures.

We need investment in green hydrogen for all islands. That could also provide another use for Sullom Voe: the site and workforce could be adapted to enable the just transition.

There is little Government investment in the development of wave and tidal energy, yet Orkney is a world leader in that area. We must invest to ensure that those technologies come to market and we must ensure that, when they do, we have the skills to keep the manufacturing and production jobs in Scotland. That is something that we have failed to do with onshore and offshore wind.

We in the Scottish Labour Party are not against the Government's new initiative, but we are concerned that it might lack ambition. One need only look at the island of Eigg and how the people there have generated their own electricity and are largely carbon neutral. Its internal grid could be replicated and scaled for the islands concerned without too much difficulty, and with new technologies to hand, it would now be much easier than it was for those on Eigg when they developed their scheme. Surely the initiative could be realised long before 2040, and any lessons learned rolled out to all our islands and, indeed, to the rest of Scotland.

Renewable energy is an untapped potential for all our islands. The northern isles and the Western Isles sit in some of Europe's most energetic waters, and could meet much of Scotland's renewable energy needs. However, to capitalise on that, the Government must take forward initiatives to keep our young people—the future workforce—in our island communities. That means that they must be able to access careers and training close to home, they must be able to find a place to live, which means providing homes that are affordable for young people, and they must have confidence in the transport links.

Perhaps the Government's lack of ambition in its announcement is a direct result of its failure to provide adequate ferries to the islands on the west coast of Scotland and adequate freight transport in the north.

It is also well known that our islands are subject to the highest level of fuel poverty in the country. That is a challenge that must be overcome if we are to reach net zero.

Will the six islands get assistance with retrofitting draughty old homes to make them more energy efficient? That is desperately needed in all our island and off-gas-grid communities. What is the Government doing to look at how hydrogen could be used in contained gas networks to roll that out more widely?

The Bute house agreement has led to the Government no longer providing funding assistance and support for oil-fired heating in homes that are off the gas grid. It has removed the help and assistance to those who wanted to switch to liquefied petroleum gas, which is a more

efficient alternative and the lowest carbon conventional energy source. The Government says that people should switch to air-source heat pumps, but those same homes are totally unsuitable for heat pumps because they are draughty and leak heat. That ill-thought-out policy will lead only to further fuel poverty. The Government must now commit to insulating homes, alongside fitting air-source heat pumps—anything less would condemn people to live in cold, draughty homes, facing higher and higher fuel costs. People who qualify for Government assistance for a new boiler cannot possibly afford £20,000 to insulate their homes properly.

We must continue to work towards the commitment to become carbon neutral, and we can use that as an opportunity to help people to tackle the higher fuel costs that are a result of the higher costs of living. There is no more pertinent time than now to do that.

We all know that the cost of living on islands is much higher than it is on the mainland. On average, before the rise in the cost of living, costs were 15 to 30 per cent higher than they were in urban areas, and that figure did not take into account the additional cost of fuel, nor has it been adjusted to reflect recent inflation trends.

The Scottish Government must make commitments not only to make the future of our islands carbon neutral, greener and more sustainable, but to make living on our islands more affordable. After all, islanders have done a lot of groundwork towards a greener and more sustainable future. What they need from the Scottish Government is investment and support where they need it most.

The investment is welcome, although the initiative is lacking in ambition. This is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to show its commitment to people on the islands by dedicating investment to right the wrongs that have been done to them. The Government should invest in the future of Scotland rather than in the shareholders of big multinationals. We urge the Government to show more determination, to commit to a just transition and to recommit to the 2045 net zero target for us all.

I move amendment S6M-04428.3, to insert at end:

“; acknowledges that the outlined move to carbon neutrality for six islands is just five years before the net zero target for the whole of Scotland; is committed to all of Scotland’s islands becoming carbon neutral and will ensure that those whose economy is more dependent on hydrocarbons will not be left behind; believes that the transition to net zero must be a jobs led, just transition, which is dependent on good quality, secure jobs in the renewables sector, and recognises the opportunities presented by offshore wind and its supply chain, including future decommissioning, in creating and supporting a

skilled renewables workforce and helping to ensure that adequate investment is made in retraining opportunities for oil and gas workers and in developing the infrastructure needed to ensure island communities can benefit from supply chain jobs.”

15:06

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the Labour and Conservative amendments.

I congratulate island communities on taking their place in the carbon-neutral project as we all journey to net zero. The islands of Hoy and Yell, like others in the northern isles, are reliant on ferries, and the greatest source of carbon emissions in the isles is transport. As Liam McArthur’s amendment states, Shetland and Orkney’s lifeline interisland ferries are currently

“excluded from the new Islands Connectivity Plan”.

The amendment calls for their inclusion so that any targets relating to carbon-neutral ferries include all of Scotland’s islands.

Almost half the vessels in Shetland’s interisland ferry fleet need to be replaced during this decade due to their age. A newer, reliable and decarbonised ferry fleet would bring mutual benefits to Shetland and Scotland. If we are to be serious about reducing carbon emissions across Scotland, we must include lifeline forms of transport that will have to be replaced.

I also highlight the potential that tunnels could bring to islands such as Shetland. They could help to reduce emissions and they offer a host of other economic and social benefits to island communities.

The second half of Liam McArthur’s amendment calls for

“a targeted plan to help retrofit homes on Scotland’s islands”.

Massive investment will be needed to improve the energy efficiency of homes across Scotland. In its paper from August 2021 proposing the creation of a housing net zero technical task force, the Scottish Government said that 2.6 million homes in Scotland will require some form of retrofit. That equates to upgrading 490 homes per day between next year and 2045. Patrick Harvie’s heat in buildings strategy seeks to convert 1 million homes and 50,000 non-domestic buildings to zero-emissions heating systems by 2030. At that rate, it will take decades to ensure that homes across Scotland are well insulated and energy efficient, so comprehensive support needs to be available for retrofitting.

Shetland and Orkney are home to some of the worst examples of fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty, and the present cost of living crisis is

exacerbating the issue. Targeted support now could help to slash bills and emissions. Most people, businesses and organisations recognise the seriousness of the climate emergency and want to play their part. Indeed, Shetland has been leading the way through Lerwick's district heating scheme, which has been operating for more than 20 years in heating homes and public buildings. We need a strategic approach and targeted support for local authorities, private home owners and housing associations to help to retrofit the current housing stock.

Islands face challenges in getting materials transported to them, and suppliers face additional costs and ferry freight capacity issues. That is made more difficult still for smaller firms, which face extra costs to be certified with the publicly available specification 2030 and PAS 2035—the updated industry specifications with which all energy efficiency installers must be certified and compliant.

I will say a few words in support of Rhoda Grant's amendment, which Scottish Liberal Democrats will support at decision time. It highlights the important issue of a just transition for people in the hydrocarbons industry and the need to ensure that islands that are dependent on hydrocarbons are not left behind.

I am pleased to say that Lerwick Port Authority is already playing a role in decommissioning work as the Ninian northern oil platform—a drilling and production facility that began work in 1980—enters a new stage in its decommissioning. The port chief has reportedly said that decommissioning is becoming more of a pipeline of work rather than a big job here or there. That is a boost to local supply chains.

Our island communities face different challenges from our mainland Scotland counterparts, but we must all do what we can to limit carbon emissions. That is why we are calling for our lifeline ferries to be included in the islands connectivity plan and for targeted support for people who face the highest fuel poverty.

I ask members to support our amendment.

I move amendment S6M-04428.2, to insert at end:

“; regrets that, although Hoy and Yell will be supported towards becoming fully carbon neutral islands, inter-island ferries in Orkney and Shetland have been excluded from the new Islands Connectivity Plan, and calls on the Scottish Government to rectify this so that any targets around carbon neutral ferries include those serving all of Scotland's islands; recognises that reducing emissions from heat will be particularly challenging and costly in island communities with the highest levels of fuel poverty, and believes that the Scottish Government must therefore prioritise support through a targeted plan to help retrofit homes on Scotland's islands as part of wider efforts to meet Scottish Government targets.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have some time in hand should they wish to make and take interventions.

15:11

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It gives me great pleasure to speak in the debate on such a positive announcement for our islands, Scotland and the world. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I have invested in Islay Energy Community Benefit Society and am a member of Islay Energy Trust and, of course, Islay is my home.

In November last year, I had a virtual visit to Port Ellen primary school. It is one of the four primary schools on the island, all of which take climate emergency and the environment very seriously. In our discussions, we talked about what Islay could do to reduce its carbon footprint and become carbon neutral. Many ideas were suggested, such as an island electric bus network, green ferries, better insulation in houses and capturing the energy of the sea and the sky.

Those are ambitious projects, but elsewhere on Islay there are testimonies to the skills of previous generations of Scottish innovators. The villages of Portnahaven and Port Wemyss boast a magnificent Stevenson lighthouse and a Telford church and manse. The Museum of Islay Life holds a Campbell-Stokes recorder, which was invented by Islay man John Francis Campbell in 1853 to record sunshine. Those great Scots rose to the challenges of previous generations and islanders continue to rise to the challenges of climate change.

As the cabinet secretary recently said in her evidence to the RAINE Committee about carbon neutral islands,

“The initiative is exciting because our islands are at the forefront of innovation. With all the work that is happening in renewables throughout our islands, we really want to capitalise on the opportunities that exist and to work closely with islands in reaching carbon neutrality.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee*, 4 May 2022; c 23.]

When I first moved to Islay, there was one man who had a renewable vision for Islay: the late Philip Maxwell. He understood that the future of energy generation lay with sustainable, cleaner power sources and he recognised that Islay had that potential, with wind and tidal power on its doorstep. However, he also knew that it would need local efforts to ensure that local communities would reap the full benefits.

Philip established Islay Energy Trust, a community-led charity whose main purpose is to generate financial and social benefits from

renewable energy operations for the island. Over the past 16 years, IET has hugely raised awareness of the importance of renewables on Islay, Jura and Colonsay, where solar panels and heat pumps are used to provide domestic energy. It has also championed the importance of fuel economy, home insulation and carbon saving.

Working with Philip and others, I helped to establish Islay Energy Community Benefit Society. We raised more than £500,000 from the community and negotiated a bank loan for the balance that was required to establish the community-owned wind turbine, which was completed in 2014. That project will bring in up to £2 million for the community over its 20-year life.

That is a success story, but challenges remain. The island's estimated current energy demand is 250GWh per year. More than 85 per cent of that is imported fuel oils, 10 per cent is electricity and the balance is wood, coal and peat.

The reason for oil consumption being so high is that whisky distillation, which is expanding, is a highly energy-intensive process. The cost of imported energy is in the region of £13 million per annum and is increasing. The whisky industry is well aware of its carbon footprint and is rising to the challenge. Making Islay one of the six islands that aspire to be carbon neutral has sent a powerful message to the distilleries, and they have begun the journey to carbon neutrality. I do not have time to list all the work that they are doing, but I will give a couple of examples. At Bowmore distillery, hot air from the stills is piped to the malting floor during the heating process, and that system also heats the local community swimming pool next door. As part of Lagavulin's 200-year anniversary celebrations, Diageo funded peatland restoration on 700 acres of its land; I know that other distilleries are taking similar steps. Bruichladdich's glass bottles, outer tins, card liners and outer cases are 100 per cent recyclable.

Of course, there is more to Islay than whisky. Islay Energy Trust has been working with—and, importantly, learning from—others to cut carbon emissions and increase the island's resilience and sustainability through tidal power, biomass and geothermal energy. Islay Energy Community Benefit Fund, which is associated with the turbine project, supports initiatives including tree planting, pathways and modernising home heating systems.

Islands are full of gifted, outward-looking folk who want to do their bit and share their experiences, as the cabinet secretary said. For example, on Iona, the community is working on a local heating system; on Bute, new carbon neutral houses have been built; on Jura, Inver has its own hydro system, which has provided back-up to the national grid; Mull and Iona Community Trust has a community hydro scheme; Tiree has a

community wind turbine that has allowed the community to expand its community-owned assets; and, of course, Gigha has its four dancing ladies. I think that I have mentioned six islands in Argyll and Bute alone.

Our islands are profoundly important not just to Scotland but to the whole world. They contribute hugely to our culture, heritage, environment, identity, landscape, economy and society. The carbon neutral islands project will embrace the opportunity for island communities to lead the way in realising Scotland's climate change ambitions.

15:17

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The debate is important. It is on an issue that is close to my heart as a regional member who proudly represents the Isle of Arran and the Isle of Cumbrae, two communities that have shown that they punch well above their weight in terms of their size and presence. Our islanders are a hardy group of people and some of them are in the chamber today.

Living on an island brings a unique set of bonuses and opportunities that people who, like me, live on the mainland never get to appreciate—I would say that we miss out on it—but it also brings many challenges that are not experienced by people who live on the mainland. Those challenges are well rehearsed in the chamber week after week. They include transport, as highlighted by the lively topical question that we have just had; the price and availability of goods and services; access to vital healthcare such as general practice services and hospitals; housing, both its quality and stock; digital infrastructure; and education—not least the difficulties faced by islands in recruiting, training and retaining teachers. Business, too, must contend with the existential problem of depopulation, which I will come on to.

However, despite those struggles, many people still choose to live and work on Scotland's 93 inhabited islands. One island resident put it eloquently:

“We live and work in a landscape that is sometimes harsh, sometimes peaceful, but always inspiring.”

Anyone who has been to the Isle of Arran will know that “Scotland in miniature” certainly testifies to that sentiment.

We have a duty to help our island communities to achieve net zero but, in doing so, let us acknowledge the day-to-day struggles that they already face by living on an island. I make no apologies for raising the issue of ferries, because it was the single most important issue on the lips of people on our islands when I spoke to them during the recent council election campaign. Some

dignity and contrition will be needed in how we approach that issue, because every day that the Arran ferry is out of action costs the local economy £170,000 according to independent figures from the Fraser of Allander Institute. That is a lot of money. Islanders are of course passionate about net zero—we will hear great examples of that in the debate—but we must get the basics of public services right before they can make the transition.

I welcome the fact that Great Cumbrae has been included in the list of islands that will be supported to achieve net zero by 2040, but it is worth putting on record some examples of the great work that is already taking place. Since 2011, the Field Studies Council centre in Millport has reduced its carbon emissions by 34 per cent and saved 389 tonnes of carbon dioxide through solar panels, mini wind turbines, insulation and even tailoring its canteen menu to sell only locally produced and sourced products.

I give special mention to Jacks Alt-Stays, a new glamping business just outside Millport that was set up by cousins Daniel Jack and Adam Jack. They are two young lads—well, they are young from my point of view—and the business is still in the fairly early stages, but they have already planted 618 trees, and they aim to achieve and maintain a carbon neutral business with their glamping pods this summer. I am sure that we all wish those young entrepreneurs the very best in their endeavours, and I look forward to staying there at some point soon, I hope.

That shows the strength of feeling that exists in communities. People want to make a difference and they are doing so. Although Arran is not on the list, it has been leading the way in the whisky industry, which has been discussed. In fact, since 2008, the distilleries on Arran have halved their gas emissions, which is an incredible achievement. One of them is Lagg distillery, which I recommend for a visit.

People on the islands have been coming together to try to help each other. Arran Eco Savvy Community is a charity based in Brodick that does fantastic work by educating residents and helping them with sustainable food, energy, travel and transport. In fact, the charity was recently given an investment of £70,000 for its community-led projects, which will help with the transition to net zero and climate resilience.

Charities, businesses and local residents are doing their bit, but the Government must do its bit, too. I spoke to the newly elected Arran councillor Timothy Billings, who said:

“There seems to be no integrated plan on how net zero is going to be achieved. There are a lot of individual projects going on—for example on active travel and on car sharing—but there is no clear path on how we are really going to get there.”

That is fair criticism, and I do not think that it is politically motivated. The national islands plan annual report of course mentions lots of good work, but let us not forget that, although the current narrative on the cost of living crisis is a worthy debate and headline, it fails to acknowledge that, really, there has been a cost of living crisis on our islands for decades. I have heard reports that diesel was £2.20 a litre on Arran in recent weeks. On Cumbrae, most residents have to get on a ferry and drive to Largs to top up their diesel cars.

It is all very well having a debate about what is reserved and what is devolved and what we can do on VAT and other such matters, but what do we do with the powers that we already have in the Parliament? What are we doing to wean people off their petrol and diesel cars? Much of that is devolved and revolves around infrastructure but, unfortunately, the infrastructure simply is not there. There is a dire lack of charging points for electric vehicles on our islands. In fact, there is only one on Cumbrae. I do not know how we can expect the community there to achieve net zero with one charging point for the 1,300 people who live there and the many thousands of people who visit.

I mentioned depopulation. It is worth noting that the North Ayrshire community planning partnership estimates that, by 2026, the population of Arran will have decreased by 25 per cent. In fact, the over-65 group is the only age group that will increase. The Government has to take that issue seriously and address it.

In the previous session of Parliament, I worked on the flagship, or groundbreaking—call it what you like—*islands legislation*, which was a genuine cross-party effort. However, real island proofing, which is a fundamental part of that legislation, means taking decisions that benefit islands, not just using the legislation to highlight decisions that are to their detriment, which I am afraid is what is happening at the moment.

There is good will, not just in the chamber but in our island communities, but the Government needs to use every power that it already has to help our islands to meet its objectives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate that they need to ensure that their request-to-speak button is actually pressed.

15:24

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Few places have as much potential to contribute to Scotland's carbon reduction efforts as our island communities. Peatland and some types of sea bed are carbon sinks on a vast scale. Peat layers have been shown to be able to store up to 25 times

more carbon than trees, while coastal ecosystems can sequester up to 20 times more carbon per acre than land forests. Although increased tree planting is important in the right locations, it is probably accepted that ploughing up peatland for commercial forestation would, in most cases, release far more carbon dioxide than it could ever then recapture.

On the potential to generate electricity from renewable sources, the options in Scotland's islands are literally incalculable. Island-based wind power could make a significant contribution to decarbonisation of the electricity grid in Scotland. However, major commercial developments in my constituency become possible only if the UK agency, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, eventually gets round to authorising the cable to export power to the mainland.

To make all such projects more commercially viable, the UK Government needs to rip up the antiquated rules on transmission charging that mean that the further north a project is, the more it pays to be connected to the national grid. That principle shows scant regard for the places where renewables potential lies. It is impossible even to begin to call that fair.

The enormous potential of the offshore wind power that is now being planned out to the west and north of my constituency, as a result of the recent ScotWind licensing round by the Scottish Government and Crown Estate Scotland, presents the prospect of renewables generation on a totally new scale. The cable from a number of those developments should make landfall in the Western Isles.

Tidal energy is being exploited on a large scale near a number of other island communities. I make the case for Scotland to look again at wave power as a potential source of energy—of which there is no shortage in my constituency.

There is a conspicuous tension, to which other members have pointed during the debate, between all the renewables potential and the reality of fuel poverty in many island communities. In my constituency, 40 per cent of households are classified as being fuel poor, which is almost double the Scottish average and is certainly one of the highest levels in all of Europe.

Being off the gas grid, island communities find themselves uncommonly dependent on heating oil, which is being bought at a price that has doubled in recent months, as I have already mentioned, in a market that the UK Government stubbornly declines to regulate. That means that, despite the considerable efforts of the Scottish Government on many fronts, fuel poverty in many islands is set to reach unprecedented and intolerable levels this winter.

Jamie Greene: Has Alasdair Allan elicited information from the Scottish Government on what it is doing to improve the quality of insulation and the resilience of houses in the islands that he represents. That is surely a big part of retaining the heat from energy that is so expensive.

Alasdair Allan: It is, indeed, a big part. Jamie Greene will be aware that I have been in touch with the Government regularly on that subject, to ensure that the process of insulating houses is restarted and increased at pace. The commitment from the Government exists, and the Government is working to make it happen.

It is certainly good to see an increased focus on what, in practical terms, carbon neutral communities can mean for islands. That is partly about ensuring direct economic benefits for island communities from renewables projects through supply chains, leasing income and decisions about the location of infrastructure. It was good to see, only yesterday, the Deputy First Minister cutting the first sod for the new deep-water port for Stornoway, with those aims in mind.

Part of the solution is ensuring continued improvements to the housing stock in the islands, which has been alluded to. Addressing island fuel poverty must be one of the essential things that we seek to do when we exploit island renewables.

This is partly about simply thinking about the future. Although island communities might not lend themselves to a huge expansion of public transport, we can look to a future in which electric cars and buses are more viable options, and in which some smaller ferries and even planes on the islands can be electric.

Many individuals, groups and businesses on the islands are already making a huge effort to reduce their carbon footprints and to protect their islands' unique environments and biodiversity. I think not least of the fact that Arnish, in the Western Isles, is probably the most rapidly scalable green hydrogen production location in the UK.

I am pleased that Barra, within my constituency, is one of the six islands that the Scottish Government is pledging to directly support. I am sure that the benefits from that investment will be quick to spill over to the rest of our island communities.

As we look to build a greener future, islands must be at the forefront of our thinking—not only as a source of energy, but as an example of what communities can do with that energy to make people warmer and healthier. That will also make the communities that others classify as remote become more economically resilient and attractive places to live in the years to come.

15:30

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Reaching net zero cannot be about just hitting a target. I think that everyone in the chamber agrees that we must drastically reduce our emissions. That agreement is testament to the climate movement. However, not everyone agrees on how it must be done. For me, as a socialist and a trade unionist, our path to net zero must redistribute wealth and power from landowners and chief executives to ordinary workers and households across the country.

Although the Scottish Government's motion contains warm words about the opportunities that are available to island communities through a just transition, there are still significant gaps when it comes to explaining how the transition will be made reality. We must see real support for offshore oil and gas workers, we must create well-paid secure jobs in the offshore wind sector, and we must have a strategy for community owned, produced and distributed renewable energy. The Labour Party is in Parliament to give voice to organised labour. That is why our amendment makes it clear that we want a worker-led transition for offshore oil and gas workers, including those who live on Scotland's islands.

Our transition to renewables must address the lack of training standardisation and skills transferability in the offshore energy sector, so that workers who want to get out of fossil fuels and work for a renewable future can do so without facing additional training costs. I believe that that can be achieved through the creation of an offshore training passport.

We should not stop there. Our transition must also empower workers through trade union recognition, sectoral collective bargaining and an end to casualised work. The Government should use every opportunity to promote those goals and should, whenever possible, lead by example in the public sector.

Members will be aware that I have been working with the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and with climate campaigners from Friends of the Earth Scotland to secure a commitment from the Scottish Government to support, at least in principle, the introduction of an offshore training passport. Although I have spent months raising the issue in Parliament and engaging with the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, the Scottish Government's position appears to be that the same failed market that has exacerbated the issues of skills transferability and a lack of training standardisation is now best placed to address those issues.

Although ministers claim that they have no formal role within existing legislation to address those issues, I believe that they can use their office to show political leadership and to drive progress forward. I am pleased to hear that the Scottish Government will support Labour's amendment, but I would like it to go further; I would like the Scottish Government to commit today to providing a statement to Parliament that will set out its vision for standardisation in the offshore energy sector, and to giving regular parliamentary updates on its progress. If the Government really wants skills standardisation, it should not be shy about being accountable for that.

As well as calling for a worker-led transition for the oil and gas sector, Labour's amendment also recognises the need to create secure and well-paid jobs in the offshore wind sector. That is sorely needed because, so far, the Scottish Government has chosen to outsource jobs and offshore wind capacity in order to enable multinational companies to turn a profit at the expense of workers and communities here in Scotland. Given the consequences of the Scottish Government's decision to outsource jobs through the ScotWind auction, Labour believes that it must now take a proactive role in the creation of secure and well-paid green jobs here in Scotland. Financed by the proceeds from the ScotWind auction, a Scottish renewables fund could invest in the development of skills and the creation of jobs throughout Scotland's offshore wind supply chain.

However, it is not only job creation in energy that needs work. The ownership model of energy should also be explored. A public model of energy generation and distribution would cut out the profit motive, meaning that the lowest cost for consumers could be realised and the best pay and conditions for workers could be won.

Given that some local authorities have explored bold measures such as council-owned renewable energy to help in their transitions to net zero, I urge the Scottish Government to work with island communities to explore the potential for community-owned renewable energy as part of their net zero transition.

I conclude by urging the Scottish Government to move beyond the limitations of the motion and to be bolder in its ambition for Scotland's island communities in their transition to net zero; to deliver the worker-led transition for offshore oil and gas workers that they expect and deserve; to create well-paid secure jobs in the offshore wind sector, instead of lining the pockets of multinational companies through outsourcing; and to support island communities in meeting their long-term energy needs by supporting them in

exploring the potential of community-owned renewable energy.

15:36

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As colleagues have said, it is incredible to note what is already happening in our islands. The Scottish Government recently supported Foula Wool with £146,000 from the island communities fund, which is aimed at supporting green projects. Foula is an island that has already done incredible things, and many of the examples relate to the Foula Electricity Trust. The island has produced its own energy since FET was established in 1982, and efforts to decarbonise the system are ongoing, with collaborative approaches involving other Scottish islands, and knowledge and experience being shared by others across the EU and the world.

Rum, Muck, Canna, Fair Isle and Eigg, which my colleague Rhoda Grant went into in more detail, are all ground breaking in their efforts to become self-sufficient with community-run and increasingly green energy developments—so much so that they, alongside the Knoydart peninsula, have been assigned the status of pioneering islands in the clean energy for EU islands programme.

With all those strong foundations in place, it makes sense for the Scottish Government to support six other islands to become carbon neutral. As an MSP who represents five of the six islands that have been identified for support, I am very glad to hear that the cabinet secretary will soon meet those who are already making headway on the islands to make sure that efforts are made with the community rather than things happening to it.

There are undeniably extra challenges involved in living in an island community. We know that transport and buildings are the highest emitters of CO₂ equivalent overall, and both are more of a pressure in the islands. Ferries and planes are a fact of life. They are things that people need to survive, not nice alternative options that people could choose to give up if they wanted, like take-away coffee cups or bottled soap. Many homes are now old and they do not have the fabric to allow for things such as turning down the heating or swapping to a new system.

In Orkney, which has always been at the forefront of renewable energy efforts, many homes relied on peat for heat well into the 20th century. So many buildings in the islands are still not compatible with air-source heat pumps or other greener heating systems. It is important to look at that in the context of fuel poverty, which is at its

highest in the UK in parts of my region, including the northern isles and Caithness and Sutherland.

It is vital that, when we talk about doing away with oil boilers, we think about the impact of that on people who already had energy bills that were impossible to budget for before the cost of living crisis and the looming need to swap to a new, and likely more expensive, heating system. We have to think about the astronomical personal costs, regardless of any grants for installation, that people face in paying for extremely high power consumption to heat badly insulated houses with green energy.

I was therefore glad to see in my Orkney colleague Liam McArthur's amendment a line that draws attention to the need to consider not just encouraging retrofitting but actively funding it. That is necessary, and it is important that that aspect was brought to the debate. We cannot push people who are experiencing the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK further into that desperate situation. Bans on oil boilers have to come immediately alongside the possibility of being able to heat homes in a green way. We are not there yet, and social housing providers in the isles are feeling the pressure, particularly considering the higher costs of building materials.

I am also glad to hear that the Scottish Government is open to considering how to support more sustainable tourism in the islands, as part of that carbon neutral journey. The Highlands and Islands region has relied heavily on tourism, but Covid restrictions, rising house prices and the struggles of local councils to keep up with extra demands on roads and other services have demonstrated a need to diversify and have perhaps opened more eyes to the concept and drawbacks of overtourism. People will always want to come and enjoy our landscapes, offerings and culture, but all those things are at risk of disappearing if locals, whether they were born and raised in the region or have chosen to make it their home—by which I mean a permanent, not a second, home—are driven out and replaced with houses that lie empty for most of the year, being visited by tourists who have not been given the knowledge that they need to make sure that they do not damage the area as they travel through it.

If our health, care and social workers cannot find housing, life in the Highlands and Islands becomes not only difficult but doubtful. Even putting that aside, if hospitality workers cannot find a home, tourists are not going to have much fun.

I will now go back to the positives of the debate, because we are debating something that is genuinely very positive if we get it right. If we get it right, we can secure the future of our islands as fantastic, sustainable and affordable places in which to live and work.

Scotland has to decarbonise and we have to work towards net zero. It is right that we focus not only on what will bring the biggest and most impressive stats all at once, but on the places in which investment is required as soon as possible, to help people who are struggling, and to avoid plunging more of them into fuel poverty. A greener country cannot just mean flashy national statistics. It has to mean that those people who are living in difficult-to-heat homes surrounded by turbines and hydro schemes can afford to heat their home in winter without starving, and that people in our islands are able to travel to work and still lead sustainable lives. It is clear that those efforts to put our islands at the forefront of our journey to net zero are good for tackling not only climate change but some of the real issues that need to be tackled in our island communities: fuel poverty, housing and transport.

It is incredibly important that the development of those plans is based on the voices of those who live there. Islanders told the Scottish Government that they wanted action to support them to become more sustainable; the Scottish Government will deliver on that big ask.

15:42

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As a member of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, and as an MSP who represents a largely rural and coastal constituency, I commend the innovative action that the Scottish Government has taken on carbon neutral islands, which is part of an on-going process to support small island communities, which have often been pioneers for sustainability and climate action.

I empathise with many of the issues, and many of the initiatives provide a snapshot of a greener future. They build on COP priorities for island communities and provide a greenprint for carbon neutral progress on the mainland. I believe and hope that the actions that have been taken in the context of carbon neutral islands will also help to address some of the other challenges for our islands and coastal communities, such as depopulation, the need for tourism to be more sustainable, and fuel poverty. We know that our islands are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change but that they have huge potential and natural capital that will help us to meet our net zero ambition.

The carbon neutral islands project will demonstrate the low-carbon energy potential of Scotland's islands as hubs of innovation in renewable energy and climate change resilience. Globally, Scotland can be seen as taking island leadership a step further, through the establishment of not one but six carbon neutral

islands. That is an opportunity for island communities to lead the way in the country's broader journey towards net zero emissions.

As has been mentioned, the project is not exclusive to the six named islands but will benefit all Scottish islands and, where possible, will shed light on good practice generally in carbon neutrality, through the sharing of best practice, the exchange of knowledge, and progressive policies that will support islands to become carbon neutral. That will help to protect their unique heritage, culture and biodiversity, while delivering on our commitment to support island communities to flourish economically and socially.

The programme for government will build on the selection process, incorporating the very best of partnership work with stakeholders, and we will listen and learn as we go. As I mentioned, Scotland's islands have been leaders in renewable energy development and innovation, and we are determined to harness that potential and build on that success to meet Scotland's 2045 net zero ambitions.

Like my constituency, island communities are remote, rural and often experience fuel poverty, alongside a higher wind-chill factor. Island industries such as farming and fishing have historically been carbon intensive, as has distilling. It is therefore a great challenge for islands to become carbon neutral, which requires a combination of what can be done in both the short and the long term. The islands have called for support that builds on their own initiatives, and I am pleased to see that we have stepped up to the mark in providing just that. However, we are at the early stages, and it is important that we move forward in a spirit of optimism and determination.

Moving forward will involve carbon audits across the islands, and a phased approach that informs our learning. That will help to deliver key commitments in the national islands plan, create jobs, protect Scottish island environments from climate change and contribute to Scotland's 2045 net zero target.

I congratulate island communities on the work and research that they have carried out and the collaboration with universities, including, to give just one example, the innovative work on hydrogen conversion. It is a well-worn phrase that nobody has a monopoly on such matters. We are keen, I am sure, to embrace many ideas and walk with island communities on a shared journey, building on route maps towards a common goal.

I agree with the leaders of some island councils that we all need to think smarter, act quicker and deliver sooner. That is the climate change imperative, and the Scottish Government is doing

just that. The work is on-going, but is happening at pace.

However, there are crossroads with some obstacles along this shared journey. As the cabinet secretary has said in this chamber previously, the higher transmission network use of system charges remain a key barrier to net zero in Scotland, and we are calling on action in that regard. Analysis by the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets shows that, by 2040, Scottish renewable energy and low-carbon generators will be the only ones paying a wider transmission network charge, with all others, including gas generators elsewhere in Great Britain, being paid credits. The Scottish Government has made it clear that, rather than there being small modifications to the existing methodologies of Ofgem's charging reviews and decision making, a new approach is needed that fully takes into account the effects on renewables project costs and ensures that they do not present barriers to investment and progress in Scotland.

I welcome the process of consulting stakeholders to get their views on how they can work together to deliver the zero carbon islands programme, and the exploration of good practice from islands around the world to fully understand how emissions can be reduced as soon as possible.

Finally, I agree with the cabinet secretary that Scotland's islands can play a "really significant role" in the race to net zero. That is a good example of this Government's determination for Scotland to lead the world in tackling climate change.

15:48

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The zero carbon islands programme sets a high level of ambition for all our islands to aspire to in the decades ahead. Islands are the perfect setting to lead on innovation and developing new technologies, which is why they are often dubbed "island laboratories". I am glad to see that the Scottish Government has recognised that by selecting six Scottish islands to lead the way in becoming carbon neutral.

It is right that we consider the unique problems and the challenging context that our island communities face from the climate emergency. Support to ensure their long-term prosperity is crucial. As the just transition progresses and the scale of change quickens, they will need more support than ever.

I give credit to the innovative and ambitious work already being done by island local authorities and community development trusts. By taking matters into their own hands, they have looked to

the future and embraced renewable energy. For example, the Shapinsay Development Trust on one of the inner isles of Orkney has harnessed revenue and electricity from the community wind turbine and reinvested the income in local housing built to Passivhaus standard. In partnership with local, national and international partners, the trust has also demonstrated the research and development opportunities that islands present. By installing a hydrogen electrolyser, the trust has not only advanced our understanding of local mixed energy systems, but has taken practical steps to reduce the carbon footprint of the local school, which is now run overnight on locally produced hydrogen, thanks to a new dual boiler system. That is island innovation at its finest. With Greens now in council in Shetland for the first time, and more Greens in Orkney Council, too, I am excited to see the community-led transition in our northern isles go from strength to strength.

The progress made on islands such as Shapinsay is not surprising. The community on Eigg, which Rhoda Grant mentioned, has demonstrated for decades the wealth of opportunities and benefits that come with community-driven decarbonisation and community ownership. The carbon neutral islands project must harness that potential for research and development, employment in high-quality green jobs and sustained population growth, because big challenges remain ahead if we are to reach net zero in our islands.

Fuel poverty is rife across Scottish island communities, which disproportionately suffer extreme fuel poverty. Even before the current cost of living crisis, islanders spent extortionate amounts on heating, while receiving below average wages. As Existing Homes Alliance Scotland highlights, islanders are also most likely to have homes rated below energy performance certificate rating C. Our islands have the highest proportion of unhealthily cold homes in Scotland. However, there is an opportunity to create jobs while tackling the crisis. Investment to bring homes across the Highlands and Islands up to EPC C and install low-emissions heating could support up to 24,000 jobs over the next decade.

We must also provide affordable homes to attract and retain those working in the area. That is why, as part of the Bute house agreement, the Greens will work with the Scottish Government to develop a remote, rural and islands housing action plan. The best way to reduce carbon is to make better use of the homes that are already there, bringing into productive use second homes, holiday homes and empty homes, and buying back former council housing. We also need to bring new-build construction closer to home, using local materials such as timber and wool-based

insulation, as part of a circular economy approach that will strengthen island economies.

The roll-out of the Scottish Government's heat network fund is also vital, and I strongly urge the Government to consider our island communities as a top priority in the delivery of local heat networks. With excellent renewable energy sources, our islands can demonstrate a new model of local energy system where communities are "prosumers"—both producing and consuming energy.

Challenges in national infrastructure also pose a barrier to island decarbonisation. The Scottish Government must make much stronger progress on grid development and supporting the national grid where it can, while also exploring island smart-grid systems to provide communities with greater resilience, ownership and independence.

Our islands' renewable energy resources are some of our most valued assets in the drive to net zero, so it beggars belief that the UK Government is not doing more to unlock those abundant resources and supply low-cost renewable energy to households across Scotland and the rest of Britain. Instead, as we have heard, energy generation projects on islands face very high transmission costs, due to their distance from large population centres. Islands can help the rest of us to decarbonise, if only the UK Government could sort out the vital transmission links from Orkney and the Western Isles. A new approach is needed to support projects to expand, as well as ensuring that some of the profit is directed back into the local community. I urge the Scottish Government to press the UK to sharpen up its approach in that area of reserved policy.

We must not overlook the carbon footprint of ferries. In Orkney alone, an estimated 36,000 tonnes of carbon is emitted each year from the burning of oil and bunker fuel by ferries servicing the island. The challenge of reaching carbon neutrality is nearly insurmountable if that barrier is not tackled, and the Scottish Government must play a leading role on that within the next two years.

Liam McArthur: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Ariane Burgess: I am just about to conclude. Presiding Officer, am I allowed to take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may take an intervention as we have a bit of time.

Liam McArthur: I thank Ariane Burgess for taking the intervention. I agree with her about the environmental impact of the fuel burned by the Orkney ferry fleet. Does she agree with me that

the cost of that should not be borne by Orkney Islands Council alone?

Ariane Burgess: I would have to look into the issues further to see whether the costs should be borne by Orkney Islands Council or should be supported by the Scottish Government.

Each island community has its own unique set of circumstances and individual challenges, but I look forward to seeing how the zero carbon islands programme will bring together people and skills to achieve concrete outcomes on the path to net zero.

15:56

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): In its programme for government 2021-22, the Scottish Government committed to supporting carbon neutral islands. That included pilot projects for islands to run on 100 per cent renewable energy, create circular economies and explore more sustainable transport options.

The Scottish Government also made a commitment to work with at least three islands over this parliamentary session to enable them to become fully carbon neutral by 2040, as forerunners to a net zero Scotland by 2045. As we have heard, during a speech delivered at COP26, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands announced that the Scottish Government was doubling its commitment and that six islands would be supported to become carbon neutral.

Scotland is an island and coastal nation; we have 93 inhabited islands and over 10,000 miles of coastline. Our islands can be exemplars and can lead the way in ensuring that Scotland meets our 2045 net zero ambitions.

The Scottish Government is committed to a just transition to net zero by 2045, with an ambitious interim target for 2030 of a 75 per cent reduction in emissions—that is only eight years away. Scotland's emissions are already down by over 50 per cent since the 1990 baseline, and we continue to outperform the UK in delivering long-term reductions.

The Scottish Government's 2022-23 budget sets out record levels of investment to address the climate emergency and deliver a just transition to net zero, including the first £20 million of our £500 million just transition fund.

In 2019, the Scottish Government produced Scotland's first ever national islands plan, which has 13 strategic objectives. Three of those objectives support the work towards carbon neutral islands. The first is strategic objective 8,

"To improve and promote environmental wellbeing and deal with biosecurity".

We are dealing with a biodiversity emergency as well as a climate change emergency. Strategic objective 9 is

“To contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation and promote clean, affordable, and secure energy”.

Strategic objective 10 is all about empowering island communities.

In the consultation for the plan, climate change emerged as one of the most pressing issues. Islanders are extremely resilient and innovative by nature. They are determined to play their part and, indeed, want to be at the very forefront of responding effectively to the climate emergency.

We are all committed to supporting and protecting Scotland’s islands and to proudly promoting them as wonderful places to live, visit, work and study. We need to continue to work closely with communities and the public agencies that support and serve those communities. Our islands are profoundly important to not just Scotland, but the world. They contribute hugely to our culture, heritage, environment, identity, landscape, economy and society.

The Scottish Government commitment to publish the islands connectivity plan by the end of 2022 is also welcome. As we know, the islands connectivity plan will replace the current ferries plan.

Liam McArthur: Mr McLennan talks about the islands connectivity plan, which we all look forward to seeing. Does he believe that the ferry services for both Orkney and Shetland should be included in that plan if it is to be a genuine successor to the national ferries plan?

Paul McLennan: Mr McArthur mentioned that before and I think that it was being considered by the cabinet secretary. I look forward to hearing her answer on that.

The islands connectivity plan will be taken forward through the national transport strategy and the strategic transport projects review. That will enable us to consider other viable options connecting the islands. The connectivity plan will replace the ferries plan by the end of 2022 and engagement and consultation on that will enable substantial public and community input.

The Scottish Government plans to explore the potential to build more fixed links to islands and remote communities, and work with island communities to reduce reliance on ferries. That needs to be part of the consultation process. The infrastructure investment plan for 2021-22 to 2025-26 will produce and maintain a long-term plan and investment programme for new ferries and development at ports and will contribute to reducing emissions.

Brexit has undoubtedly had an impact on island communities. It has previously been reported that EU structural and investment funds of more than £1 billion have been invested in the socioeconomic development of the Highlands and Islands since the 1970s. That includes projects such as the Shetland fibre-optic broadband cable, the Scalpay and Eriskay bridges, the Lochcarnan wind farm on South Uist and the electrification of Eigg.

The second annual report on the islands plan was published recently. Key findings included that new models have emerged to support community climate action via a developing network of regional climate action hubs, providing a vehicle for communities to come together and engage in collective climate action. Two pathfinder projects were launched in September 2021, with one hub covering the north Highlands and Islands—Orkney and Shetland.

Work is developing on the approach to heat decarbonisation, and the resilience and sustainability of island energy systems will be covered in the islands energy strategy, which is due to be published in 2022. In addition, Local Energy Scotland continues to deliver the Scottish Government’s community and renewable energy scheme—CARES—which supports community groups and organisations and rural small and medium-sized enterprises to explore their renewable energy options. Jenni Minto and I recently met Michael Matheson to discuss that. CARES advice and funding support is available to communities across Scotland, including our island communities.

The Scottish Government has also worked closely with Scotland’s distribution networks owners to ensure that their business plans reflect the scale and pace of change that is required to meet our targets. The draft plans that were submitted to Ofgem in December would, if approved, unlock over £3 billion of investment in our local networks.

As part of that investment, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, which provides essential services to communities on 59 remote islands through 111 subsea cables, has included provision for £35.7 million of investment for new subsea cables, and £43 million is proposed for maintaining and operating standby diesel generation for island communities at seven sites. That includes replacing the engines at Battery Point power station on the Isle of Lewis to improve its environmental impact, and uprating the capacity of Bowmore power station on Islay.

In conclusion, the national islands plan has given us a good start to moving towards carbon neutrality by 2045. The commitment to carbon neutral islands will take us even further.

16:02

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Like members who spoke before me, I whole-heartedly welcome the motion and the commitment to these six beautiful islands becoming carbon neutral by 2040. That is the kind of ambitious commitment that we need to tackle climate change, and I welcome those islands working towards that goal.

I preface my speech by admitting that I feel like a wee bit of an imposter speaking in the debate, and I hope that my colleagues who represent the islands that are being mentioned today—I can see some of them looking at me—will give me some leeway. My interest is always piqued by hearing mention of Coatbridge and Chryston in the chamber, and I have to make sure that the member gets the information right. I hope that I refer to the islands accurately.

I have been able to enjoy only one of those islands. I have visited Great Cumbrae on many occasions, as I am sure several of my Glasgow and Lanarkshire-based colleagues have done. It is a bit of a rite for every primary 6 or 7 school pupil to cycle around Millport—they all have to do that. More recently, I have loved taking my family to Great Cumbrae, and I have fond memories of cycling around the island and enjoying the sunny views. I was there this time last year and stayed at the Millport Pier hotel. It was a family-friendly experience, so I am happy to mention it.

I look forward to seeing the islands' transformation into being carbon neutral, and I am sure that the current use of bicycles, as has been mentioned, will help to reach that goal. We are a proud coastal nation and are very proud of our island communities, so it makes perfect sense that those islands lead the way in the achievement of our climate change goals.

Renewable energy has already blossomed on our coastlines, with tidal and wind power industries embracing our natural environment. The Deputy Presiding Officer—he is not in the chair today but is in the chamber—will keep me right, but I have read reports that Orkney residents have installed 700 wind turbines in their back yards to generate electricity for their personal use and for the grid, which shows how amazing our natural resources are at providing green energy for our homes. Orkney was once utterly dependent on power that was produced by burning coal and gas on the Scottish mainland and transmitted through an undersea cable. What an amazing example to set. Community-owned wind turbines generate power for local villages, and islanders drive non-polluting cars that run on devices that can turn energy from waves and tides into electricity. I am not saying that just to get on the good side of Mr McArthur

because he is leading the parliamentary football team, which I play in, on Thursday.

We can also look to the island of Eigg, which is community owned. In 2008, Eigg became the first community to launch an off-grid electricity system powered by wind, water and solar energy. It is important to note that that was led by residents who taught themselves how to run that system. Before that, expensive diesel generators that ran for only a few hours a day were relied on for power. Today, that island of 12 square miles continues to set an example not only on how to deliver electricity from renewable energy but on how societies can meet their energy needs without access to a national grid. That challenge affects nearly one fifth of the world's population.

As others have mentioned, the plans are very ambitious. However, ambition without the means to carry out the aims is inoperable. That is why I am happy to see that the Scottish Government has ensured that there are the tools to allow communities to realise the goals.

From April to July 2019, the Scottish Government consulted widely on what was important to islanders and island communities. That consultation process highlighted where we needed to step up our collective efforts and focus our energies to address the challenges and realise the aspirations of everyone who lives on Scotland's islands. Climate change emerged as one of the most pressing of those issues. By developing carbon-neutral islands that attract jobs and investment, the project aims to retain people on, and bring more people to, Scotland's islands.

The sustainability of Scotland's islands is vital. The national islands plan provides a framework for action in order to meaningfully improve outcomes for island communities. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 introduced many measures that ensure that there is sustained focus across Government and the public sector to meet the needs of island communities not only just now but in the future. I remember being a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for a period of time last session. Its work included scrutiny of the Islands (Scotland) Bill. I agree with Jamie Greene's comments about island proofing being a key part of that sustainability.

Brexit has had an impact on our island communities, of course, and the on-going Covid-19 pandemic has meant that the implementation of the national islands plan has met with unfortunate delays.

The North Highlands and Islands Climate Hub, which supports community-led climate action, will be integral to the process of going carbon neutral. I note that it is hosting a Highland climate festival this summer. I encourage my constituents to go to

that; it certainly looks like it will be great fun. If I had been up there that week, I would certainly have gone to it. However, I have looked at the dates, and I am planning my holidays for the week after. There will be development officers at the hub who can support any events and applications for funding. I encourage anyone from the area who is watching this debate to get in touch with the hub to see how they can be assisted.

Although it is important that the six islands get support to go carbon neutral, that is not our single focus. The project is intended to benefit all Scottish islands—I think that my colleague Alasdair Allan made that point. Through knowledge exchange and the sharing of good practices stemming from the implementation of the carbon-neutral project, we can work towards a greener and fairer Scotland. For that reason, I support the Government's motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give advance notice to the closing speakers that we have some time in hand, so we are likely to be able to be reasonably generous on the times for those contributions.

16:08

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Frantic speech rewriting is starting across the front benches, Presiding Officer.

The ambition in the national islands plan to support carbon neutrality is a positive one. Our island communities have shown themselves to be aspirational in transitioning to net zero, and they have demonstrated the sort of leadership and approach that can serve as an example for the whole of Scotland and the UK. However, alongside a positive vision must come practical ideas as well as pragmatic engagement with the individuals, organisations and businesses that make up our island communities. The six islands identified by the cabinet secretary must be just a start, and they must act as an example of where the Scottish Government's support is most needed. Those islands must be ahead of the curve, and we must see solutions shaped early.

There will also be the challenge of positive collaborative working. Local authorities that cover many of the island communities have already shown an admirable dedication to tackling climate change. We should also remember that the our islands, our future campaign, which was the motive and force behind much of our island planning, was directed at both the Scottish and UK Governments.

To make improvements in all our island communities and not just the six islands that the announcement concerns will be challenging work. It must involve public services at all levels and will

mean navigating the multitude of public bodies that play a key role in island life.

Sadly, we should also keep it in mind that the Scottish Government is not used to meeting its carbon reduction targets. After the Government's 15 years in office, the sense is growing that big aspirations are not often met by delivery. Too often, when bold ambitions are set out—even in law—there is little accountability for failure.

Achievement of targets to lower our ferry network's emissions is now further away than it was, and islanders will know that the only ferry to join the CalMac Ferries fleet in recent years had been sold by a Norwegian ferries company as Norway moved to a carbon-free future.

Perhaps we are simply supposed to enjoy the journey towards the targets—hit or miss—but good intentions will not make the vital changes that we know are required; that will require work and investment.

There has been visible progress locally. My home—Orkney—has shown just some of the potential for our islands to demonstrate that a different future is possible. In February 2020, I had the opportunity to participate in the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee's visit to the islands as part of our wider energy inquiry. Many members have had the opportunity to come to Orkney and see some of what is happening.

Orkney's main problem is not a shortage of renewable energy but rather a surplus, and the challenge is to use that most effectively. The European Marine Energy Centre, which has sites across Orkney, will celebrate its second decade next year. Those facilities have provided the UK with world-leading research into harnessing wave and tidal power, and that is more than just experimental, as it is feeding power into the grid now. On a small scale, excess electricity is being converted into hydrogen, which can be reused.

It is not only the islands that stand to benefit—there is a strong case, and work is on-going, to increase the interconnector capacity to the mainland. The existing subsea cables were designed for a very different time and a very different electricity network.

In the meantime, there is a positive sense of direction in deploying what we have on the islands. As the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee saw, Orkney has one of the highest rates of uptake of electric vehicles in the UK. Last year, we tested the UK's first electric-powered aircraft flights.

We have a long history of harnessing the power of the wind—something that we are not short of in Orkney. In 1951, Orkney was the site of the UK's

first grid-connected wind turbine, which was at Costa Head.

It is worth remembering that the islands play a key role in the oil and gas industry. Flotta oil terminal, which is sited in Scapa Flow across from my home, was built in the 1970s and represented an enormous investment in Orkney. There is a co-dependent relationship—an energy shift requires a fair and well-managed transition and, in turn, renewable energy can benefit from the expertise that has been built up in the past.

That leads to another question, which has been raised previously. Despite having key roles as energy hubs, our island communities—alongside the Highlands and Islands more generally—are often the places where fuel poverty levels are at their highest. The legacy of an ageing housing stock and the fact that many households continue to rely on oil for heating remain considerable challenges. The wider question of regional economic inequality also plays a significant role. Relatively simple changes such as proper insulation will require a great deal of work at scale and must not be neglected.

In 2020, the former committee met ReFLEX Orkney, which is a collaboration between EMEC and the local authority with support from a range of partners, including funding from UK Research and Innovation. In recognition of the need for better integration and active management of our energy resources, the organisation has been working on a range of decarbonisation options. From heat to transport and from storage to smart charging, the organisation has been shaping the visible change that we need to see not just on our islands but across our country.

There are undoubtedly challenges ahead, but I believe strongly in a positive and optimistic future for energy and decarbonisation on our islands. What they have achieved independently has been remarkable; what they can achieve with effective collaboration can be incredible.

We should also remember the principles of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the wider commitments that have been made as part of islands policy. The debate should be about support and co-operation, not central direction. The Scottish Government must respect the distinct communities that make up Scotland's islands and work to ensure that they are the key drivers of their own futures. The Government can provide a lead, and it must go farther in that role than we have seen so far, but, ultimately, the task must bring in communities, businesses and so many others.

16:14

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak about supporting our island communities in their journey to becoming fully carbon neutral by 2040.

From the outset, I want to be clear that our islands are vital contributors to Scotland's environment, society and economy, as well as to our enormous tourism offering and our national culture and heritage. As I am an MSP who represents part of the granite city and not our islands, some might ask why I am speaking in the debate. The answer is simple: it is because our islands matter. They can lead the way for our whole country in offering solutions to current and future challenges, of which the most pressing is the climate emergency.

In 2019, the Scottish Government consulted widely on what was important to islanders and island communities, and the consultation process showed where more work is required to better support our island communities. Importantly, it allowed the voices of island residents to be heard and their priorities to be known. Unsurprisingly, climate change emerged as one of the most urgent of those priorities.

Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government has acted on the needs of our island communities, particularly in tackling the climate emergency. The Government is committed to demonstrating the low-carbon energy potential of Scotland's islands as hubs of innovation in renewable energy and climate change resilience. That will be achieved while positively impacting on island economies and on population retention and growth.

Island communities are already engaged and are acting to cut emissions, including through working to ensure sustainable tourism by decarbonising transport infrastructure as well as sources of fuel for heat, which is helping to tackle fuel poverty—an issue that is hitting our island communities particularly hard, as we have heard from members across the chamber. Those actions are welcome.

The transition to net zero will require the deployment of significantly greater levels of renewable energy. The ScotWind leasing round, which is led by Crown Estate Scotland, offers significant potential for gigawatts of offshore wind power from the end of this decade. In addition to those projects, the move to deeper waters that are further from the shore presents fresh opportunities for the development of newer technology such as floating wind. That will offer more supply chain opportunities for Scotland than have been achieved to date with fixed-bottom wind

developments, presenting huge potential not only for our islands but for the country as a whole.

As a north-east MSP, I welcome the fact that the oil and gas industry now recognises offshore wind as being a critical part of decarbonisation, with a commitment for operations in the UK continental shelf to be decarbonised by 2035. Our islands play a critical role in that regard. We are already seeing work under way to ensure that there is energy integration such as the powering of offshore oil and gas platforms by renewable energy. That is a priority for the Scottish Government. I welcome the fact that those who work in our oil and gas sector are being supported by the Scottish Government and industry to diversify their skill sets away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy.

It would be remiss of me to discuss the islands without noting that island communities are bearing the brunt of a hard Brexit, which has been recklessly expedited during a global pandemic. The Scottish Government is acutely aware of the impact that Brexit has had on our island communities and across the country, with EU support having been a lifeline to Scotland for decades.

It has been reported that EU structural and investment funds in excess of £1 billion have played a significant role in the socioeconomic development of the Highlands and Islands since the 1970s. I know that that is the case because I have seen a lot of the funding that is in place in the Highlands—indeed, I was up there visiting my sister just last weekend. Moreover, schemes that were supported by EU funding included the Shetland fibre optic broadband cable, the Scalpay bridge, the Eriskay causeway, the Lochcarnan community wind farm on South Uist and the electrification of Eigg. Our island communities are also missing out on around £150 million of potential investment, having been short-changed by the UK Government's so-called shared prosperity fund.

However, against the backdrop of Brexit and Covid-19, the Scottish Government has continued to support our island communities through the national islands plan and, now, through the decarbonisation plan. The same simply cannot be said of the UK Government.

Islanders are extremely resilient and innovative, and they are determined to play their part in—and, indeed, to be at the forefront of—responding effectively to the climate emergency. I therefore welcome the work that is under way to help our island communities to achieve their enormous potential by becoming carbon neutral by 2040. I welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to protect our islands against the backdrop of Brexit, and I highlight again the invaluable contribution of our islands to the North

East Scotland region, to Scotland as a whole and to the globe.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
We move to closing speeches.

16:20

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Earlier, Fulton MacGregor talked about his memories of cycling round Millport and his aspirations to have a crack at the other islands that are part of the initiative that the cabinet secretary has announced. I advise him that, if he fancies a crack at Hoy, he might want to invest in an electric bike.

As a “hardy” islander, in the words of Jamie Greene, I whole-heartedly welcome any debate that focuses on the needs and potential of our islands and island communities. In fact, I might go as far as to suggest that such a debate should be a weekly requirement under standing orders. However, if that would be going too far, I will simply say that I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

I broadly welcome the motion in the name of my good friend Mairi Gougeon, although Rhoda Grant made some very valid points. I say that not simply because she referred to Orkney as world leading, which I think should also be required under standing orders, but because, as others did, she talked about viewing the debate in the context of the Government not having met its targets relating to climate change mitigation more generally in recent years. We should also recognise the fact that any measures that are taken on the islands need to be bespoke and tailored to their needs.

Rhoda Grant spoke about the particular challenges of transition for island communities that are more heavily reliant on oil and gas. That point is also made in her amendment. I will not conjecture how the six islands were chosen—I take what the cabinet secretary has set out in good faith—but there are certainly other islands for which the transition will be more challenging. It will be a transition, although elements of the SNP-Green coalition Government appear to be in favour of something that is less of a transition and more of a handbrake turn, which is a concern.

Rhoda Grant and other members were right to talk about the requirement, as part of the transition, for skills development on our islands as well as nationally. A number of speakers talked about the link between what we do here, particularly on transport, and population retention on our islands. Earlier in the debate, I had an exchange with Rachael Hamilton, who talked about population retention being crucial to efforts to move towards carbon neutrality.

Rachael Hamilton raised the issue of the islands bonds. In relation to attracting people and retaining populations, I suggest that, in addition to piloting low-emission air transport in places such as Orkney, there is an opportunity to aggregate funds through the islands bonds and green transport initiatives. That would have the double benefit of moving us towards our climate aspirations and making more resilient not just the population of one island community but the population across the outer north isles in Orkney.

I perhaps take exception to the part of the motion that says that it is the Scottish Government's initiative that

“puts Scotland's islands at the forefront of climate change policy”.

No, it is not. As we have heard from colleagues across the chamber, it is the ingenuity, hard work and ambition of islanders that are putting our islands at the forefront of those efforts.

Jenni Minto gave one example of that when she made the case on behalf of the islands in her constituency. I was very interested in the experience of some of the distilleries because I know that Highland Park has sought to embark on a similar route and has been frustrated that it has been unable to take forward some projects.

Nevertheless, for years, Orkney has been harnessing its natural resources to blaze a trail through innovation, first, in renewable energy generation, and, more recently, in the use of that energy in transport and heat. Like Jenni Minto, I probably ought to declare an interest as a member of the ReFLEX Orkney project, which Jamie Halcro Johnston described very well. I have no doubt that Mairi Gougeon saw much of that for herself when she enjoyed some time in Orkney last summer. It has been in evidence since the first turbine on Burgar Hill, in the 1970s, and EMEC's establishment, in 2003, through to the connection last year of the world's most powerful tidal turbine, made by Orbital Marine Power, with which the minister will be familiar.

There have been any number of landmarks along the way. I can confirm to Fulton MacGregor that there are around 700 wind turbines—including one in my back field—and 400 solar installations across the isles, which allows Orkney to generate around 130 per cent of its electricity demand from renewables. We also have the highest percentage of EV use in Scotland, as well as the highest number of charging points, although Jamie Greene made a fair point when he said that that is not replicated in island communities around the country. More recently, plans were unveiled that could mean the Flotta oil terminal transitioning into a green hydrogen production facility using offshore wind power produced west of Orkney.

I warmly welcome the carbon neutral islands initiative and the inclusion of Hoy, but I urge that ministers be cautious about hogging the credit. I also hope and expect that the other islands in my constituency and elsewhere will benefit from knowledge transfer and the sharing of experience as well as of Government support.

However, I want the Government to go further and faster on heat and transport. At a national level, those are the policy areas in which ministers are failing to meet their targets. As Beatrice Wishart reminded us, they are also the areas that arguably matter the most to islanders, because of the need to deliver lifeline ferry and air services and the need to address the appalling levels of fuel poverty that have, I think, been reflected on in every speech in the debate. That is why my amendment makes it clear that any ambition to create carbon-neutral islands must factor in the need for low-emission ferries. The SNP's record in that area does not inspire confidence, as the fiasco at Ferguson's testifies.

Beatrice Wishart was also right to highlight the point that the exclusion of Orkney's and Shetland's internal ferry services from the Government's connectivity plan—the successor to the national ferries plan—suggests that ministers are sticking their heads in the sand rather than facing up to the reality of what needs to be done. That is simply not good enough, particularly as Orkney is already innovating with hydrogen ferries, which Ariane Burgess referred to, and the use of shore power as well as low-emission aircraft. However, replacing the ageing fleet on those lifeline ferry routes is now a matter of urgency, not only if we are to reduce emissions, but if we are to safeguard the services on which island communities depend.

On decarbonising heat, too, we need greater urgency from the Government and a targeted approach in our islands. The levels of fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty in Orkney and, as Alasdair Allan suggested, in the Western Isles are among the highest not only in Scotland but across the continent. That was the case even before the current cost of energy crisis. In a thoughtful speech, Alasdair Allan also made a fair point about the need to provide a cap on heating oil.

Emma Roddick also made a thoughtful speech, in which she set out in clear detail the fact that the measures that are needed to improve energy efficiency are more challenging and costly to deliver on the islands. That is why my amendment calls for priority to be given to our islands and for a targeted plan of retrofitting. It was disappointing that the cabinet secretary said that she was unable to support the amendment. Her motion gives the Scottish Government the credit for much of what is happening, but, apparently, making

progress on transport and heat is the responsibility of local authorities or the UK Government.

The carbon neutral islands initiative is welcome, and I wish the islands that are involved in it all the best. However, it must not be the sum of our ambition; nor can we afford its being another glossy announcement on which delivery is left to chance. The needs of islanders and island communities on transport—particularly ferries—and heat must be urgently met as we continue our journey to net zero.

I urge Parliament to back the amendment in my name.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that I can afford to be generous with the allocation of time for closing speeches.

16:28

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The debate has been a welcome opportunity to shine a light on the work of our island communities as part of our journey to net zero. I refer not only to the six islands that will be part of the carbon-neutral islands project, but to the 88 other inhabited islands that will not.

I place on record Labour's thanks to the island authorities, the community groups and the businesses on our islands, such as those in the whisky industry, which Jenni Minto and Jamie Greene highlighted, for the work that they are all doing in leading the way in the fight against climate change, to which our islands are especially vulnerable, as the cabinet secretary highlighted in her opening speech.

The debate has also highlighted the scale of the challenge that we face. Although we might have the target of reaching net zero by 2045 and the—as Rhoda Grant highlighted—very modest target of just six islands becoming carbon neutral by 2040, we do not yet have a plan for meeting either target, as Rachael Hamilton stressed. Scotland consistently misses its emissions reduction targets, and the longer we take to put in place proper plans to meet those targets, the less likely it is that any transition will be a just one.

The failure to deliver a just transition would be particularly devastating for our island communities, yet there is no mention of a just transition in the SNP-Green motion. I am therefore pleased that the SNP and the Greens will be supporting Labour's amendment. A just transition is particularly important at a time when, across Scotland, families face a cost of living crisis, with household bills rising. Rhoda Grant made the key point that, for our island communities, the costs of energy, food and petrol are already disproportionately high: on average, they are 15 to

30 per cent higher compared with those in urban areas.

Rhoda Grant, Beatrice Wishart, Ariane Burgess, Jamie Halcro Johnston and many other members rightly raised the shameful levels of fuel poverty that our island communities face. As Alasdair Allan pointed out, according to Energy Action Scotland, fuel poverty is 40 per cent in the Western Isles, which is almost double the Scottish average. Households in some of our islands, such as Shetland and Orkney, have no access to mains gas; in the Western Isles, the figure is just 14 per cent. The main source of domestic heating is often oil or solid fuel. As Emma Roddick passionately argued, for those households electrification of heating would come at a prohibitive cost. The total cost of meeting the Government's commitments on heat decarbonisation is estimated to be in excess of £33 billion, but so far only £1.8 billion has been committed to meeting that cost.

If we are serious about achieving a just transition, the burden of that commitment cannot fall on the shoulders of those who can least afford it. We need better support for our island communities when it comes to properly insulating their homes and retrofitting those houses, as Rhoda Grant and Beatrice Wishart highlighted. However, we must also stop the madness of building homes to a standard that means that they will need to be re-retrofitted in the future. My colleague Alex Rowley will soon introduce a bill to ensure that all homes are built to a passive house standard, which I hope the Government will consider supporting.

A number of members across the chamber raised other areas where more urgent action is needed if we are to tackle the climate crisis. Alasdair Allan highlighted the issue of transport, which remains the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland—it is responsible for more than a third of those emissions. Of course, public transport options on our islands are, sadly, very limited, so for many islanders a car is not a luxury but a necessity.

The Government has set a target of banning the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2032, but the available alternative low-emission vehicles remain prohibitively expensive and the lack of charging points is in danger of leaving electric car owners in our rural communities and islands stuck at the side of the road. The Climate Change Committee says that we need around 30,000 public charging points in Scotland by 2030, so the Scottish Government's plan to provide just an extra couple of thousand over the next few years falls woefully short.

As several members stressed, our ferry network provides a lifeline transport link for our island communities, but the Government's approach to cutting emissions from our ferries appears to be

not to run them, with cancellations and delays of the creaking, ageing CalMac fleet now the norm for long-suffering island communities. There is real scepticism about the Government's commitment to make 30 per cent of CalMac's fleet zero carbon by 2030 when it has spent years and hundreds of millions of pounds failing to deliver just two new ferries. As Liam McArthur's amendment highlights, it is not just the CalMac fleet that needs to be decarbonised.

In her opening comments, the cabinet secretary said that, although our island communities face challenges in becoming carbon neutral, there are also big opportunities for them, and I agree. As Rhoda Grant stressed, renewable energy is one of those opportunities and its potential remains largely untapped, not least when it comes to jobs. We all remember Alex Salmond promising that Scotland would be the Saudi Arabia of renewables. The SNP pledged to create 130,000 green jobs but, a decade on, the most recent number of people directly employed in the low-carbon and renewable economy was just 20,500 and falling.

Offshore wind, in particular, offers huge opportunities for our islands to help to deliver the just transition, given the significance of the oil and gas sector to the economy of many of those islands, as Rhoda Grant and Jamie Halcro Johnston highlighted. However, the recent ScotWind leasing of Scotland's sea beds on the cheap, entirely to overseas-owned multinationals, failed to include legally binding guarantees on jobs. Scotland will get none of the billions of pounds of profits and a pitiful level of the rent. Imagine the difference if those offshore wind projects were in the hands of a publicly owned energy firm that put social responsibility before profits, creating a pipeline of work for Scottish firms, rather than the Scottish Government's approach of supporting big business and pursuing the cheapest supply chain option.

At the very least, we need to ensure that every single penny of the £700 million that the Scottish Government receives from the ScotWind leasing round is ring fenced for a Scottish renewables fund to help to bring those supply chain jobs to Scotland by investing in Scottish ports and infrastructure and, crucially, in Scottish skills.

My colleague Mercedes Villalba again highlighted the issue of skills when she raised the issue of an offshore training passport. The Government cannot keep sitting on the fence on that, because it has responsibility for training and skills. As Mercedes Villalba said, if the Government continues to take the view that the matter should be left to the market, at the very least, the Government needs to set out publicly its expectation of what the sector should deliver. It is

bad enough that, in offshoring Scotland's wind energy, the Government has offshored the profits from it, but it cannot be allowed also to offshore the jobs as a result of the lack of intervention on so many fronts and, in particular, the failure to include conditionality in contracts.

We all recognise the need for a transition to net zero, but it must be a jobs-led transition that leaves no worker, family or community behind. Climate justice needs to go hand in hand with economic justice. Only by delivering both will all our communities, both island and mainland, have the genuine jobs-led transition that we need.

16:36

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): At the outset, I reiterate the Scottish Conservatives' support for the global ambition to reduce carbon emissions and address the climate emergency, here in Scotland and worldwide. We recognise the critical role that our islands will play in allowing Scotland to meet its climate targets and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels.

Although there is undoubtedly a need to be bold in how we reduce emissions, the Scottish Government must also ensure that any approaches that it takes receive public backing and garner widespread support. The process of seeking to make six of our islands carbon neutral will not be delivered top down by Government; it has to have island communities at its heart. The process must involve residents and must strike a balance between the realities of island life and the need to meet important climate targets.

Although the Scottish Conservatives support the Scottish Government's aims in that respect, we remain concerned that the Government continues to neglect other pressing issues that are impacting on our island communities—issues in the here and now that affect islanders day in and day out. One of the most urgent issues is island depopulation. It has been a problem for many years, and there is a justified fear that efforts to tackle it are simply not working. Indeed, the Government's "The National Islands Plan" identified depopulation as the top priority for Scotland's 93 island communities. Members from across the chamber have already spoken about some of the reasons why island depopulation remains a serious threat to island life, and I want to summarise some of those points.

Many members touched on the critical state of Scotland's ferries infrastructure being a key reason why efforts to reverse depopulation on the islands are failing. We simply cannot separate that from what we are discussing today. I know that the Government is never keen to talk about the issue, but the fact is that, after 15 years, the lack of a

robust and reliable ferry network is driving people from our islands. As Rachael Hamilton pointed out, CalMac's ferry community board, which is a neutral body, has said that the situation is

"a real threat to our islands' ability to retain and attract people, ensure services are sufficiently reliable and at prices that permit viable communities and thereby avoid depopulation."

We welcome the Scottish Government's stated ambition in the 2021-22 programme for government to ensure that 30 per cent of state-owned ferries are low-emissions ferries by 2032. That will plainly contribute to making our islands carbon neutral, which is a point that Ariane Burgess, Beatrice Wishart and Liam McArthur picked up on.

However, the Scottish Government must build ferries now and deliver them on time. There is no use in making our islands carbon neutral if fewer people live on them and nobody can get to them.

Housing is another important issue, which was touched on by members from across the chamber. We must incentivise the need to retrofit existing homes, where possible, to make them more energy efficient. Emma Roddick covered that point compellingly, and stressed the need to support island communities to become more sustainable, which is harder to do on islands than it is elsewhere. We must build new houses that meet energy-efficiency standards, especially in island communities.

I often get emails—I am sure that other island representatives do, too—from young constituents who want to live, work and raise families on the islands where they were brought up, but who cannot do that because there are no affordable homes. Affordable housing is the number 1 issue for islands.

That has not been helped by the fact that the Scottish Government has failed to deliver targeted house-building funds to rural and island authorities over the past five years. In the previous parliamentary session, I lodged a written question for the Government, and the answer revealed that the Scottish Government passed on to councils less than half of its £25 million rural housing fund.

More woefully, the Government's island housing fund delivered only nine houses in five years. The Mull and Iona Community Trust could not have put it more starkly when it said:

"The lack of housing is causing significant problems to our communities and threatens to accelerate depopulation of our working age residents."

A subject that Rachael Hamilton mentioned in her speech is the need to properly support and incentivise crofters in their important role in reducing our carbon footprint. I refer to my crofting

interests in my entry in the members' register of interests.

I applaud the way in which crofters are developing more environmentally friendly ways of producing food and goods, and of managing land. Many crofters would say that they have been doing that since the dawn of time. The work that they do is too often overlooked. It is critical that the views of crofters are acknowledged by the Scottish Government and included in its plans for carbon neutral islands. In the Western Isles, 77 per cent of land is held in crofting tenure, so the actions of crofters will play a vital role in achieving carbon targets. However, poor transport, lack of housing and the need to support crofters must be prioritised if we are to ensure that we have thriving, sustainable and environmentally sound island communities.

We need more detail. I have listened with great interest during the debate, but there has been little detail from the Government on how it will deliver its pledge to make the six islands carbon neutral. What does it mean in practice? We need more than just this one debate to thrash out the details, and we have to scrutinise the policy.

I will now focus on the powerful speeches that we have heard. Jenni Minto made an effort to concentrate on pragmatic points that showed what islands can do. She spoke about the distillery on Islay that heats the local swimming pool. What does it mean to make our islands carbon neutral? In her excellent speech, she gave us some colour in respect of what that might look like.

Rhoda Grant spoke about development of skills and the effects of fuel poverty, especially in the islands.

Beatrice Wishart mentioned tunnels as a good way to reduce emissions, and we heard from Jamie Greene about how the Scottish Government must use every power in its armoury to help in the ambition to reduce emissions.

In the first of the Orkney speeches, Jamie Halcro Johnston talked about renewable energy facilities and world-leading research on electric vehicles on Orkney and, in the second, Liam McArthur—the local MSP—spoke about low-emissions transport and the natural resources and renewable energy sector on Orkney. He made the critical point that it is not Governments, but the ingenuity and ambition of islanders that are driving forward action. Islanders are the innovators, not Governments. That is fundamental to the debate.

I would like to have commented on the speeches of many more members; it has been an excellent debate and lots of issues have been covered.

We support the ambition to help Scotland's islands become carbon neutral, but we do so on the basis that communities must be at the heart of the process. The phrase "just transition" is overused, but it remains true, and island communities deserve nothing less. Change and transition must be just and fair as we move to a carbon neutral future.

16:45

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater):

Before I address the contributions to the debate, I will say a few words about two key areas of my portfolio. The climate emergency requires a stronger circular economy. We must create an environment in which everyone in society feels that they can contribute simply and effectively to a circular economy. The recycling improvement fund is beginning the work in that direction.

Biodiversity and nature are also crucial. Adaptation requires working together with nature, and protecting and restoring our biodiversity will always be at the heart of our adaptation policies. We are doing that through our 2019 climate change adaptation programme, which critically affects island communities because of coastal erosion and sea level rises, and we have increased our funding for flood risk management and coastal change adaptation. Moving towards net zero can and should see biodiversity and nature as assets, while embracing the opportunity for green jobs.

We have heard many excellent and passionate contributions in support of our island communities. I will pick out what I think are four key themes, as well as responding to some specific details.

I liked that Jamie Greene said that our islands are

"sometimes harsh, sometimes peaceful, but always inspiring."

I thought that that was beautiful.

The number 1 concern that I have heard from across the chamber is about heat in homes and fuel poverty. I am pleased that there is recognition from all parties of the importance of the insulation and upgrading of homes and of a transition away from fossil fuels in order to tackle carbon emissions and fuel costs and enable quality of life by providing warm homes for everyone in Scotland, including on our islands.

The Scottish Government's heat in buildings strategy, which was published on 7 October, sets out the actions to decarbonise Scotland's building stock in line with our legislated climate change targets. In the next financial year, the Scottish Government will allocate a total of £336 million to

heat energy efficiency and fuel poverty, including £64 million for local authority-led area-based schemes and an increased allocation of £55 million for warmer homes Scotland.

Liam McArthur: I welcome the increased funding that is available through the warmer homes Scotland initiative. Will the minister agree to look at how that might be best deployed? That could be by doing what a number of members have referred to, which is targeting the funding where it is most needed so that we end up with a streamlined system in which the area-based schemes of home energy efficiency programmes for Scotland collaborate with warmer homes Scotland to deliver measures to the island households that desperately need them. That will require capacity in Warmworks Scotland.

Lorna Slater: I am happy to consider that. My colleagues and I will be happy to look at that.

As has been discussed in the debate, rural households face many challenges in the transition to zero emissions heating, including generally higher installation costs, older buildings and fuel poverty. In recognition of that, our area-based schemes provide enhanced support to rural households. The Scottish Government is considering options for an islands uplift across our delivery programmes that would provide additional support to those areas.

Funding is also being made available through CARES—the Scottish Government's community and renewable energy scheme—to help communities in rural and island areas develop cleaner, greener and cheaper energy. That investment will empower communities that operate existing local, grid-independent electricity schemes to develop local, independent climate-friendly electricity supplies. We are making £3 million available to develop projects in 2022 and 2023; expressions of interest to the fund, which is administered by local energy Scotland, closed in January.

The next top theme in this afternoon's debate was depopulation and the challenges of recruiting people, keeping them and ensuring that our island communities are places where people want to live. I understand a little about those issues, having worked in renewable energy—in both wave and tidal energy—in Orkney. I understand both the difficulty with recruiting for posts and attracting people to the islands and the importance of doing so in order to make businesses and the economies of the islands successful.

Rachael Hamilton spoke about the populations of the islands, which many speakers across the chamber identified as an issue. As my colleague said, tackling depopulation is the number 1 strategic objective in the Scottish Government's

national islands plan. The issues around depopulation are complex and there is no silver bullet.

Rachael Hamilton: Does the minister agree that rural depopulation can be reversed through good ferry transport and good connectivity without our having to wait for what the Greens are looking for, which is a green form of energy for ferry transport? It is actually just about getting ferries running.

Lorna Slater: As we have heard this afternoon—I have heard this over and over again, and I am happy to listen—connectivity to the islands through ferries and other forms of transportation is vital not only to the life and the health and safety of our island communities but to repopulating them. However, it is not just about ferries and transportation, even though those are very important. In our vision for thriving island communities that are highly desirable places to live, the housing crisis needs to be taken into consideration as well.

I note that the islands connectivity plan will replace the current ferries plan from January 2023. As part of the connectivity plan, we will produce and maintain a long-term plan and investment programme for new ferries and development at ports. It will aim to improve resilience, reliability, capacity and accessibility, to increase standardisation and to reduce emissions in order to meet the needs of island communities and those who travel to islands for both business and leisure.

Liam McArthur: All the things that the minister has suggested will be in the connectivity plan are welcome and sensible, but can she confirm that Orkney and Shetland's internal ferry services will be included in the plan, which is after all supposed to be the successor to the national ferries plan?

Lorna Slater: Obviously, connectivity to Orkney and Shetland is vital for the communities on those islands, and we look forward to seeing the islands connectivity plan when it is published in January 2023.

The connectivity plan will investigate the opportunities and technologies that are available in the maritime sector and set out pathways towards the delivery of vessels that will operate with zero or significantly reduced carbon emissions. Transport Scotland is aware that other ferry owners and operators both in this country and in Europe have recently commissioned hydrogen fuel cell and battery hybrid vessels. Transport Scotland will engage with those stakeholders to learn what was involved in the design and development process and the thoughts behind the choice of that mode of propulsion. That will be done as part of the commissioned work on

alternative fuels for the vessels on our longer routes.

Housing was raised by several members, but specifically by Emma Roddick. Many of the actions in "Housing to 2040" will bring benefits to island communities, including the development of a new fund for local authorities to apply to in order to bring empty homes back into residential use, as well as steps to regulate short-term lets to empower local authorities to strike a better balance between local housing needs and the concerns of residents and the tourism industry. I know that housing is an issue in all our rural and island communities.

We are also committed to continuing and refreshing the rural tourism infrastructure fund, which has benefited island communities through provision of infrastructure to mitigate the impacts of increased tourism.

The third theme, which we have heard about repeatedly today, and rightly so, is connectivity and ferries. I hear and understand the frustrations that have been expressed and the importance of connectivity in this area.

The fourth theme that was covered in the debate is renewable energy, which has many aspects. We heard from Jenni Minto and Fulton MacGregor about how successful and important community energy schemes can be. Our community and renewable energy scheme, which is delivered by Local Energy Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Government, provides bespoke expert advice and support, including funding support in grants and loans, to community groups and organisations, rural small and medium-sized enterprises and other eligible organisations that seek to explore their renewable energy options. CARES supports the delivery of the Scottish Government's target to deliver 2GW of community and locally owned energy by 2030 as well as our ambition for at least half of all newly consented renewable energy developments to have an element of shared ownership.

Until May last year, when I was elected to the Parliament, I worked in the tidal energy industry. I have worked in wave energy in Orkney. I completely understand the frustrations about connectivity to Orkney and the situation with the grid. As we have discussed, those are not devolved matters but, absolutely, the emphasis on the opportunities for using green hydrogen are recognised by our hydrogen action plan. I was involved with the turbine that generated the first green hydrogen in Orkney, so I completely understand that focus.

From having worked in the industry, I also understand the challenges of getting skilled individuals. This is a personal interest, but I flag to

everyone in the chamber that we need not just skills in renewable energy but skilled people in all the traditional trades—for example, mechanical engineers and electrical technicians. I especially encourage women to look into such things. I had an enjoyable and successful career as an electromechanical engineer, and I know that that is possible for other women.

We have heard mention a few times of the importance of a skills passport. I am pleased with the progress of the OPITO, working with trade unions, towards creating that skills passport, which I know is going to be so important.

I thank Rhoda Grant for her amendment and for asking an excellent question—why are we supporting these six islands? What difference can a small number of islands make when it comes to tackling the climate emergency? The answer is that we need to get started, urgently, and to learn by doing. By going first, these islands will show us the way and will provide learning that the rest of us—on the rest of our islands and the mainland—can follow, to decarbonise at speed and in a just way, as we all agree is so important.

Yesterday, I had a conversation with Elizabeth Mrema from the UN about how small nations and small islands, by starting the pebble rolling, can make a difference. She was thanking Scotland for our work on financing natural capital. I asked what difference Scotland was making, as such a tiny nation, given that the crisis is global. She said that Scotland is leading the way and showing a path for other countries; and as Scotland goes, so do our islands. That is a wonderful way to think about how we can all contribute to tackling the climate crisis.

I have been so delighted to have the opportunity to close today's debate on supporting Scotland's islands on their journey to becoming carbon neutral. The debate has highlighted that islands are not on the fringes of the discussion about how to tackle climate change—quite the opposite. When it comes to net zero, our islands are at the centre of Scotland's efforts.

Whether further developments are in floating wind or green hydrogen, islands and island communities need to benefit from the infrastructure and the green skills that go with that. It is important to highlight that the movement towards net zero should be seen as an opportunity to leverage innovation and to develop the green skills that are needed to decarbonise Scotland.

I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues in the Government and with communities, and all other stakeholders, on our islands and on the mainland, to support our journey towards becoming carbon neutral.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on supporting Scotland's islands.

Point of Order

16:58

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Since last Wednesday's Conservative Party business debate on the ferries fiasco, the Opposition parties have asked repeatedly that the Deputy First Minister appear before the Parliament. Earlier today, I was told that there was nothing new to say; however, there most definitely is.

Last week, it was revealed that the Deputy First Minister was directly involved in the signing-off of the ferry contracts, despite the First Minister's having told us previously that that was the doing of only Derek Mackay.

Given Mr Swinney's willingness to speak to multiple media outlets on the issue, have you received any indication this afternoon from the Scottish Government that he is now willing to deliver a statement to the Parliament regarding his involvement in the matter?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank the member for his point of order. He will be aware that the requests have been made at the Parliamentary Bureau. I am currently unaware of any updates on the situation that was discussed this morning. It is, of course, for the Government to respond to such requests.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-04428.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04428, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on supporting Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-04428.3, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04428, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on supporting Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-04428.2, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04428, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on supporting Scotland's islands on their journey to become carbon neutral, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on amendment S6M-04428.2, in the name of Liam McArthur. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app froze, but I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms McAllan. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Unfortunately, I could not connect to the app, but I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Smyth. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)

Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 52, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-04428, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on supporting Scotland’s islands on their journey to become carbon neutral, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government’s announcement of the six islands that will be supported towards becoming fully carbon neutral by 2040;

notes that the six islands are Hoy, Islay, Great Cumbrae, Raasay, Barra and Yell; recognises that these six islands will embrace the opportunity for island communities to lead the way in realising Scotland's climate change ambitions; notes that the project will benefit all Scottish islands, and not only those supported directly as part of the project, through knowledge exchange and good practices; welcomes this initiative, which puts Scotland's islands at the forefront of climate change policy while celebrating their unique culture and heritage; acknowledges that the six carbon neutral islands will become international trailblazers and champions of carbon neutrality across the world; calls on the Scottish Government to provide support and funding so that the islands and islanders can progress towards being carbon neutral; further calls on the Scottish Government to publish plans for these islands to achieve these goals; acknowledges that the outlined move to carbon neutrality for six islands is just five years before the net zero target for the whole of Scotland; is committed to all of Scotland's islands becoming carbon neutral and will ensure that those whose economy is more dependent on hydrocarbons will not be left behind; believes that the transition to net zero must be a jobs led, just transition, which is dependent on good quality, secure jobs in the renewables sector, and recognises the opportunities presented by offshore wind and its supply chain, including future decommissioning, in creating and supporting a skilled renewables workforce and helping to ensure that adequate investment is made in retraining opportunities for oil and gas workers and in developing the infrastructure needed to ensure island communities can benefit from supply chain jobs.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Marine Life (Unexploded Ordnance)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-04277, in the name of Beatrice Wishart, on protecting marine life during unexploded ordnance removal. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes reports that there are 100,000 tonnes of unexploded ordnance in waters around the UK, which are relics of the first and second world wars; recognises that the presence of bombs, mines and shells in the waters around Shetland and the whole of Scotland pose potential obstructions to offshore projects; understands that the current common method of disposing of these devices involves powerful explosives that the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, a statutory adviser of the UK and Scottish governments, acknowledges can be very loud; notes the concerns of campaigners that this can seriously disrupt and threaten marine mammals, which use sound to find food, socialise and navigate, and can suffer hearing loss, other physical damage, and death as a result of loud sounds; further notes the reports that connect clearances with mass strandings; acknowledges the campaign for the adoption of available low-impact methods of disposal, such as low-order deflagration, which it understands have the support of Whale and Dolphin Conservation and other organisations; notes the calls for new guidance from Marine Scotland and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and what it considers as the potential benefits of this for low-impact disposal methods and enhanced protection of marine life, and highlights the event that was hosted in the Scottish Parliament informing MSPs about the issue in April 2022.

17:10

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank members for taking an interest in this debate, and I thank the minister for attending on behalf of the Scottish Government and for her time when we met a few weeks ago to discuss this matter.

Whether through the provision of food, energy or fascinating wildlife, for centuries, the coast and seas of Scotland have been bountiful. As we continue to expand the use of our seas, we are met with increasingly difficult challenges that risk not only human lives but the very environment that we rely on. There are an estimated half a million unexploded ordnance items—or UXOs—in waters around the United Kingdom, many of which are in the areas designated for offshore wind farms. These munitions have posed a risk for decades, with numerous examples of unexploded bombs, torpedoes and shells being hauled up in fishing nets. I well remember an incident many years ago when a trawler hauled up a torpedo off Fair Isle and came into Lerwick harbour. I am sure that the crew of the Lerwick lifeboat remember it too,

because two fishermen were lost as a consequence of dragging up that torpedo.

As we continue to build more infrastructure at sea to help meet our net zero targets, the sea bed must be surveyed and cleared. Encountering UXOs increases the risk to us and the environment. They are usually cleared by high-order detonations, where a countercharge is placed next to the unexploded munitions and both are exploded, creating a large underwater blast. High-order detonations are thought to be responsible for affecting the auditory systems of marine mammals, and they can impact on animals up to 30km away from a blast. The explosions also leave craters in the sea bed, while the remnants of toxins and explosives scatter through the water and can enter the food chain.

There are alternatives to high-order detonations at sea, and militaries and navies across the world use low-order detonation by deflagration processes. Indeed, the Royal Navy has used the technology since the early 2000s. The alternative low-order detonation process is less disruptive, reduces acoustic output by 20 decibels and the affected area is reduced to 750m. After the UXO is made safe, what is left can be removed from the seabed by remotely operated underwater vehicles.

The Scottish Government is awaiting analysis from a Danish navy trial of low-order deflagration that was conducted earlier this year. I would be grateful if the minister could let us know in her closing remarks what the timeline is for the findings to be known and, if policy changes are envisioned, how long they will take to be put in place.

I became an orca species champion when I was elected in 2019, and I am pleased to say that I continue to be a champion in this Parliament. We learn more about those fascinating animals and other marine mammals every day, not least through the reports on the Shetland orca sightings Facebook page. We know that marine mammals rely heavily on their auditory systems and that they are intelligent and social creatures. Harm to these auditory systems can disrupt navigation, feeding and communication, and noise trauma can cause permanent hearing loss and is thought to lead to mass strandings.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am enjoying the member's contribution. Can she tell me whether anyone has studied the impact of exploding ordnance on commercial fish stocks or spawning grounds? In any event, will the minister address that in her closing speech?

Beatrice Wishart: I think there is concern, although I have focused this debate primarily on orcas and cetaceans.

A report into the 2011 incident at the Kyle of Durness, where 39 long-finned pilot whales became stranded, leading to 19 deaths, revealed that noise from munition disposal operations in the area at the time was the probable cause of the strandings and deaths. As we see the stress that climate change is placing on our natural environment and we develop more at sea to tackle the climate crisis, is it not our responsibility to ensure that that expansion does not further damage populations of marine mammals and other sea life?

Could the minister confirm that it is the Scottish Government's intention to end the use of all high-order detonations for UXOs that are discovered? I appreciate that emergency situations can suddenly arise, but new ways of clearance should be the preference for the environment and human safety every time.

The minister is aware of my concerns about ensuring that Marine Scotland is well resourced to carry out its pivotal role in safeguarding what happens in our seas. Along with many other responsibilities, the body issues licences for the clearance of unexploded munitions in Scottish waters. Will it be able to fill that role as well as ensuring that those with licences are using the least-damaging methods? If Marine Scotland is busy now, and with offshore wind developments rapidly advancing, how can the Government ensure that it is keeping pace with developments and new technologies as well as enforcing UXO licences in real time? Transparency is vital in a regulated approach to new technologies. Without it, how do we advance or improve them?

The expectation of the Scottish Government and other UK regulators who signed up to the unexploded ordnance clearance joint interim position statement last November is that developers prioritise low-noise methods, but that statement is non-binding. I believe that Scotland could lead the way and be at the forefront of new industries and the associated novel techniques to mitigate impacts to Scotland's marine environment. I am keen to work with the Scottish Government to create a position that is binding and enforceable to help protect sea life and marine mammals.

I thank the Stop Sea Blasts campaign for its assistance and for coming to Parliament last month to hold an event to highlight this important topic, and I thank the MSPs who came along to find out about UXOs and their impact on the marine environment.

17:17

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and congratulate Beatrice Wishart on securing it.

Increasing development in the marine environment is leading to the discovery of a greater number of undetonated munitions. Clearance of unexploded ordnance is commonly undertaken by high-order detonation, as Beatrice Wishart described, which uses a controlled explosion that leads to loud blasts and disturbs protected marine mammals. I agree with Beatrice Wishart that such blasts cause a huge welfare concern to marine life and to our natural marine environment.

Since 2019, I have been raising my concerns over the levels of unexploded ordnance items that are washing ashore across beaches and coastal areas in Dumfries and Galloway. Although exact figures are not available, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the Royal Navy bomb disposal unit have reported that the number of unexploded ordnance items washing ashore is increasing. While the exact reasons for that remain unclear, expert opinion suggests that it may be due to a combination of sea levels rising, increasing offshore projects such as the construction of offshore wind turbines and increased marine traffic.

Beaufort's Dyke is a national deepwater trench located in the north channel of the Irish Sea between Ireland and Portpatrick in the south-west of Scotland. It is widely understood that, at the end of the second world war, instead of surplus unexploded munitions being dumped directly in Beaufort's Dyke, which was approved as a dump site, the weapons were often dumped outside or around the site to save money and time. It is therefore little wonder that we are now discovering more unexploded ordnance washing ashore.

According to the Ministry of Defence, over 50,000 tonnes of explosives are disposed of in Beaufort's Dyke. In July 1945 alone, 14,500 tonnes of 5-inch, 130mm artillery rockets filled with phosgene gas were dumped. In addition, according to documents from the Public Record Office, approximately 2 tonnes of concrete-encased metal drums, filled with radioactive laboratory waste and luminous paint, were dumped in the dyke during the 1950s.

I have previously contacted the UK Government—the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Defence—to ask whether a risk assessment of the stability of Beaufort's Dyke and the area around the site has been carried out, so that constituents across the region can be assured of its safety. I have sought

assurance that there are no future plans to use the dyke as a dump site in the future.

Unsurprisingly, other than one response from the MOD indicating that it believes Beaufort's Dyke to be safe and to pose no threat, I have had no response from the Scottish or defence secretaries and, therefore, I repeat my calls for Beaufort's Dyke to receive a full safety inspection. That would not only reassure constituents but protect our marine environment. The RSPB's director, Anne McCall, has shared concerns over the impact of undersea explosions on sea life.

Alternatives to high-order detonation are now available on the commercial market. Some alternatives have been developed or are being developed in a military context and are not used commercially, whereas others have been developed purely for industry use. Those alternatives require the use of explosive material to effect clearance, but in much smaller volumes than the donor charges required for high-order detonation. Alternative methods cause lower noise levels, which reduces the impacts on the marine environment. I agree with Beatrice Wishart that their use is welcome and I ask the minister to do all that she can to press the UK Government to make use of those alternatives as standard practice.

I repeat my calls on the UK Government to carry out a full safety inspection of Beaufort's Dyke and I ask the minister to press the UK Government to use proven alternatives to high-order detonation.

17:21

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I too thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the debate to the chamber and giving the Parliament the opportunity to speak on the subject.

We absolutely should do all that we can to protect the welfare of our marine wildlife, which is subject to so many challenges at this time, including from the impact of unexploded bombs. As we have heard, it is estimated that there are around 100,000 tonnes of ordnance in UK waters, equating to almost half a million bombs, mines and shells left over from the first and second world wars. Interestingly and worryingly, much of that ordnance lies buried in areas that are now being designated for potential offshore wind construction, which the Scottish Government is anxious to develop and expand in the coming years if we are to meet net zero emission targets.

It is welcome news that some wind farm developers and energy companies are seeking alternative methods for clearing unexploded ordnance, and many require contractors to offer low-order deflagration as a process that can burn out a bomb and the likes without detonation. In

that process, a magnesium cone is fired at the munition, causing its explosive content to ignite and burn out from within, without a damaging explosion, resulting in significantly lower noise emissions. It is a largely unknown fact that noise levels depend only on the size of the counter charge and not on the size of the explosive tested. However, low order is not standard practice and the high-order method is still commonly used.

It is worth mentioning that marine planning and protection is devolved to the Scottish Government, which means that it falls within the responsibility of ministers in Scotland to regulate on the issue. The use of explosives within the UK's marine licensing area requires a licence under part 4 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. In Scotland, the body responsible for licensing is Marine Scotland, and in November 2021, it signed a joint position statement that included the line:

"Low noise alternatives to high order detonations should be prioritised when developing protocols to clear UXOs."

However, as we have already heard, it is non-binding and high-order techniques or similar are still likely to continue to be used to clear unexploded ordnance.

I recognise the significant impact that underwater noise from ordnance clearance can have on vulnerable marine species, which means that we have to tackle the matter delicately and with great care. Campaigners such as Stop Sea Blasts have rightly highlighted that.

As I understand it, Crown Estate Scotland operates under a framework document set out by the Scottish Government and, among other responsibilities, it manages and leases the seabed within 12 nautical miles of Scotland. I know that unexploded munitions are often found during surveys of potential sites for offshore wind development and they need to be cleared. To clear such munitions, however, developers must apply for a licence from Marine Scotland. Specialist companies are then hired to carry out the work within the terms of the licence granted.

We should all agree that any clearance method used has to be both safe and effective without causing any damage to marine wildlife. The UK Government supports the development and use of lower noise alternatives than the high-order detonation that is the traditional method. Campaigners want to see that happen in Scottish waters, too.

The decision to prioritise the use of low noise alternatives is a welcome step forward and I hope that the Scottish Government will take it into consideration for the future. It has previously said that it is awaiting the results of trials conducted by the Danish navy before deciding on any future legislation. While it is important that all scientific

data is taken into account, it is clear that alternatives such as low-order deflagration, which can reduce noise output by several hundred times compared to the large blasts, should be encouraged.

Everything possible should and must be done to protect our marine wildlife and environment as a matter of course to avoid a repeat of the incident in the Kyle of Durness in July 2011 when 19 whales died. We must do as much as we can as soon as possible.

17:26

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland)
(Lab): I thank Beatrice Wishart for securing this important debate on protecting marine life during unexploded ordnance removal. I also pay tribute to the work that Stop Sea Blasts continues to do to raise awareness of the issue, including the informative event that it held in the Parliament last month.

It is clear that the scale of the issue should not be underestimated. As a result of the two world wars, there are now more than 100,000 tonnes of unexploded ordnance in the UK's waters. As we continue to develop our offshore energy infrastructure, there will be a greater need to remove unexploded ordnance from the seabed, but, as we have already heard, unexploded ordnance is being removed in a way that is highly disruptive to marine life and habitats because of the use of high-order detonations. As other members have already explained, that is having a particularly harmful effect on marine mammals who rely on sound for navigation, communication and feeding.

It is not just wildlife that is affected. The use of high-order detonations also harms marine habitats, with explosives leaving craters in the seabed and damaging the sea floor. That is why we must look urgently at the use of low-order technologies in unexploded ordnance removal to protect marine life and habitats. We know that these low-order technologies work. A UK Government-funded study found that low-order technologies reduce noise emissions and physical damage to the seabed. Crucially, those technologies are supported by a range of marine protection organisations such as Whale and Dolphin Conservation.

Given the damage caused by high-order detonations and the evidence of viable alternatives, it is now time for the Scottish Government and Marine Scotland to take concrete action. The Scottish Government has a national marine plan, and it should be updated to include support for a shift to the use of low-order technologies in unexploded ordnance removal.

Marine Scotland has signed up to a UK-wide regulatory statement, which signals a shift towards favouring the use of low-order technologies, but it needs to be made binding. Marine Scotland already has licensing conditions for ordnance removal, but they are outdated. Those conditions must be updated to ensure that developers prioritise the use of low-order technologies and ensure that high-order detonations are subject to tighter restrictions.

There is, however, another issue that must be addressed by a change to licensing conditions. Most unexploded ordnance removal work is carried out by private companies on behalf of offshore developers. Given the risks associated with the use of high-order detonations and the removal of unexploded ordnance, there should be a clear obligation on employers to guarantee workers' rights and safety. I am calling on the Scottish Government and Marine Scotland to commit to exploring the introduction of a new marine licensing condition that ensures that employers will adhere to established employment rights and health and safety legislation.

The debate relates to the role that Marine Scotland plays in managing our seas, so I will conclude by touching upon an on-going dispute involving its fisheries protection fleet. Up to 80 Marine Scotland workers face the prospect of having a below inflation 2 per cent pay rise imposed on them by the Scottish Government. As Unite the union has highlighted, imposing a pay award against the wishes of a workforce could constitute an illegal inducement and leave the Scottish Government in breach of collective bargaining arrangements. As well as taking the urgent action needed on unexploded ordnance removal, the Scottish Government must engage with Unite and the Marine Scotland workers to deliver the fair pay rise that they deserve.

17:30

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Beatrice Wishart for lodging an important motion and congratulate her on securing the debate. I also thank her for hosting the parliamentary event on this topic last month. I was not able to attend that event, but I had some very interesting and helpful follow-up conversations with Eodex and others about the Stop Sea Blasts campaign. I heard about the catastrophic impacts on cetaceans and other marine life that most current commercial disposal mechanisms have and the proven alternatives, such as low-order deflagration, that Beatrice Wishart and others have so clearly described.

In the chamber, members are used to—or, at least, we are getting a little more used to—a fair amount of noise and disruption during business.

Sometimes, some of us might struggle to hear because of this disruption, but mostly, we deal with it. Imagine if we used our auditory system for navigation, communication and feeding—for staying alive. Without this system, we would be completely cut off from our fellow creatures, we could not eat and we could not travel anywhere safely. In fact, we would have no idea where we were, what dangers or threats were nearby, or anything about our surroundings. We would be, essentially, helplessly vulnerable.

What if we were near an explosion that took out our auditory system completely? Within 2km of the blast, it is almost certain that we would die because of the pressure waves caused by the explosion. Research shows a complete kill zone of between 0m and 50m, but an almost certain death zone of up to 2km from the blast site. Up to 10km away, we would suffer permanent threshold shift or permanent damage to our hearing. Up to 20km away, we would suffer temporary threshold shift or temporary hearing damage, but that might be enough to distort our feeding and communication to such an extent that the trauma is overwhelming and the consequences result in permanent damage. Beyond 20km, there may still be some long-term behavioural impacts as a consequence of the trauma.

To put this into perspective, if we in the chamber were all cetaceans, a blast at Haymarket station would kill us and a blast at Edinburgh airport would render us all with permanent hearing loss—we would become disoriented, hungry and traumatised and we would likely die. That is exactly what happened to the 19 pilot whales who beached themselves and died at the Kyle of Durness, as Beatrice Wishart and others have highlighted.

We have a responsibility to act to ensure that we are not complicit in the deaths of cetaceans and other sea life. We must not stand by and accept the release of toxins and the destruction of our sea beds that result from high-order deflagration.

I am interested to hear the minister's closing speech. In addition to responding to the questions and points raised by other members this evening, I hope that she will provide an update on what the Scottish Government is able to require of BP, Shell, SSE and other energy operators who undertake deflagration in Scottish waters, especially in the North Sea off the north-east coast. That is especially important given the ScotWind licences that those companies have and the work that they need to do in preparation for the development of offshore wind farms. What plans are in place to ensure that proven alternatives to high-order deflagration will be used? The Stop Sea Blasts campaign and others are clear: so-

called low-yield deflagration is not the same; it must be low-order deflagration and it must be proven to work—not just hypothetical.

In closing, I thank Beatrice Wishart once again for bringing this important topic to the chamber and I thank the Stop Sea Blasts campaigners for all that they are doing to raise awareness and for taking action to protect our marine species and ecosystems.

17:35

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I thank Beatrice Wishart for lodging the motion on what we agree is an important topic. As Ms Wishart said, we met to discuss the issue some weeks ago and I know that she campaigns on it and cares very much about it. I am sorry that I was not able to make the parliamentary event. I also thank members for their speeches, many of which have focused on the importance of a healthy marine environment.

The Scottish Government's vision is for a clean, healthy, safe, productive and diverse marine environment that is managed to meet the long-term needs of nature and people. As members have pointed out, our marine environment is increasingly important to our environmental, social and economic wellbeing. We must manage this increasingly busy space fairly and safely. Ms Wishart referred to how dangerous the challenge can be—indeed, it can be fatal in some circumstances.

We know that offshore wind in, particular, will be critical in our journey to net zero. We must seize the opportunity for our climate and for our green economy of the future, but we must do so in a way that protects our waters and marine wildlife, and ensures the health and safety of maritime workers, as Mercedes Villalba rightly noted.

As members have said, the vast majority of unexploded ordnance is discovered when offshore wind developers come to prepare their sites for development. Unexploded ordnance has to be safely disposed of to allow construction works to commence. Such work has to be effective, safe and as environmentally unobtrusive as possible.

Liam Kerr asked about commercial fisheries. I will focus my remarks on offshore wind, as that is the focus of the motion, but I assure him that licence conditions require that if any dead fish are reported from such activity, that is reported straight back to Marine Scotland.

We are taking action to meet the objectives of safety and effectiveness, through licensing processes and by collaborative working with other regulators and statutory nature conservation bodies. I will highlight exactly what the Scottish

Government is doing, as I have been asked to do so by several members.

On licensing, in line with policies set out in our national marine plan, we are committed to reducing the effects of man-made noise and vibration on marine species, especially those that are sensitive to such effects. Before starting any UXO clearance on an offshore wind farm site, a developer must apply to Marine Scotland for a marine licence and a European protected species licence. Those two licensing regimes are underpinned by legislation and require offshore wind developers to use UXO clearance methods that produce the least underwater noise. When applying for those licences, developers must consider any satisfactory alternatives to meet their objective of clearance and those must have the least environmental impact.

To further reinforce that commitment, the licences that we issue contain the binding conditions that I have been asked about, which mean that all possible opportunities to undertake UXO clearance using low-noise techniques must have failed before licensees can consider the use of high-order detonation. Of course, we know that high-order detonation is still sometimes required for human safety reasons, although we are watching as evidence develops on that. I hope that the robust framework that I have set out will assure members that low-noise techniques are prioritised where practicable, effective and safe.

Beyond what we are doing in licensing, we are collaborating. We know that to meet the challenge of reducing underwater noise resulting from increased development in the marine environment, we must work with other regulators and statutory nature conservation bodies to support the use of alternatives to high-order detonation. That is the goal of all of us. That is why, together with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Marine Management Organisation and NatureScot, we have signed a joint interim position statement that sets out our collective position. Put simply, that position is that low-noise alternatives should be prioritised over high-order detonations.

However, as members have made clear today, these are serious matters, with substantial safety and environmental implications. Moreover, alternatives to high-order detonation are a relatively new approach in a commercial context and because of those two factors we have to be sure that they are effective and safe. Early trials of low-order deflagration techniques show that they can result in greatly reduced underwater noise, which brings obvious benefits for acoustic impacts on marine wildlife.

Further trials of techniques have taken place off the coast of Denmark. Those trials commenced on 22 January 2022, after a slight delay owing to Covid, and have resulted in six world war two mines being cleared. Measurements were taken at a range of distances during the project to characterise sound outputs, and sea bed and surface samples were also collected. I am particularly interested in the findings of this report because, importantly, the trials took place in North Sea conditions and have a strong applicability for us. The data from the trial is currently being analysed by scientists and will be made available as soon as possible. When that information is made available, it will inform our decision making—and decision making across the UK—on alternative technologies.

Beyond the scientific research that I have just outlined, the Scottish Government takes an active role in developing an evidence base to ensure that the best available science will always underpin the planning and regulation of developments that are contributing to our low carbon future, but are doing so in a sensitive environment that we must protect. Our Scottish marine energy research programme is a significant part of that. We also operate an array of acoustic recorders across the east coast of Scotland, which for almost a decade have been measuring underwater noise before and during offshore wind farm construction.

I am glad that the motion highlights the call for new guidance from Marine Scotland—members also asked for such guidance. I am pleased to say that a review of our current consenting and licensing guidance for offshore renewable energy is being undertaken. The updated guidance will reinforce our position surrounding the effort to reduce underwater noise levels.

In conclusion, the Government is committed to ensuring that the deployment of Scotland's huge offshore wind potential materialises in a way that is sustainable, respects the marine environment and, crucially, is safe for the people working in our marine environment. Our on-going evidence-based, collaborative work, including with regulators and nature conservation bodies, will help us to deliver that. We have a robust framework that already prioritises low-impact clearance of UXOs. We are committed to considering evidence of new techniques as they emerge, always being sure that they are effective, safe and as environmentally unobtrusive as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:43.

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