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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 22 September 2022

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. As ever, in order to get in as many members as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be gratefully received.

Social Care Workers (Cost of Living Crisis)

1. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what specific measures it is taking to support social care workers during the cost of living crisis. (S6O-01372)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government is doing everything within its powers to tackle the cost of living crisis, but it is the United Kingdom Government that has the key levers to significantly mitigate the crisis for workers, households and businesses.

We have increased the minimum rate of pay for adult social care workers delivering direct care to £10.50 per hour from April 2022. That represents an increase of 4.8 per cent from the £10.02 pay rate that was introduced in December. That is an increase of 10.5 per cent for those workers in the course of a year, with pay rising from at least £9.50 per hour in April 2021 to at least £10.50 per hour in April 2022. For a full-time adult social care worker, based on 37.5 hours a week, the increase to £10.50 per hour represents an uplift of more than £1,600 over the course of this financial year.

Alex Rowley: I wrote to the minister in the summer and pointed out to him that those carers who were working in the private sector were getting 25p a mile for their petrol. In the public sector, I think that it is 42p, so there is an inequality there. We then have an inequality in pay, which will be even greater now that we have the pay awards in the council sector. I have talked to private sector providers up and down the country who tell me that they cannot recruit and cannot retain. What impact is that having on our hospitals and on people who are on waiting lists for care packages, and does the Government have any plan to address that?

Kevin Stewart: As I explained in my initial answer, a lot of the key levers to tackle the cost of

living crisis rest with the UK Government. The Scottish Government is doing all that it can to do its level best for those people, and in particular for the most vulnerable people across the country.

On the fuel aspect that Mr Rowley raised, we are actively involved with our partners, including local government, to understand what impact the increase in the price of fuel is having across Scotland. I have recently written to the UK Government to press it to help those workers, including social care workers, who are impacted by the rises in fuel prices. It would be much better if the UK Government did all that it can to tackle the cost of living crisis, including for our public sector, rather than cutting taxes for the rich or removing the cap on bankers' bonuses.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I will help the minister to understand the impact, particularly on rural workers and social care workers across the country: they are leaving the service. People are going without care packages and the minister just washes his hands of the whole affair and says that it is somebody else's responsibility. We need some action to deal with the problem, particularly in rural areas, where workers are travelling hundreds of miles every week to go from house to house. Their fuel bills are going through the roof and it does not pay to work any more. What action is the minister going to take?

Kevin Stewart: I have spoken to folk right across the country, including people in the Fife care at home collaborative, and I know that these are difficult times for people, particularly with regard to fuel prices. However, we do not have the levers of power to deal with fuel prices. That power rests with the UK Government.

Mr Rennie is quite happy for all of that to rest with the UK Government, but I am not. I want those powers to come here. That is why I want an independent Scotland—so that we do not have to rely on the UK Government to mitigate these issues.

Ferries

2. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to improve the reliability and resilience of Scotland's ferry network. (S6O-01373)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I refer the member to the statement that I made to Parliament on 8 September, which is available on the Parliament's website. In that statement, I set out a range of actions to improve the reliability and resilience of our ferry network, including the expansion of tide and weather monitoring equipment to help reduce the number of delays and cancellations related to weather.

Another key action is to increase the number of vessels and capacity. This year the MV Loch Frisa will join the Caledonian MacBrayne fleet, bringing benefits across the network, and I am hopeful that I will be able to provide more good news in this regard shortly.

Donald Cameron: The minister will be aware of on-going reports on the chaos and confusion surrounding the draft winter timetables for the main route serving Mull. That route is in some instances being reduced from a two-vessel to a one-vessel service, something that the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee has described as being “completely inadequate”. I note that today the minister has asked CalMac to rethink its proposed timetable for the route, but can she clarify when that will happen so that residents and communities on Mull receive urgent clarity?

Jenny Gilruth: The member might be aware that the delay this year related to mitigations that were put in place in Uig in relation to that outage. I am pleased that we have been able to get to a better place with the Uig outage; it has now been split in half, and the time that the port will be closed for has been substantially reduced

I met the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee yesterday along with the constituency MSP Jenni Minto to discuss this very issue, and CalMac is in discussions with the committee, too. I expect the committee to have clarification on the timetable later this week.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the minister has said, she held a meeting yesterday with the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee, Transport Scotland and CalMac to drive through the changes to the proposed winter timetable for Mull and Iona in response to issues highlighted by the community. I should also point out that other work such as the installation of new equipment on piers to improve resilience has been done. Can the minister provide more detail on that and on what else might be done this winter to create greater resilience in service provision, especially to prevent weather disruption being exacerbated by technical issues?

Jenny Gilruth: I was pleased to meet the member yesterday along with the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee and, as I mentioned in my response to Mr Cameron, I hope later this week to have clarification on the detail of that timetable to share with the community. I recognise that this has been a challenging time.

As I mentioned in my statement to Parliament two weeks ago now, there is a need for a robust cross-government approach to resilience. That is why I confirmed in my statement my intention to re-establish and refresh the islands transport

forum, which will focus on ferries provision and islands resilience.

With regard to the issue of resilience more generally, it is worth saying that in 2018 a resilience fund was established to upgrade or replace key systems and equipment on older vessels, and that fund has seen recent investment of £14.5 million by Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd in upgrades to CalMac vessels. Moreover, as I said in my update to Parliament a couple of weeks ago, the Government is also investing in an additional weather monitoring station network, which will provide vessel crews with the enhanced intelligence that will be crucial in giving information that might allow sailings to take place when actual live conditions are less than those forecast.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister has talked about additional ferries both today and previously. When is she going to be in a position to give us more details on that, and does she hope that the additional ferries will be available this winter?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that the member raised that question with me two weeks ago in response to my statement. She will be aware that some of the negotiations involved in purchasing additional vessels are commercially sensitive, so I am not able to give her confirmation on that matter at this moment in time. However, I am happy to write to her in more detail on expected timescales, because I very much recognise the need for greater resilience in the fleet and, as she knows, a spare vessel to provide greater reassurance to island communities.

Shetland Islands Council (Meetings)

3. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government when it was last in contact with Shetland Islands Council and what was discussed. (S6O-01374)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): The Government engages with all local authorities on a regular basis, working together on key priorities for communities. Last month, there were a number of ministerial visits to Shetland, during which key topics were discussed such as the current cost crisis; transport and additional connectivity, including fixed links; promotion of renewables and hydrogen in the context of a just transition; and the provision of care services in the context of the national care service. The Scottish Government is keen to continue to work closely with Shetland Islands Council to address these and other issues of concern and mutual interest.

Beatrice Wishart: Depopulation and decarbonisation are but two key challenges that Shetland Islands Council faces, and fixed links

have a role in reversing depopulation. Tunnels replacing internal lifeline ferries could reduce emissions and improve connectivity, which is important locally. The issue is also about national infrastructure and Shetland's contribution to Scotland's economy.

The SaxaVord United Kingdom spaceport, the aquaculture sector and the export of millions of pounds-worth of fish landings all demonstrate that Shetland punches above its weight. However, with 21st century infrastructure, Shetland could do much more. Will the Scottish Government commit to meeting grass-roots community fixed links action groups, as well as Shetland Islands Council, to discuss tunnel infrastructure?

Ben Macpherson: I thank the member for her follow-up question, which touched on a number of aspects in which Shetland is succeeding and has further potential. Connectivity with regard to the ferry service was discussed by the Minister for Transport on her recent visit to Shetland. In the interests of expediency and productivity, if the member wishes to engage with me and other ministerial colleagues further, we can follow up constructively on the aspects that she has raised.

Transport Infrastructure Improvements (North-east Scotland)

4. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on transport infrastructure improvements in the north-east. (S6O-01375)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government remains committed to improving infrastructure in the north-east. A transparent and evidence-based review of the A96 corridor is under way and will report by the end of this year. We continue to progress proposals at Laurencekirk junction through the statutory process.

Enhancing access to affordable public transport is a key theme of the second strategic transport projects review, and Transport Scotland continues to work with partners on the Aberdeen rapid transport system through the bus partnership fund. Additionally, the Campaign for North East Rail was successful in its funding bid for a new feasibility study through the just transition fund.

Liam Kerr: This Government has repeatedly kicked down the road the dualling of the A9 and A96. We heard yesterday that colleagues across the chamber are rightly distraught about repeated tragedies. Our constituents are furious at the abject failure to give firm dates for the work starting. Year after year goes by with no meaningful progress and, now, thanks to the politicking of central belt-based Green MSPs, we have a delaying consultation on the A96, with an

unpublished report that—we have just heard—has been kicked to the end of the year. The eyes of people of the north and north-east of Scotland are on the minister, and they want a firm commitment: on what date will the Government bypass its Green partners and start making life-saving improvements by dualling in full the A9 and A96?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise some of the sensitivities around the routes that Mr Kerr mentioned—I do not think that the A9 is in his region, but the A96 is. He is right to say that the Bute house agreement sets out that we will take forward a transparent enhancement programme on the A96 corridor that will look more broadly at connectivity for surrounding towns. We have already undertaken substantial development work on the programme, which tells us that the dualling of the entire A96 will involve substantial offline new roads. In essence, that means changing part of the route of the current road. I am sure that Mr Kerr will agree that the current climate emergency necessitates that all Governments, irrespective of their politics, ensure that all roads in the future are not detrimental to our environment.

I am more than happy to meet Mr Kerr to talk about the route. I know that other members have a keen interest in the matter and I have previously met them in relation to the development that is required to be undertaken. It is important to understand that statutory requirements around the route must be adhered to and the Government cannot be seen to override those requirements.

I am sure that Mr Kerr would agree that it is important to work collegiately on matters in relation to road building. To that end, as I have said, I am more than happy to work with him and colleagues on progressing the requirements for the A96.

Fuel Costs (Rural and Island Communities)

5. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what additional support it can give to rural and island communities, such as those in Argyll and Bute, in light of basic fuel costs reportedly being disproportionately high historically. (S6O-01376)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The United Kingdom Government holds most of the levers to address pressures on energy bills. This month's announcement of support by the UK Government was necessary, but more support is needed for vulnerable consumers, and we anticipate more details in the chancellor's fiscal statement this week.

We will continue to do all that we can to mitigate pressures on households. Energy efficiency measures are essential, so we have widened the

warmer homes Scotland fuel poverty programme to offer further support to island and rural communities. We intend to use our emergency budget review to double our fuel insecurity fund to £20 million this year. The fund helps households on any tariff type using any kind of fuel; it provides dedicated support for people who are reliant on solid or liquid fuels, who are often those in remote and rural communities and who are not currently covered by Office of Gas and Electricity Markets protections.

Jenni Minto: I thank the cabinet secretary for that very helpful response.

Rural communities are coming together to support vulnerable people—for example, by using community halls. However, those spaces are also being impacted by the increasing fuel prices. How can the Scottish Government support such endeavours by local community groups?

Mairi Gougeon: We very much welcome those initiatives, and we are aware that a number of local authorities and community organisations in Scotland, as well as elsewhere in the UK, are considering setting up warm banks this coming winter, essentially to ensure that people who cannot afford to heat their own home have a place where they can go to stay warm. That is a relatively new concept, and we will, of course, continue to monitor that as well as ensuring that, working together with our local government partners, we consider what other measures we might be able to deploy to provide support to those who are most affected by the rising energy prices. Our foremost concern is to support people who are worried about heating their home to access the information and support that they need to reduce their energy bills. We have expanded the capacity of our Home Energy Scotland advice service this year to help additional households to receive free and impartial advice.

Energy Costs (United Kingdom Government)

6. **Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its most recent communication with the United Kingdom Government has been regarding the impact of energy costs on the cost of living crisis. (S6O-01377)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): My officials have discussed the proposed package of support with the UK Government. The average annual bill of £2,500, which is an increase of 27 per cent on the current level, is simply unsustainable for many households, and the announcement has come way too late for many across Scotland who are already struggling to heat their homes. We estimate that, with the price cap frozen at £2,500, there will be around 860,000 fuel-poor households

in Scotland, of which some 600,000 will experience extreme fuel poverty from October this year.

Jim Fairlie: It is clear from the cabinet secretary's answer that there is much more that should be done by the UK Government in response to the deepening crisis.

I appreciate that no stone should be left unturned. In my Perthshire South and Kinross-shire constituency, I will soon be hosting a cost of living summit that will bring together food banks, local charities, the citizens advice bureau and representatives of Perth and Kinross Council to co-ordinate a multifaceted approach to the cost of living crisis, which will only become more critical as the winter approaches. To what extent is the Scottish Government liaising with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local government to ensure that local and community organisations, such as food banks, are given all possible support for the difficult months to follow?

Michael Matheson: We should be absolutely clear that no household should have to make the choice between heating, eating and other essentials. The measures that have been taken so far by the UK Government are wholly inadequate to address the level of the cost of living crisis that many households now face.

We have already allocated some £3 billion in this financial year to a range of policy areas to help to meet individuals' daily living costs. However, it is clear that we need to see much more action in order to tackle the scale of this particular crisis. That is why we have also set out the wider measures in our fuel insecurity fund and our cash-first support programme, which we will take forward with our partners in COSLA. However, it is clear that much more needs to be done if we are to effectively tackle a growing crisis throughout the country.

Ardrossan Harbour

7. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will give an update on the work to upgrade Ardrossan harbour. (S6O-01378)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): The Ardrossan harbour project is currently at the tender design stage, and further work is required. The legal and commercial arrangements for investment at that third party-owned harbour have been challenging. I am frustrated by the lack of progress, but I remain committed to a solution and to progress being made at Ardrossan.

Following our investment, Troon will be used when MV Glen Sannox comes into service until the Ardrossan works are complete. The investment in Troon also provides options for use

as an alternative mainland port of refuge in the longer term.

Katy Clark: The failure by the landowner, Peel Ports, to agree a deal that is acceptable to the public purse has led to a delay of over four years. In the meantime, islanders on Arran, those who use the ferry services, and the Ardrossan people and economy are suffering. Does the minister agree that enough is enough? Will the Scottish Government now take urgent and compulsory measures so that progress is made?

Jenny Gilruth: I share Ms Clark's frustration about progress at Ardrossan, but it is also worth noting that the Scottish Government will invest £40 million in ports and harbours services in this year alone. Some ports, such as the one at Ardrossan, are privately owned, which can substantially slow progress in making improvements. Any work also comes at a cost to the public purse, which is why, in my update to Parliament two weeks ago, I made clear my intention to explore with the relevant partners, local authorities and third party owners—including Peel Ports—how we can improve matters.

It is worth saying that extensive work is needed to complete the improvements at Ardrossan and that Troon—which is another private port—will be the temporary mainland port for the service to Brodick while Ardrossan is closed or if hull 801 comes in before the Ardrossan work starts. The work at Troon is now largely complete, but the need for the closure of Ardrossan and the temporary move to Troon has been widely known for some time. That relates, as Ms Clark has said, to the protracted and on-going negotiations with Peel Ports.

The project entered the design stage in April of this year and is being progressed by the project partners. The development work at Ardrossan is being overseen by the ministerial task force, which I look forward to chairing later this year.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Emergency Treatment (Waiting Times)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** This week's health figures revealed that more people are waiting longer than ever for emergency treatment. In the past week, almost 10,000 people across Scotland waited for more than the target four hours at accident and emergency departments. Those are the worst waiting time figures on record and it is only September.

Our doctors, nurses and staff are doing outstanding work, but we know that the pressures on our national health service will only get worse over the winter. What action is the First Minister's Government taking now to reduce the time that people are waiting for emergency treatment here in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care said earlier this week, the most recent performance in accident and emergency is not good enough. I am very clear about the need for improvement. Of course, the most recent performance reflects the very significant pressure across health and social care arising from the two-year pandemic and from some pre-existing factors, such as our country's changing demographics.

There is a sharp focus on doing what is required to improve that performance, which takes me to the specific question. In addition to what has been a 263 per cent increase in the number of accident and emergency consultants since this Government took office, we are investing more to support further recruitment, including overseas recruitment, and are taking action through the £50 million urgent and unscheduled care collaborative. That work includes a range of strands offering alternatives to hospital where those are appropriate, such as hospital at home; directing people, where appropriate, to better urgent care settings; and scheduling some urgent appointments to avoid long waits in accident and emergency. This week, the chief operating officer of the NHS wrote to health boards with five additional specific actions that we expect boards to take. We expect to see improvement and we want it to start to become visible immediately.

I will make one final point to put the issue into context, for the sake of those who are working so hard in our national health service. Our NHS is facing significant pressures, but the NHS in every part of the United Kingdom is doing so, too. Although performance needs to improve here in

Scotland, our accident and emergency departments are performing better than those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For context—it is important to put it in context—in the last complete month for which we have figures, performance against the four-hour target in Scotland was 66.5 per cent, which is not good enough and needs to improve, but it compares with 57 per cent in England, 55.2 per cent in Wales and 45.7 per cent in Northern Ireland. The pressures exist everywhere and this Government is focused on ensuring that we support those in our health service to tackle them.

Douglas Ross: Context may be important for the First Minister and her members behind her but, for people who are waiting hours and days for A and E treatment, those are hollow words. We are now more than a year into the health secretary's recovery plan, but the situation is getting worse, not better. The First Minister spoke about A and E consultants, but I will tell her what doctors on the front line are saying.

This week, Dr Peel, the deputy chair of the British Medical Association Scotland said:

“As an A&E doctor I often tell people that A&E is a safe space, you can come here if you're in pain, if you're sore, if you don't know where to go.”

However, Dr Peel continued:

“Our A&E departments are no longer safe and what's really concerning is our government just aren't acting ... and they are turning a blind eye.”

New information that we have uncovered shows just how horrendous waiting times in Scottish hospitals are just now. A response to a freedom of information request has revealed that one patient at a hospital in Ayrshire had to wait 84 hours for treatment. That is three and a half days; the equivalent of turning up for emergency treatment right now and not being seen until next week, in the early hours of Monday morning. Is that really what anyone in Scotland should go through in 2022?

The First Minister: No—that is clearly an unacceptable situation, but it is also an exceptional situation. I am more than willing to look into the particular circumstances around that.

I have been very clear that the current performance is not acceptable. I would not, and do not, shy away from saying that. I have also been very clear about the action that the Government is taking to support those on the front line, to ensure that there is much speedier access to accident and emergency and to healthcare services more generally.

I have also made the important contextual points, because that is part of giving people confidence that we are taking action to address

the issue. The performance against the four-hour waiting time target is not good enough, but it is better than it is in counterpart parts of the United Kingdom. With regard to long waits, there are 50 times more 12-hour waits in England than there are in Scotland, and they are four times higher in Wales than they are in Scotland.

That does not mean that performance in Scotland is good enough, but Douglas Ross and others often come to the chamber and pretend or suggest that those issues are unique to Scotland. They are not unique to Scotland; they are pressures that all health services are facing. I am rightly setting out the action that we are taking to support the health service in tackling the pressures with regard to recruitment, investment and changing the pathways of care to ensure that people not only get speedier access but access to the right part of the health service at the right time. We are taking action across all those strands and will continue to do so.

Douglas Ross: Unbelievably, the First Minister just said that 84 hours is not good enough but is better than the situation in other parts of the United Kingdom. How does the person—*[Interruption.]* How does the person who was waiting for 84 hours, and their friends and family, feel when they hear that?

Although that was the most extreme example that we found, it is not the only time that someone has waited for days at A and E. Our FOI responses revealed that another patient waited 79 hours earlier this year, another waited 66 hours, and another waited 53 hours. There are thousands of people waiting each week for longer than the Government's target time.

A constituent wrote to us about their grandmother. They said:

“My nana took a turn for the worse last week and could not stop vomiting. Due to her type 2 diabetes and blood pressure this is very serious indeed. She was admitted to hospital after a lengthy wait then sent home. This happened several times over a number of days.”

Finally, she had to be rushed to A and E, and her grandson told us:

“What I was faced with was utter chaos. I felt so sorry for the doctors and nurses and helpers. They are literally at breaking point, there were beds and people everywhere. I wish I had taken a picture but the image is etched in my memory forever. The beds were wall to wall and my nana had to stay in her mobility chair as there was nowhere for her to go.”

First Minister, this cannot go on any longer, and it certainly cannot go on through the winter. When will people in Scotland get access to the emergency treatment that they deserve when they need it?

The First Minister: As I said, we expect to see, and we are supporting what it will take to deliver, immediate improvements in accident and emergency waiting times. These are really serious issues, as the case that Douglas Ross has narrated illustrates—I would not say otherwise—but it does not do anybody any service at all to deliberately twist, and indeed misrepresent, what I said in my previous answer. It is really important to be clear here: I did not say that 84 hours was not good enough but better than anywhere else in the UK; I said that our four-hour performance was not good enough but was better than in other parts of the UK, and I said that about our longer-wait performance, too. I said that 84 hours is clearly unacceptable, but cases like that are exceptional, and it is important that, where such cases occur, they are properly looked into.

I turn to our performance against the 12-hour target. In the most recent week, which was very challenging, there was the lowest four-hour performance on record, and it is important to be clear about that. However, more than nine out of 10 patients—95.4 per cent of patients—were seen within the 12-hour target time. Clearly, exceptional cases should not happen. When they do, lessons should be learned. It is important, however, not to misrepresent the situation or to misrepresent what I have said.

On the action that we are taking, which is obviously what matters, I have referred to support for recruitment, and it is important to point out the 263 per cent increase in the number of A and E consultants. We are also investing £11 million to support further domestic and international recruitment. Of course, international recruitment has been made significantly harder because of Brexit—I just put that on record. A thousand healthcare support workers were brought in last winter. I have already referred to the £50 million of investment to examine alternatives to accident and emergency where they are more appropriate for patients.

We will continue to focus on improving performance. To end my answer where I started, we expect to see performance improve immediately.

Douglas Ross: We have been told before that there will be immediate improvements, but people are waiting for 84, 79, 66 or 59 hours. The First Minister says that those are exceptional cases, but let me give her another one, as there are so many.

We spoke to another patient, who attended Monklands hospital. She was stuck at A and E again, again and again, waiting for emergency treatment. She went to A and E with severe abdominal pains. She was left waiting, vomiting and in extreme pain for nine hours. She was told

to come back the next day at 9 am. This time, she waited a further six hours.

Two days later, her condition had worsened to the point that her general practitioner told her to go back to A and E for urgent treatment. On this occasion, she again waited nine hours. That is a total of 24 hours' waiting for emergency treatment in just four days, all of it in extreme pain. That patient wants to ask one simple question to the First Minister: "How can you allow this to continue?"

The First Minister: We are not allowing this to continue. We are recognising the significant pressures on our national health service. An experience such as that is completely unacceptable, but there are significant pressures on our national health service, and significant action is being taken to address those pressures. We will continue to take steps around recruitment, investment and redesigning pathways of care. I do not know whether it is the case in the particular instance that Douglas Ross has just narrated, but there will be many people who end up in accident and emergency departments who would be better seen and treated in other parts of our national health service.

Douglas Ross: Her GP said that she should go there.

The First Minister: That is why I said that I did not know whether that was the case in that particular instance. However, many people would be better treated in other ways, and that is why we are investing in hospital at home, in different urgent care settings and in scheduling urgent appointments in A and E, so that people do not have to have long waits. That work takes time, and it requires the investment in recruitment that I have spoken about, but the health secretary and the Government are focused on ensuring that we do that and on supporting those working at the front line of the health service, as they support patients who need treatment on the national health service.

National Health Service Waiting Lists

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** On 25 August 2021, the First Minister announced her NHS catch-up plan. Can she tell the Parliament how many people were on NHS waiting lists then and, 13 months on, how many are on NHS waiting lists now? (S6F-01349)

The First Minister: Waiting lists and waiting times have increased since then. The figures are published, so they are there for people to see; I am sure that Anas Sarwar will quote the published figures at me.

Since then, we have also had further waves of Covid, and the pressure on our national health service here and in other parts of the country

continues. However, we are focused, through the recovery plan, on treating the most urgent patients and the longest waits. Just this morning, information has been published about performance against the target to eradicate, in most specialties, the numbers of those waiting two years or more.

We are seeing progress, but this is an extremely challenging time for the national health service, which is why it is so important that we continue to focus on investment and the action that we are taking.

Anas Sarwar: Catch-up surely means that waiting lists come down rather than go up. In August 2021, 603,000 were on a waiting list; now—14 months on from the First Minister's so-called catch-up plan—the figure is nearly 750,000 people.

The First Minister should stop pretending that that is all down to Covid. When the Scottish National Party came to power, there were 260,000 people on NHS waiting lists. Immediately before Covid, the figure was 420,000 people. Now, it is 750,000. That is one in seven Scots on an NHS waiting list, and that has consequences.

Listen to the staff. Dr Lailah Peel from the British Medical Association said this week that

“patients are now presenting at A&E because of complications developed while waiting for treatment and scans.”

Week after week, this Government has been breaking records for the worst A and E waiting times ever. Can you tell us how many people have waited more than 12 hours for A and E treatment since you launched your so-called NHS recovery plan?

The First Minister: I have just covered the situation in accident and emergency. The number of people waiting more than 12 hours has increased, but more than 95 per cent of patients are seen in accident and emergency within 12 hours. Of course, the target that we want to meet in accident and emergency is the four-hour waiting time target.

More generally, waiting times have been increasing. There has been a two-year pandemic, which has had a significant impact on waiting times in our national health service. However, as I think I said in response to an earlier question, there are other, pre-existing factors, the changing demographics of the country being one of those.

Over the past two months, there has been a focus on treating the longest waits in our national health service. The figures published today show the progress in that.

We are also seeing an increase in the number of in-patient and day-case patients who have been seen. In the most recent quarter, there was a 7.6 per cent increase in those seen, which demonstrates the recovery of the NHS from Covid.

These are difficult challenges—there is absolutely no getting away from that. Almost every country—certainly every country in the United Kingdom and most countries across the world—are grappling with these challenges, but the investment that we see in our national health service and the steps that we are taking to redesign care are what need to continue.

Lastly, we do listen to staff. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care meets staff, unions and professional organisations regularly. There are many more staff working in our national health service today than was the case when this Government took office. More than 20,000 additional staff have been recruited in that period.

Anas Sarwar: The health secretary might listen to staff, but he is not hearing what staff are telling him and taking the necessary action to help people across the country.

On my question to the First Minister, the answer that she was looking for is that 38,255 people have waited more than 12 hours in A and E since the recovery plan was published. Frankly, people are sick of the same old excuses and of the SNP Government always looking for someone or something else to blame. Across Scotland, people are getting the same inadequate answer from this Government: wait—wait in fear for a cancer diagnosis; wait in pain for a hip replacement; wait for hours in an ambulance outside A and E; wait anxiously for their child to get mental health treatment. Today, we discover that life expectancy has dropped again for a second year running—all on Nicola Sturgeon's watch.

After 15 years in power and 15 years of running our NHS, how long will the people of Scotland have to wait for you and your health secretary to do your job?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Speak through the chair, please, Mr Sarwar.

The First Minister: We will continue to do our jobs. Ultimately, as it always has been, it is for the people of Scotland to decide whether they want us to continue to do our jobs.

A two-year pandemic has presented real and very significant challenges for Scotland, as it has for every country, and every day we seek to address those challenges and support those who are on the front line. We will continue to do that in our NHS. We will continue to take action—albeit in this regard with one hand tied behind our back—to tackle poverty in Scotland, to have a positive

impact on things such as life expectancy—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members—thank you.

The First Minister: Unfortunately, Labour still wants us to have one hand tied behind our back on these issues.

Although I take full responsibility for performance across all of these things in Scotland, the reality in terms of the national health service in Scotland is that, whatever the challenges we face, thanks to the dedication of those who are working in our national health service, it is performing better than its counterpart in England, where the Conservatives are in power, and better than its counterpart in Wales, where Labour is in government.

We will continue to address these challenges, we will continue to take the steps that are necessary to do so, and we will continue to ask the Scottish people to put their trust in us to do exactly that.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

Stem Cell Register

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): September is blood cancer awareness month, which provides an opportunity to increase awareness of the importance of new people joining the Anthony Nolan stem cell register. The simple act of a taking a swab test could lead to the selfless act of saving a life. Will the First Minister join me in encouraging young people aged 16 to 30, especially men from ethnic minority backgrounds, to consider joining the stem cell register, and in thanking Anthony Nolan and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for their continued efforts in raising this issue in schools up and down the country?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I am very happy to do so. I am grateful to Bill Kidd for raising this important issue. I join him in encouraging all those who are eligible to consider joining the stem cell register. Anthony Nolan's research has shown that the younger the donor, the better the patient's chance of survival. It has been pointed out that people between ages 16 and 30 can join the stem cell register.

In addition, I acknowledge the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's 13-year partnership with Anthony Nolan and I thank the service for its continued hard work in raising awareness of the issue.

Suicide (Young People)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A recent report by Public Health Scotland has found suicide to be the leading cause of death among young Scots. Ministers have described every suicide as being "a tragedy" and have said that suicide prevention is the key priority for the Scottish Government.

Given that priority, what action is being taken to ensure that youngsters who are affected by suicide get access to the services that they require to reduce this appalling situation?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Every suicide is a tragedy. Obviously, we want to take and support steps to reduce the number of suicides in Scotland.

I am not trying to take anything away from the very important issue that has been raised, but thankfully the number of deaths by suicide among young people has decreased over the past two years. The Public Health Scotland report that came out earlier this month tells us that the average rate from 2011 to 2020 among under-24s was lower than the rates among those aged 25 and over, but it is still way too high.

Our new suicide prevention youth advisory group will help shape the approach to suicide prevention for children and young people. Here, of course, the wider work around mental health support for young people is also important, and so is encouraging young people to access support earlier rather than later and ensuring that the services are there for them when they do.

Nursing and Midwifery Student Numbers

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Recent shocking figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service highlight a shortfall of almost 1,000 in the number of students who are currently accepted in nursing and midwifery courses in Scotland, compared with the Government's own recommended intake for 2022-23.

In my South Scotland region last week, I saw at first hand the impact that shortages are having on Ayrshire's hospitals and the wellbeing of their staff. We need a clear plan for making nursing and midwifery an appealing career for young people to address those figures, which are being described as "extremely worrying" for nursing.

I ask the First Minister: when will her Government stop patting itself on the back, realise the scale of this recruitment problem and outline in detail the actions that it will take to address it?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Again, in addressing an important issue, it is important to ensure that it is not misrepresented, and I know

that the member would not want to do that. I will, therefore, address in some detail the issue of nurse and midwifery student numbers.

The target intake for this year is 4,837. So far—I stress that this is so far, and I will come back to that point—3,850 students have been accepted on to nursing courses and 280 on to midwifery courses, which comes to 4,120. I do not think that that is a shortfall at all, for reasons that I will come to, but there are around 700 places yet to be filled, not 1,000.

The reason why I say “so far” is that this is a clearing process that has not yet completed. It is still under way and final numbers will not be known until the end of the cycle in December. However, even so, compared with 2019, the figures so far are 5 per cent up in terms of acceptance for nursing places and 7 per cent up in terms of acceptance for midwifery places. Again, for context—because I think that context is important—the number of nursing acceptances in Wales over the same period is down by 17 per cent. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: The cycle is not yet complete, but I think that there is much to be encouraged about.

Perhaps one of the reasons for that difference is that we have increased the nursing and midwifery student bursary to £10,000—that is higher than it is anywhere else in the United Kingdom, and we also have more qualified nurses and midwives per head of population than any other part of the UK.

Yes, there are challenges but, clearly—as has just been evidenced—action is being taken to address those challenges.

Food and Drink Sector (Brexit)

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Tories seem to have concluded that a trade deal with the USA was yet another effort to deceive themselves and others on the merits of Brexit. Meanwhile, former Scotland Food & Drink chief executive James Withers recently stated:

“The UK is suffering ongoing malaise ... This is Long Brexit & we’re all living with it.”

Does the First Minister support that view and agree that the renormalisation of relations with our European friends is the only way to ensure that Scotland’s world-class food and drink industry does not continue to be hamstrung by United Kingdom mismanagement?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): There is no doubt at all that the food and drink sector in Scotland and across the UK has borne the brunt of the hard Brexit that has been pursued by the UK

Tory Government, particularly through the loss of free trade and free movement of people. We know that Scotland’s food exports to the European Union in 2021 were down by £70 million compared with 2019, and that is clearly down to the reckless Brexit that the UK Government has pursued.

Given that it has had to admit this week that there is no trade deal with the United States on the horizon, the least that the UK Government can do now is to stop threatening a trade war with the European Union in the middle of the cost of living crisis. Brexit was not in the interests of Scotland and further exacerbating trade tensions with the EU would certainly not be in the interests of Scotland or anybody in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Forced Adoption (Apology)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Campaigners were heartened when the First Minister signalled that the Scottish Government will take forward a formal apology to those affected by forced adoption. Monica Lennon and I have met ministers to try to progress the issue, but progress has been limited. For many campaigners, time is simply running out. Therefore, I ask the First Minister this straightforward question: will she today commit to take forward that national apology before the end of this year?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The commitments that I have made in this chamber still stand. I understand the importance of the issue and the great sensitivity around it. However, it is important that we properly think through and work through all the various legal issues that are inevitably involved and give careful thought to the framing and the wording of an apology.

This is an important issue so, rather than give an update right now, I will ask officials or the relevant minister to write to the member with a more detailed update on the work that has been done and the progress that is being made, and to place that in the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Alpha Solway

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Just last year, Scottish Government funding of £4.8 million was awarded to Dumfriesshire-based company Alpha Solway to build a manufacturing plant in Dumfries for personal protective equipment, with a promise from ministers of 300 jobs. That firm now employs less than half that number of people and it has just begun a consultation on further job losses because, in the firm’s words,

“NHS orders have been stopped”.

Of course, the overall amount of PPE that we need may well have reduced, but, surely, one of

the lessons from the pandemic is that we should never again rely on importing PPE; it should be manufactured in Scotland. I presume that that was the Government's view when it awarded funding to the company. Will the First Minister urgently investigate the Government's approach to the purchase of PPE and the stopping of NHS orders so that we can avoid any further job losses at Alpha Solway and ensure that we have the vital future PPE resilience that we need?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): During the pandemic, we built a resilient PPE manufacturing sector in Scotland, which is important. It is also important that we maintain it to reduce any dependence on imported PPE in the future. However, it is the case—and the member has referenced this point in his question—that demand for PPE has, understandably, slowed considerably between the peak of the pandemic and the current time, which means that procurement requirements have reduced. Work to implement a new approach to pandemic PPE and to learn fully the lessons from Covid is continuing.

Alpha Solway is one of our partners, and we appreciate the important contribution that it made during the pandemic. I know that this is a concerning time for the company's staff. The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise has spoken with the company and has offered the full support of the Scottish Government and South of Scotland Enterprise. South of Scotland Enterprise is engaging with the company to explore all options and it will offer any assistance that may be required. I will ask the business minister to keep the member updated fully on progress.

Ukrainian Refugees

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I refer the chamber to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of the homes for Ukraine scheme.

To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Government will announce the outcome of its review into the pausing of the supersponsor scheme for Ukrainian refugees coming to Scotland. (S6F-01353)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I report to the Parliament that more than 18,000 displaced Ukrainians are currently being accommodated in Scotland, which is almost 20 per cent of the total number in the United Kingdom. That includes almost 15,000 Ukrainians under the Scottish Government's supersponsor scheme, which compares to our initial commitment of 3,000. That is something for everyone across Scotland to be very proud of, and it is an important part of our overall contribution to supporting and helping Ukraine in its hour of need.

We are currently reviewing the operation of the sponsor programme and the warm Scots welcome to ensure that we can provide appropriate and sustainable longer-term support to those who are here, as well as to those who are still arriving and are due to travel. I can also confirm that we are providing a dedicated capital fund of up to £50 million, which will be available for registered social landlords to help them to bring sustainable accommodation into use and boost the housing supply for those who are fleeing conflict in Ukraine.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The First Minister's boasting about numbers will be of cold comfort to those who have been living out of suitcases since February or who are coming to the end of their placements with no idea what happens next. That is not a new life; it is a new limbo. Furthermore, the mobilisations in Russia and the pretend referendums mean that there is no chance of early return for our Ukrainian guests.

A memo that was leaked to *The Herald* from the Government's rapid rehousing group has described confusion and increasing desperation. The Government has written good-will cheques that refugees cannot cash. Although the Government closed the scheme in July, it still has not acted on my call to re-issue the appeal for homes. In addition, we know that, if it is easier to travel, it is easier to find homes and jobs. Alongside the renewed call for homes, will the First Minister now extend free bus travel to all refugees?

The First Minister: If those who are being temporarily accommodated in Scotland were not in temporary accommodation here, they would not have refuge, so it is important that we recognise that Scotland is more than playing our part. Almost 20 per cent of all displaced Ukrainians in the UK are being accommodated in Scotland, which is a good thing. It is good for Ukrainians and it is good for Scotland to be playing a positive part.

We continue to take steps to ensure that not just temporary accommodation is available but longer-term, more sustainable accommodation. In relation to temporary accommodation, we continue to support those who have offered private homes for use, and we continue to work to speed up the matching process. However, it is important that we make longer-term accommodation available, which is why the fund that I referenced earlier is an important part of that work.

We will continue to take all of those steps to make sure that we are playing our part in continuing to support Ukraine at what is a pivotal moment in the war—we are all happy to see Ukraine in the ascendancy, but we continue to be concerned about Putin and his intentions. Scotland will continue to play its part, and I hope

that members across the chamber will give the Scottish Government and our local authority and third sector partners every support in doing so.

Flooding (Pakistan)

4. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on the Scottish Government's support for the people of Pakistan as they face on-going devastation following severe monsoon flash flooding. (S6F-01351)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We have all been shocked and concerned by the devastating impacts of monsoon flooding in Pakistan, which includes the destruction of or damage to 1.7 million homes. That is a clear example of the loss and damage caused by climate change and underlines the need for all countries to act on it.

As an immediate response, we have made available £500,000 in humanitarian relief funding. The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development has also met the consul general of Pakistan to hear about the situation on the ground at first hand and to offer Scotland's on-going support.

Kaukab Stewart: Pakistanis across Scotland, including from the First Minister's constituency in Glasgow Southside and mine in Glasgow Kelvin, will appreciate that update.

On behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I have previously welcomed to Parliament a delegation from the regional government of Balochistan, which is one of the regions that has been worst affected by the flooding. This week, the UNICEF Pakistan chief field officer in Balochistan reported:

"We don't have enough food, we don't have shelter," and there is not enough healthcare, adding that "Roads and bridges have been washed away ... the flood is not going anywhere."

Will the First Minister commit to considering further support for Pakistan in the coming weeks, given the scale of the catastrophe and the on-going havoc and misery that people are living through?

The First Minister: Yes, we will absolutely do that. Kaukab Stewart is right to point to her constituency interest in this as well as my own—a significant proportion of my constituents in Glasgow Southside are of Pakistani origin and will have relatives affected by the flooding. My constituency is also home to the Pakistan consulate.

These are issues that concern all of us, and the scale of the devastation is truly overwhelming. It is

estimated that 22,000 schools have been damaged, disrupting the education of an estimated 3.5 million children. It is estimated that the material damage will be up to \$30 billion and that 45 per cent of the country's agricultural land has been destroyed. The World Bank estimates that the floods could push 15 million people into poverty.

As the Prime Minister of Pakistan has highlighted, this is a clear case of climate injustice. Today, on the international day of recognition for loss and damage, we support his plea for additional finance to address loss and damage, and we will always do whatever we can to play our part in supporting countries affected by disasters such as this one.

Net Zero Heating (Rural Homes)

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to support the transition to net zero heating in rural homes. (S6F-01360)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Poorer energy efficiency and higher fuel poverty are long-standing issues in rural areas. That is why we provide more whole-house retrofits and a wider range of support for the installation of zero-emissions heating in rural areas. Overall, we have committed £1.8 billion for heat and energy efficiency over this session of Parliament. That includes £42 million for the Home Energy Scotland loans with cashback scheme, £55 million for the warmer homes Scotland scheme and £64 million for area-based schemes. We are committed to spending more per head on energy efficiency in remote rural areas, where we know that installation and labour costs are higher.

In addition, the Home Energy Scotland service provides free impartial advice on zero-emissions heating and energy efficiency. Its five regional centres provide location-specific energy advice that takes account of rural circumstances and the varying energy demands of properties across the country.

Brian Whittle: Earlier this year, a cross-party group of MSPs wrote to the Scottish Government to highlight the serious financial challenges that are facing off-gas-grid home owners who are seeking to replace their oil heating systems, which are increasingly expensive to run and are carbon intensive. Despite the Scottish Government's much-vaunted target of a million zero-carbon heated homes by 2030, there is still no detailed plan on how that will be delivered, nor are the existing funding packages sufficient to meet the costs that those home owners will face to install net zero heat.

Does the First Minister recognise that any credible strategy should prioritise support for

homes that are facing the costliest transition away from the most carbon-intensive heating systems?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. I have already set out some of the schemes that are in place, and the funding that is attached to those schemes, to help us to meet the targets to which Brian Whittle referred.

I have already made it clear that we recognise, and are responding to, the reality that there are deeper issues with poor energy efficiency and higher levels of fuel poverty in rural areas. We are addressing those issues, but there is a big responsibility on us, as there is on all Governments, to continue to do so.

I was struck by the British Energy Efficiency Federation's recent comments relating specifically to Scottish Government policies on energy efficiency. I will quote those comments to give some background. The federation said:

"The Scottish government has deliberately concentrated such improvements in rural and remote communities not served by the gas grid."

It went on to say:

"no such set of activist programmes to stimulate energy efficiency yet exists from the UK Government. My advice to Whitehall is simple ... you had best be copying Scotland's initiatives."

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Communities across the Highlands and Islands are experiencing extreme fuel poverty. Many of those places also generate more than 400 per cent of their energy use through renewables. Will the Scottish Government consider extra support for homes in those areas that do not yet have, or cannot be fitted with, green heating systems and are still using systems such as liquefied petroleum gas and oil boilers, until they are able to be fitted with lower-carbon alternatives, given that those areas can already be considered net zero?

The First Minister: Regulation lies with the UK Government, and we have asked it to use its regulatory levers. Within the powers and resources that we have, which I have already given an indication of, we will seek to do exactly that. We recognise the particular issues that exist in rural areas and, as part of our overall approach, it is vital that we address those appropriately.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that her Government fits only heat pumps under its central heating assistance scheme. Those pumps are absolutely useless in draughty houses, and people who need help to replace and install central heating cannot afford to clad their homes with insulation. Will she therefore urgently amend the scheme to ensure that insulation is fitted in tandem with heat pumps in central heating

schemes to ensure that nobody is freezing this winter?

The First Minister: We will certainly look on an on-going basis at any adaptation or amendment that might be required to the rules for our existing schemes. I will ask the relevant minister to look at that particular point and to write to the member as soon as possible.

Cost of Living (Single Parenting)

6. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the One Parent Families Scotland report "Living without a lifeline: single parenting and the cost of living". (S6F-01364)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome the report, although I wish that it was not necessary. We are all aware of the hardship that is felt by many families right now, and in particular by single parents. The Scottish Government's very significant actions to tackle child poverty, alongside our interventions to mitigate the cost of living crisis, are providing direct support. For example, our five family benefits, which will shortly be worth more than £10,000 in the early years of a child's life, include the Scottish child payment, which will increase to £25 in November, representing a 150 per cent increase within eight months.

All of that is in contrast to the approach of the United Kingdom Government, which continues to hold most of the key levers here. If it reversed the welfare reforms that it has imposed since 2015, such as the two-child limit, the £20 cut to universal credit, the benefit freeze and the benefit cap, that would put £780 million into household budgets and would lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty.

Unfortunately, right now, we have to rely on the UK Government to exercise the levers. I look forward to the day when such decisions lie in this Parliament's powers.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank One Parent Families Scotland for its report and I thank the parents who contributed. The report is indeed a grim read, and one parent's response shows how bad things are. She said:

"Depression, anxiety, stress ... I am responsible for the most amazing children but I am falling apart and terrified of losing my job."

The report suggests many ways to tackle child poverty including, crucially, employability support to help people to stay out of poverty.

Will the First Minister explore the recommendations that the report sets out? Will she give an assurance that the cuts to

employability support that the Deputy First Minister announced will not impact efforts to help single parents and other priority groups, including disabled people, larger families, families with children who are under one, mums who are under 25 and people of colour?

The First Minister: I am happy to give that assurance and to engage in more detail on all of that. On the specific questions, yes, we will consider all the recommendations that are in the report. Support for employability is important. The Deputy First Minister set out the rationale for the savings that were announced two weeks ago. At a time of high employment and low unemployment rates, our judgment when our budget is under so much pressure is that we need to focus as much as possible on increasing people's incomes through wage increases, as far as we can support them, and through increases to the Scottish child payment, for example.

Nevertheless, supporting employability for lone parents and others who tend to be furthest from the labour market remains extremely important. We will continue to use all levers and maximise the resources that we can bring to bear to tackle poverty generally and child poverty and the issues that lone parents experience in particular. The Government has a good record, but the more powers we hold in our own hands, the more we will be able to do.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Does the First Minister share my frustration that, while the Scottish Government has introduced significant poverty interventions such as the Scottish child payment, which she mentioned, our ambition to tackle poverty is not only unmatched but absolutely undermined by Tory policies and, as long as the UK Government holds the key tax, borrowing and welfare powers, we will always be constrained in our ability to protect the most vulnerable in our society?

The First Minister: I share that frustration. While we use our powers and deploy our resources to try to lift people out of poverty, the UK Government takes actions that push people into poverty. That is not a sustainable, sensible or morally defensible position. The UK Government now seems to want to increase the bonuses that are paid to bankers, while further eroding the incomes of those who are on universal credit. That is utterly indefensible.

We are showing what we can do with the limited welfare powers that we have—the Scottish child payment is the leading example of that. As long as so many such powers and levers lie with a UK Government that is acting in the way that this one is, our efforts will continue to be undermined. That is why it is so important that we get all such

powers into this Parliament's hands as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business is a members' business debate on a motion in Ruth Maguire's name. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Ardeer Girls

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask members of the public who are leaving the public gallery to do so quietly, because we are about to start the next item of business. Thank you very much indeed.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-04642, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on Ardeer girls take centre stage. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Cartridge Girls for staging the play, *Girls of Cartridge Hut No.7*; understands that the play was written by Jack Dickson and directed by Mary McCluskey, with musical direction and arrangement by Hilary Brooks; notes that this ensemble drama charts the history of Nobel / ICI at Ardeer, Stevenston, through the eyes of four girls killed on the site in an industrial accident in 1884; understands that the story is based at Nobels (later ICI) at Ardeer, which first opened in 1872, and employed almost 13,000 people at its peak, and that the story focuses on the young women workers who manufactured sticks of dynamite, beginning with the 1884 explosion that killed 10 women, the youngest being 14; further understands that four of the victims were the women working in Cartridge Hut No.7, Mary and Annie Brannan, Mary McAdam and Rachel Allison, who were all blamed for the explosion; congratulates the cast and creative crew for their success in making history come alive, and wishes them all the very best for future productions.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I am honoured to bring this debate to the chamber today, in order—I hope—to continue the good work of playwright Jack Dickson in highlighting the injustice as told in “The Girls of Cartridge Hut No 7”. I thank colleagues from across the chamber who supported the motion, thereby allowing us to take the girls’ story to the floor of the Scottish Parliament, as well as members who are contributing to the debate today. It is a great pleasure to welcome Jack to the chamber, along with Graeme and Saorsa Cobb, the great-great-nephew and great-great-niece of Mary and Annie Brannan.

If you take a walk around Ardeer peninsula today, you can find yourself surrounded by nature. The western fringe of the peninsula is dominated by 3km of crumbling seawall. The area is well vegetated and supports all manner of plant species. It is peaceful—a place where people walk their dogs, take their children to explore and generally enjoy the outdoors.

However, in 1884, among the sand dunes and natural beauty was the largest explosive manufacturing plant in the world—Nobel’s Explosives Company—which was built by the

inventor of dynamite and, latterly, of the peace prize, Alfred Nobel. It is also where the story begins and ends for four young girls who would be wrongly blamed not only for their own deaths but for those of six other colleagues—sisters Anne and Mary Brannan, Mary McAdam and Rachel Allison. Those four girls were part of the exclusively young and female group of workers who manufactured the sticks of dynamite at the plant, and whose ages started at 14 years old.

After learning about the tragedy, Jack Dickson was inspired to create the play “The Girls of Cartridge Hut No 7” to right a wrong and get some justice for the girls. The storytelling—along with the dramatic displays by the cast, help from the girls’ descendants and local people, the hard work of the crew and funding from Playwrights Studio Scotland and Creative Scotland—gave voices to those four young girls.

What happened? On 9 May 1884, the day after the event, the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* reported the explosion as follows:

“Yesterday morning the works at Stevenston of the Nobels Explosive Co was the scene of a distressing and fatal occurrence. At about twenty minutes to nine o’clock No 7 Cartridge hut blew up. As many of our readers are aware the huts in which the cartridges are made up are scattered among the sand hills a mile or so to the west of the town of Stevenston and a short distance from the beach between Stevenston burn and Irvine harbour. ...

There are usually four girls employed in each of these huts and Mr McRoberts the manager states that yesterday morning fifteen girls in all were employed in them. In No 7 hut, that in which the explosion occurred, the young women employed were; Ann Brannan, Mary Brannan, Mary McAdam and Rachael Allison. The last named resided with her parents in Kilwinning and the others were”

residents of Stevenston.

“The force of the explosion was terrific as well may be imagined when it is stated that the huts were supposed to contain two and a half cwt of dynamite each”—

that is 127kg.

“Not a vestige of the hut remains to indicate its former presence and parts of the body of one of the girls was found over the boundary palisade towards the shore and probably not less than 150 yards from the scene of the explosion. ...

In Hut No 5 two girls lost their lives, Mary Ann Peters aged 19, Main St Stevenston and Martha McAllister of Ardeer Square.

In Hut No 6 the killed were Elizabeth Love and Martha Haggerty.

In Hut No 8 two were also burnt to death; Isabella Longridge of Stevenston and Isabella McCall of New Square. In each case death was probably instantaneous, for the huts were not more than 15 feet square.

The injured are Sarah Ann McKane, Jessie Craig, Mary Banks, and Rose Ann Murphy.”

The newspaper report went on:

“The cause of the explosion has not yet been ascertained. It is just possible that there may have been some larking around amongst the girls and it is probable that some irregularity or other amongst them was committed.”

That explosion was one of the worst industrial accidents to happen at Nobel’s Explosives Company and the girls were getting blamed for it.

The accident investigator’s report, published several months later, concluded that the explosion was actually caused by faulty equipment. The report, buried under other relevant news of the day, details that a handle of one of the machines fell into a box of dynamite causing the accident.

The incident affected not only the families and descendants of those involved but the whole of Stevenston and the surrounding communities, who for generations had, until its closure in 1990, been tied to a single, huge industrial plant. People still remember the extraordinarily large chimneys and yellow smoke, and speak of family members and friends who tell stories of working in the plant.

The memories live on and so should the memory of our four cartridge girls: Anne Brannan, Mary Brannan, Mary McAdam and Rachel Allison. May they rest in power.

12:58

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I congratulate Ruth Maguire on bringing the debate to the chamber and drawing our attention to Jack Dickson’s play, “The Girls of Cartridge Hut No 7”. I did not know anything about the cartridge girls, but the play has put a spotlight on them and it is great that that spotlight is being amplified in the Scottish Parliament.

Young women risked their lives every day manufacturing dangerous deadly dynamite. Telling the story of the explosion in 1884 that killed the 10 women and of the terrible injustice of four of those girls being blamed in death for the accident, the play—and the film that went before it, which I found on YouTube—speaks to two issues that interest me greatly: the lack of attention to women’s voices in history and the importance of art in providing a platform for those voices and drawing attention to past injustices.

Having now learned more about the cartridge girls, I thank Ruth Maguire for inviting Graeme and Saorsa to join us in a spirit of commemorating their two great-grand-aunties whose voices were lost—Mary and Annie. I also extend my thanks to Jack Dickson for writing a play that gives a voice to them and an opportunity for the present community to understand their past.

When we talk of dynamite, of course we know about Alfred Nobel the inventor, the Titan of industry, but how often have the people who

worked with his dangerous invention ever really been mentioned? They have not been at the forefront of our memory, and history is told by the big figures, striding on stilts over the many stories that can either disappear or be conveniently ignored to avoid the moral questions that they raise.

It could be asked whether the stories of the 10 women who died that day belonged to that latter category. As Ms Maguire has mentioned, Nobel’s Explosives Company had a 100-acre site for its factory in Ardeer, and the only people who were producing sticks of dynamite in those 30 huts were very young women, some of whom were as young as 14—children, in effect.

Again as Ms Maguire mentioned, how the newspaper of the day recorded the tragedy of the 10 deaths was heavily influenced by the trust put in a factory manager’s buck passing and finger pointing. Those four girls had just died, and they could not tell their own story. If we had only written history and no oral history at all, we would have only that short, skewed account of the event—the one that painted the girls in hut number 7 effectively as villains. What was the manager’s suggestion that there had been “larking around” if not deflection and buck passing? It certainly has a great deal of moral dubiety around it.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I share the member’s commending of Jack Dickson and everyone involved in creating this fantastic play. The point that she is making is important: class exploitation is very much still alive in our present economy. Does she agree that the stories of our forefathers and foremothers that are likely described and articulated in this play can teach us a valuable lesson and make us aware of class exploitation in the current economy?

Gillian Martin: I absolutely agree. When I looked at this particular event, it made me think about all the other industrial accidents that we have had—even in more recent times—in which people have tried to blame others. What happened with Piper Alpha, in my area, is a classic example of people initially being blamed until the truth came out.

The play is about an industry that affected thousands of working women and which was such an integral part of the region’s social fabric. As Paul Sweeney has alluded to, it is a story that anyone can relate to, regardless of where they are from. The stories of working women—and working-class women—and their lives, be they in the fish markets of Aberdeen, the textile mills of Bute and Dundee or the munitions factory of Clydebank all need to be told.

I am not from the area that Ruth Maguire has been talking about—Ardeer and the Irvine area—

but I am pleased to have joined everyone today and to have this opportunity to talk about the importance of working women's history and the theatre as a way of shining a light on it. Thank you very much for telling the story of the cartridge girls.

13:02

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber. It is a real privilege and a pleasure to contribute to it, especially with members of the community in the public gallery.

I also thank Ms Maguire for raising awareness of two things: the event itself, given the time that has passed since the tragedy; and, more important, the telling of the story through the play "The Girls of Cartridge Hut No 7". Interestingly, it is described as a play with songs rather than just a play or indeed a musical. Although it details a tragic event from 1884—the explosion hitherto mentioned, which tragically killed 10 young women—the play, I think, actually does a number of things that I will develop in my comments.

What struck me the most is that, despite the cause of the explosion not being immediately clear at the time, a particular narrative was painted very quickly in the days after. The *Ardrossan & Saltcoats Herald*—a newspaper that, I am glad to say, still exists and in which I have a column—expressed the matter in concerning ways. It said:

"The cause of the explosion has not yet been ascertained. It is just possible that there may have been some larking around amongst the girls and it is probable that some irregularity"—

whatever that means—

"or other amongst them was committed."

That really pins the blame on these poor young women—indeed, children, as Gillian Martin pointed out. I would like to think that, these days, the *Ardrossan & Saltcoats Herald* would not report things in that way and jump to such conclusions, but it is clear that the false accusations coming from the factory's management were completely an effort to deflect blame. Indeed, the matter was put to bed by the accident investigator's report, which later revealed the real cause of the explosion to be faulty equipment. That sort of thing can be put down to a number of factors but, as is often the case, when something is said in public, it is believed and it is then very hard to rewrite history.

The names of the young victims had never really been cleared, which is why Jack Dickson wanted to restore the reputations of the young women and give them a voice. They died tragically, through no fault of their own, and have no voice to defend themselves. However, their voice has been restored, which has been done so

well. We should commend Jack for that, and not just for that. Putting on such a play is not easy at the best of times but, as with so many events in the theatre and arts over the past two years, it had to be postponed because of the pandemic. It has not been easy to produce anything. However, despite all the hurdles, Jack finally had the chance to put on his play at Ardeer community centre earlier this year.

The play had to have two components. First, the story of the victims had to be told, with a particular focus on their personalities and their lives before the accident. People are often defined by the tragedies with which their names are associated, and it is easy to forget that they were individuals who had lives up until that point.

Secondly, the play had to be firmly rooted in the local community. The Nobel factory, which later became ICI, was a major part of local life, employing 13,000 people at its peak, and was a fundamental part of the community's economic development and daily routine for generations. The community still lives in the shadow of the business. By hosting the play in Ardeer community centre and performing it in local schools, the memory of ICI has been reawakened or brought alive to a whole new generation of young people in Ayrshire.

Reviews of the play have been really positive. *The Irvine Herald* reported that the production team

"put on a brilliant show with well-timed mood lighting and spine tingling sound effects".

The best review that I found was from local resident Doris Robertson, who said:

"Very professional and totally absorbing storytelling of these remarkable girls."

"Remarkable" is certainly the word to use, and that is a ringing endorsement if ever there was one.

I am sorry that I did not see the play, but I am sure that members will all agree that the hard work of writer Jack Dickson, director Mary McCluskey, and composer Hilary Brooks, as well as the amazing and dedicated cast and team of volunteers, has brought to life this important story. We congratulate them on their success and thank them for their work. I hope that these young girls have had their voice fully restored and have been exonerated today in the Scottish Parliament.

13:07

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to congratulate Ruth Maguire on securing the debate and to congratulate and thank Jack Dickson, who I understand is a good comrade, for the research that has been involved in what is a chronicling of working-class history, for bringing

the story to the Parliament and documenting the exploitative working conditions that existed in the plant and, unfortunately, in many workplaces throughout Ayrshire and Scotland where there was brutal and grinding poverty. The health and safety concerns that existed then are, thankfully, more serious than those that exist today but, as members have said, health and safety remains a significant problem in many workplaces.

As Jamie Greene said, it was very much a case of guilty until proved innocent. I imagine that the work that has been done through the play has been welcomed by families and local communities, and I am pleased that some family members have been able to come to the Parliament today. It is important that we remember the tragic story of the deaths of these girls and women.

We must understand the important role that the Ardeer factory had in the North Ayrshire community. As has been said, it was reputed to be the largest explosives factory in the world and, at its height, 13,000 people were employed there. Many people in North Ayrshire either are former employees or know people who were. It is very much something that is still spoken about.

There has been an impact on the community, not just in the three towns but all over North Ayrshire, where works buses travelled in, bringing workers to the site. There are now only a few hundred workers at the Chemring site, which still produces ammunition, and there is no doubt that the loss of the workplace is still being felt in the three towns and beyond. Indeed, the closure of other large employers such as the Glengarnock steel plant, and the closure of the mines in the 1980s are still being felt throughout Ayrshire.

Working-class communities have a mixed story to tell. Massive employers that brought much wealth—not necessarily to the individual workers, but to Scotland as a whole—have gone, and that has created massive challenges. It is important that we remember and understand the brutal conditions in which people worked. The conditions at Ardeer and in many places of employment in the 1880s were appalling. It was only through the struggle of working-class communities and the creation of the trade union movement that that began to change.

The story is one of individuals involved in struggle and having to face exploitation. The story of the explosion, which killed 10 women, one of whom was only 14, would not have been heard if it was not for those who did the research, documented the evidence, listened to the oral stories that still exist, and put together the piece of work that we are discussing.

I congratulate all involved in the production. Those stories need to be heard. We need to learn

the lessons of the past, recognise what we have been through, and understand what that means for us today in respect of the values of our society and what kind of society we want to live in. We must recognise the changes that have been made, which mean, I hope, that disasters on such a scale will not happen again, and we must recognise that the only way in which we will ensure that that happens is through understanding our history and fighting to ensure that we listen to the lessons and value the lives of all in society. For that reason, I am pleased to have contributed to the debate and to congratulate all those who have brought the issue before us.

13:12

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): I congratulate my colleague Ruth Maguire on lodging the motion, securing the debate this afternoon, setting out so vividly the tragedy and injustice that the play is based on and supporting her community in bringing the issue to life. I also thank the speakers—Gillian Martin, Jamie Greene, Katy Clark and Paul Sweeney via an intervention—for their valuable and interesting contributions.

Today, we commemorate 150 years of the Nobel's Explosives Company on the Ardeer peninsula at Stevenston in North Ayrshire. We also celebrate the power of the performing arts to bring to life important and largely forgotten historical events for modern audiences.

Alfred Nobel established the British dynamite factory at Ardeer in 1871. It was the first factory of that type in the United Kingdom, and it became the largest explosives factory in the world. It was believed to have employed around 13,000 people from the local area at its peak, which made it the largest employer. Its success contributed to the increased fortunes of the Ayrshire towns of Stevenston, Irvine, Saltcoats and Ardrossan. The factory developed a wide range of high explosives that revolutionised the mining and engineering industries, provided essential minerals and raw materials, and assisted in the development of harbours, canals, railways, roads and water and electricity supplies.

By the 1990s, Ardeer's fortunes had declined, accelerated by the demise of the British deep-coal mining industry. Changing patterns in international trade and competition led to the closure of most of the factory. Today, little—if anything—remains of the original 1871 factory.

This debate celebrates the play "The Girls of Cartridge Hut No 7" by Cartridge Girls, which shines a light on an industrial accident at the

Nobel explosives factory in Ardeer in 1884. That tragic event took the lives of 10 young women and girls, one of whom was as young as 14 years of age. They were involved in making dynamite cartridges for blasting purposes. The play focuses on the four girls in cartridge hut number 7 who were killed.

Today, we honour the ultimate sacrifices that Mary McAdam, Rachel Allison and sisters Mary and Annie Brannan made while working at Nobel's factory so many years ago, as well as the sacrifices that were made by the others who Ruth Maguire mentioned in her speech. Mary Brannan and Rachel Allison were 18; Annie Brannan and Mary McAdam were 20. That was the age at which many girls at that time were likely to marry, at which time they would be required to leave the factory.

Young unmarried girls and women were employed in preference to men and boys, apparently due to their speed in learning the job and for their manual dexterity in handling such volatile materials. It is on the record from that time that—incredibly—they apparently asked for lower wages than men and boys. They were paid at piece-work rates and a good full-time female worker could earn 15 shillings a week in the 1880s.

No such devastating workplace accident of the type had ever happened before in Scotland or the United Kingdom. Protecting the safety and wellbeing of staff at work and closing the gender pay gap clearly remain priorities for us and for employers today.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg members' indulgence as I am about to make a long intervention.

I was not a cartridge hut girl, but I worked in Ardeer. I was there for a year as part of my degree and I worked at the Nobel site. I remember it well. I have been sitting here thinking about all the things that I could not take into the workplace, such as phones, hair clasps and jewellery. I had to change almost my entire appearance before walking into the site. The health and safety message was very strong at that time.

I have been absolutely enthralled by the debate, and I thank Jack Dickson for his work.

I also remember that one of the final innovations at Ardeer was on safety detonators, which would have made mining much safer because they would have prevented some accidental detonations. I was struck at the time by the fact that that product did not really take off because, in areas of the world outside the UK, workers' safety was not considered to be a priority in mining. Although we know that things have improved here, we have a sense of international solidarity and

cannot fail to recognise that safety in other parts of the world is as bad as, if not worse than, some of the conditions that we had here.

Jack Dickson's play and the work that has been done in the community show that we can never take safety for granted. The Piper Alpha disaster has been mentioned. We must never take for granted the strides that have been taken to make workplaces safer. I am the convener of the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness and I would not want to say anything other than how important it is to value workers' safety and to strive to make workplaces safer. *[Applause.]*

Neil Gray: It is entirely appropriate that that intervention was given the applause that we just heard from the gallery. Thank you for your indulgence, Presiding Officer, which allowed us to hear a fantastic insight into work at the factory and also allowed us to compare and contrast the environment that the girls were sadly forced to endure with more modern practices. I commend Clare Adamson for her work on health and safety. She is right in saying that we should not take those practices for granted but must continue to ensure that we do all that we can to make employment as safe as possible.

The play draws on historical sources from the time, as well as on more recent consultation with the community. A report by Her Majesty's Inspector of Explosives from that time states that the work by the girls and women in the cartridge huts was much sought after in the neighbourhood and that the

"occupation is a healthy ... and clean"

one.

Like the other first-hand testimony that has been quoted today, that should make us at least raise an eyebrow as we think of the more modern view of workers' rights and gender equality.

The inspector went on to say:

"Nitro-glycerine is poisonous, a person handling it for the first time is likely to have severe headaches with violent sickness, but after the system has become saturated with the poison it may be handled without any apparent ill effects. Indeed, the girls employed in the factory have better complexions and are more healthy generally than those in the district who are not so employed."

Wow!

He also said:

"as a matter of fact, the girls employed in the huts were in the habit of 'skylarking' when the foreman's back was turned, and that it was found very difficult to prevent this practice".

The report recommended improved supervision of the girls and absolved the employers of any culpability for the explosion, thereby compounding

the injustice and tragedy by scapegoating of the girls. The report went on to say:

“Whether the fall of a machine, or the fracture and fall of a lever-handle, or (as I consider improbable) some other cause, such as a temporary defect in the working of a machine, be the real explanation of this disaster it does not appear that any blame can be attached to Nobel’s Explosives Company”

It continued:

“How far one of the girls was to blame for the present accident from the rough or improper use of her machine is a matter for conjecture only, and as all in the hut were killed it is unnecessary for me to pursue further that part of the question.”

During the development of the play, women who worked at the factory long after the tragedy of 1884 reported on the youthful exuberance and camaraderie of the girls and women at the factory. They revelled in singing along to the radio at high volume on night shifts, while also handling high-risk materials. Therefore, it is fitting that the play uses theatre and music to bring to life in technicolour and song the realities of those people’s hazardous working lives.

The oral testimony of our economic, industrial and social history is invaluable. It brings stories that need to be told to new generations and audiences. Written by Jack Dickson and directed by Mary McCluskey, with musical direction and arrangement by Hilary Brooks, the play features a cast of professional and amateur actors. I pay tribute to the strong community involvement at the heart of this production.

I am pleased that Creative Scotland provided support for the development of the production in consultation with, for and in the local community. The play was performed in May in the Ardeer community centre to enthusiastic audiences and excellent reviews. Audience members have commented on the professionalism of the cast and how moving and well researched the play is. About 2,000 people attended the 10 performances, which took place over five days.

More recently, Jack Dickson took part in an event at North Ayrshire’s annual book festival, Tidelines, in Irvine. At the event last week, he spoke about what inspired him to write the play, why local stories of that kind matter to him and why capturing the stories is so critical.

While researching the play, Jack Dickson realised that there was a large interest among the local communities and people from further afield who had a connection to the area. Jack also produced a very popular video called “Shifting Sands”, which examined the past, present and future of the Ardeer peninsula. It has been viewed more than 10,000 times.

Such was the reach of the play, family members of the young girls at the centre of the play contacted Jack Dickson to share what they knew of their ancestors. They agreed to have their stories recorded, and those recordings are now deposited in North Ayrshire Council’s heritage archive, where they will be preserved for future generations. I very much welcome the living descendants of the girls, Graeme and Saorsa, who are here today, along with Jack Dickson and others from the Ardeer community.

I extend my warmest congratulations to everyone who was involved in the production for creating and staging this pivotal story. I also thank everyone who has taken part in today’s debate. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I am very pleased—as I am sure that we all are—to see our guests in the gallery, but I need to say that, as a matter of form, you are not allowed to clap. However, the deed has been done. That concludes the debate.

13:23

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio is education and skills. I remind members that questions 1 and 2 are grouped together and that supplementaries on those questions will be taken when they are answered. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function.

Attainment Gap (Cowdenbeath)

1. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on measures to close the educational attainment gap in schools in the Cowdenbeath constituency. (S6O-01364)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are absolutely committed to substantially eliminating the poverty-related attainment gap by 2026, and are investing an increased £1 billion in the Scottish attainment challenge over the course of this parliamentary session to do that.

Schools in Fife are receiving more than £10.4 million in pupil equity funding in 2022-23, with allocations confirmed over four years. Fife Council will also receive a further £8.5 million strategic equity funding over four years. Those long-term commitments will support headteachers and local authorities to develop their short and longer-term plans to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Additionally, Fife Council is receiving almost £700,000 in funding for care-experienced children and young people in 2022-23.

Annabelle Ewing: I welcome the significant investment that the Scottish Government is making in tackling the poverty-related education gap.

Could the cabinet secretary provide further information about the pupil equity funding that will be available to schools in my Cowdenbeath constituency? It would also be helpful if the cabinet secretary could indicate what assessment has been made of the significant role that that funding can play in closing the attainment gap, so that every pupil enjoys the same life chances wherever they live.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I can advise Annabelle Ewing that schools in Fife, including in

her Cowdenbeath constituency, have had their PEF allocations confirmed for four years. That means that schools throughout Fife will receive almost £42 million over the next four years, which will help to support schools and headteachers, who know their pupils best, to invest in approaches to improve children's literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing.

A new Education Scotland PEF resource has been published to support school leaders as they further develop their approaches to PEF. Such sharing of effective practice, including how some schools in Fife have invested their PEF, helps staff to reflect and build on the practice to help ensure that every young person in Scotland has an equal chance of success, including, importantly, the children and young people in the member's constituency.

Attainment Gap

2. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what work has been done to close the attainment gap. (S6O-01365)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The impact of the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis means that accelerating progress to substantially eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap is as important as ever. That is why we are investing £1 billion this parliamentary session, up from last session's £750 million. That includes the distribution of more than £520 million in pupil equity funding and more than £174 million to all 32 local authorities over the next four years, which will enable them to make longer-term plans.

Additionally, we provide local authorities with targeted funding for care-experienced children and young people.

Finally, we have introduced a requirement for local authorities to set ambitious local stretch aims by 30 September, to accelerate progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Alexander Stewart: The statistics show that the attainment gap for pupils achieving A to C at national 5 and higher has widened in the past year, with the gap at higher level nearly double the 2021 figure. Given that the gap is getting wider, has the Scottish Government failed to tackle its supposed defining mission?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would urge caution in comparisons with the 2021 and 2022 results because, as members will know, young people were assessed in an entirely different way in those years because of the pandemic. However, we have seen progress and positive signs in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. For example, since 2009-10, the proportion of school leavers

attaining one pass or more at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 or higher has increased by 19.5 percentage points for the most deprived areas. That shows that progress has been made. However, we are aware that there is much more to do, which is exactly why we have been increasing investment in that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementaries.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has already cut vital attainment funding for the poorest communities in Scotland, but we know that another £43 million of cuts to the education portfolio are still to come. Can the cabinet secretary guarantee to Parliament today that attainment funding will not be cut as part of that project, especially for the poorest communities, which have suffered the brunt of the cuts that she made most recently?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the member is well aware, the investment that comes from the Scottish attainment challenge funding, and particularly the part of it that is now going to the 32 local authorities, is a recognition of the fact that there is poverty in all parts of Scotland and that the impact of the pandemic is to be found throughout Scotland. It is very important that we recognise that and ensure that local authorities right across Scotland have the funds available to enable them to assist children and young people during this time.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): We know that poverty drives the attainment gap. I welcome the steps that are being taken by the Scottish Government that I hope will narrow the gap, including the game-changing Scottish child payment and the £1 billion in investment over this parliamentary session through the Scottish attainment challenge.

However, we need to see meaningful actions by the United Kingdom Government. Ahead of the fiscal event tomorrow, does the cabinet secretary agree that the Tories should take the opportunity to end child poverty instead of delivering tax cuts for the rich?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank the member for that very important question. We will do everything that we can within education—certainly our teachers and our local authorities are doing everything that they can—to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap but the best way to tackle it is to tackle poverty itself. That is exactly why we are investing in the Scottish child payment, for example.

The member is quite right to point to the fact that the Westminster welfare reforms have severely impacted on families right across Scotland. If the two-child limit, the removal of the

£20 uplift to universal credit and the benefit freeze, among other policies, were to be reversed, it would put £780 million into the pockets of people in Scottish households and lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty next year. We are determined to do all that we can. Unfortunately, the UK Government seems intent on prioritising bankers' bonuses rather than children.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Back to education. When I was on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, the cabinet secretary promised the committee that she would publish a statement of the plan and the expected outcomes for the £1 billion that has been spent during this parliamentary session. When will her statement on the plan, with its detail on those outcomes, be published, so that we can review it at a further meeting of the education committee, which I am looking forward to rejoining?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome Stephen Kerr to his role as education spokesperson for the Scottish Conservatives. I gently say to him that education is impacted by many things. It is impacted by poverty. It is impacted by his Tory Government down in Westminster. Not to see that would be a disservice to the education committee.

If Stephen Kerr had listened to my answer to Alexander Stewart, he would have heard that local authorities are set to give their local stretch aims to the Scottish Government by 30 September. The Scottish Government will analyse those aims and publish that analysis. I look forward to appearing before the education committee, should it wish me to do so, and taking further questions from Stephen Kerr at that point.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am intrigued by the very careful language of the education secretary. She now says that she is going to “substantially eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap”. I have checked the Scottish National Party website, which is very clear that the party wants to “close” the poverty-related attainment gap.

The education secretary was pulled up by the First Minister before when she tried to slip away from the 2026 target for closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Is this another attempt to get around that very important target to help young people from our deprived communities?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The 2016-17 programme for government says that it

“is the defining mission of this Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We intend to make significant progress within the lifetime of this Parliament and substantially eliminate the gap over the course of the next decade.”

That is exactly what my answers refer to, and that is exactly what the policy of this Government remains.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has not been lodged.

Student Accommodation Strategy

4. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of its student accommodation strategy. (S6O-01367)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government is committed to delivering a student accommodation strategy for Scotland that will be, in part, informed by a review of purpose-built student accommodation. The review will look at a number of issues, including supply and affordability.

The PBSA review research report has now been received and will be considered by a review group, with recommendations being submitted to ministers later this year.

Kaukab Stewart: The minister will be aware that a number of institutions, including the University of Glasgow in my Glasgow Kelvin constituency, find themselves unable to guarantee accommodation for students this academic year, and that that is a source of concern and anxiety for students and their families. Will the minister undertake to continue to work with institutions on the complex supply issues that they are facing, to ensure that next year's intake does not face the same difficulties in securing appropriate accommodation?

Jamie Hepburn: Yes, I can give that commitment. I am aware of the challenges that some students going to the University of Glasgow have encountered. I should add that it is my understanding that all first-year undergraduates who applied for accommodation by the deadline that had been set by the university and who do not live within an hour's commute have now been offered accommodation. I know that other students have thus far not been able to do so, and the university continues to work with them.

As I have laid out, we have a commitment to our student accommodation strategy for Scotland, and Kaukab Stewart and other members can be assured that we will work with Scotland's universities and others with an interest in that to take it forward.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I have been contacted by multiple constituents saying that they have been advised by the University of Glasgow to suspend or withdraw from their

courses because, as they put it, "Glasgow is full" due to a significant contraction in the private rental market. The Fraser of Allander Institute warns that the situation will get worse following the announcement of rent control. Further to Kaukab Stewart's question about next year, my question is: what will the minister do to help students now?

Jamie Hepburn: It is interesting to see the Tory mask slip in terms of their opposition to rent control—*[Interruption.]* Well, that is what I heard very clearly from Mr Gulhane.

Turning to the specific point of the question, I am aware of the issues. We have made commitments to work towards a student accommodation strategy, and that is exactly what we will do. The member can be assured that we will continue to work with universities and others on the matter. If Mr Gulhane wants to contact me directly about any specific concerns, I will of course be happy to respond.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Students have been venting their fury at the lack of accommodation, with the Government failing to take any meaningful action to support them. Following the written answer that the minister gave to me yesterday, does he agree that, under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and articles 27 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Scottish Government has a substantial additional responsibility to our young people who are under 18 and who attend university to ensure that they are safe, accommodated and supported? The evidence is that that is not happening. Indeed, as we have heard, universities are asking them to drop out of their courses.

Jamie Hepburn: Of course we have responsibilities in that regard, and I have set out the work that is under way. I do not know whether there is a suggestion that this should alter, but I observe that the Scottish Government is not directly involved in the provision of housing for students. However, we recognise that we have responsibilities along the lines that Mr Whitfield has laid out, and that recognition will be at the heart of the strategy that we take forward.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): As other members have highlighted, the serious lack of accommodation for students has been well reported. Island students have also been experiencing problems, just like their peers on the mainland. I was actually aghast to hear the short-sighted suggestion that students should suspend or defer their studies. Will the Government's student accommodation strategy include plans to guarantee students from Scotland's islands accommodation at their chosen place of study, and will it also recognise that accommodation is

required at the University of the Highlands and Islands Shetland for those studying there?

Jamie Hepburn: I understand the concerns that Ms Wishart raises, but I go back to the point that, thus far, there is no direct role for the Scottish Government in the provision of accommodation. However, I take her points seriously and, as we take forward the strategy, we can consider that as a particular matter for further reflection.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister is only too happy to take the credit when things go right, but he is absent when things go wrong.

There has been a dramatic impact on students at the University of St Andrews, as well. The minister knew that that was coming. We knew that there would be an uptick in student numbers as a result of Covid and that there would be consequences from the housing legislation, whether we supported it or not. However, the minister sat idly by and did nothing. What is the practical plan to make a change now and for next year, because the problem is not going away any time soon?

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Rennie is frequently happy to deride me when I am, apparently, trying to take the credit for the successes of the Administration, but I will not linger on that point.

As I have laid out, we have plans to take forward a strategy. We have already taken on board the purpose-built student accommodation research report, which will be considered further. We will consider those issues as part of the strategy that we will take forward. I understand the current stresses in the housing market. There is a degree to which we are seeking to work through those issues in our wider housing policy, for example, by tackling short-term lets to make sure that there is increased supply in the private sector. Fundamentally, however, we will look to tackle the issues and improve on the current situation through the strategy that we take forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 has not been lodged and question 6 has been withdrawn.

Child Protection Policies

7. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it is having with local authorities regarding child protection policies in schools. (S6O-01370)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): All children in Scotland should grow up feeling safe, loved and respected. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that robust child protection measures are in place across Scotland. Last year, we published updated

national guidance for child protection. The Scottish Government engages regularly with local authorities on the implementation of consistent good practice on that critical issue. The national guidance implementation group was set up last September to lead on that activity. Education Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland are both represented in that group.

Liz Smith: I am sure that the minister is aware of the article in the Perthshire edition of *The Courier* on 5 September that reported a high absence rate among child protection committee members. The committee encompasses Perth and Kinross Council and NHS Tayside staff. Over two years, there were 148 apologies, with three members of the committee missing on 12, 11 and nine occasions respectively. What action will the Scottish Government take to impress on local authorities and health boards the importance of people turning up to such meetings, particularly at a time when we have so many vulnerable children who are desperate for our assistance?

Clare Haughey: Liz Smith raises an important point. Child protection and child safeguarding are everyone's business, whether they are in education or health. I will certainly have my officials look into that and will come back to her in writing.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): How can the Scottish Government be assured that the new national guidance for child protection is being implemented in schools? How is the Scottish Government ensuring that there is oversight of private music or dance lessons in schools and other settings?

Clare Haughey: Local authority schools, grant-aided special schools and independent schools were instructed to review and update their procedures in line with the 2021 national guidance. The national child protection guidance implementation group was established to support that implementation. A monitoring and evaluation sub-group is developing an approach to monitoring the extent and quality of guidance implementation. The multi-agency sub-group includes education.

On private music or dance lessons in schools, the 2021 national guidance describes the responsibilities and expectations of everyone who works with children and young people and their families in Scotland. It makes clear that those who are responsible for the organisation of activities, whether those are regulated or otherwise, must ensure that safeguarding is integral to the recruitment, training and oversight of staff and volunteers, and that children know how and with whom they can voice their questions and concerns.

Pupils with a Disability (Support)

8. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to support pupils with a declared or assessed disability at school. (S6O-01371)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to ensuring that all children and young people get the additional support that they need to reach their full learning potential, including those who have disabilities. In October 2020, we published our joint response to the independently chaired review of the implementation of additional support for learning. The action plan sets out the measures that we will take to implement the recommendations. We will publish an updated action plan in autumn 2022. Further, under the Equality Act 2010, responsible bodies—including local authorities—have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils and to provide auxiliary aids and services.

Jeremy Balfour: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer, but the stats show that, in the past five years, there has been no noticeable improvement in the attainment gap between declared and assessed disabled children and those who are non-declared and assessed, particularly at national 5 and higher levels. Therefore, the policy is simply not working. Will the Scottish Government's approach change to allow disabled pupils to do better in school and, if so, when will that change be implemented?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Jeremy Balfour for raising this important issue. I think that the updated action plan that I mentioned contains the measures that are required to ensure that our education system works effectively for all children and young people. I would of course be happy to have further discussions with Mr Balfour following on from today should he wish to raise particular issues that he does not think were in the previous action plan or that he thinks should be in the updated action plan. I would be happy to receive correspondence from him on that issue should he wish to write to me on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We end where we started: with Annabelle Ewing, who has a supplementary.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Support for pupils with a disability in schools is certainly an issue that has been raised by my Cowdenbeath constituents over the years, and it seems to me that much anguish could be avoided if there were more early and direct engagement on the part of the school with the pupil and their family. What could the cabinet secretary do to help to ensure that such engagement happens in

schools in my Cowdenbeath constituency and, indeed, across Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I certainly agree with the context that Annabelle Ewing has described. It is incredibly important that not only schools but everybody who is involved in the life of a child or young person has very close discussions with them directly and with their family at the earliest opportunity. It is also important that continued support is provided to the family even before diagnosis is given. That period can be very difficult for families, but it does not necessarily need to be as difficult as it is for many families. I am sure that Ms Ewing has had those types of issues in her mailbag from constituents. I certainly think that there is a role in the matter not only for education but for wider Government and local agencies, which can also play a part.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Skills Delivery Landscape

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jamie Hepburn on an independent review of the skills delivery landscape. The minister will take questions on the issues raised at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:53

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): There are few areas in Government that are as important as equipping people with the knowledge and skills that they need to thrive in life and in the world of work. It is key to our vision for delivering a strong, resilient economy and a society that has people and their wellbeing at its heart.

Today, I am announcing our intention to initiate an independent review of the skills delivery landscape. Scotland performs well in post-school education. The most recent available data show that, compared to European Union countries, Scotland has the highest share of population aged 25 to 64 with at least tertiary education. The Scottish employer perspectives survey shows that the majority of employers are satisfied with the skill levels of those moving to work from education.

In 2021, of the employers who were surveyed, 68 per cent found school leavers that they recruited to be well or very well prepared. The figure rose to 78 per cent for college leavers and 80 per cent for those transitioning from university. That speaks to the fact that the foundations of our system are strong; to the work of our universities, colleges, training providers and community and learning development sectors; to the dedication of those who are in training and post-school education and the educators and trainers who support them; and to the commitment and partnership working of our skills agencies: Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council.

However, we all know that the challenges that lie ahead of us are significant. Demographic change, digital transformation and automation, shifts in sectors of our economy and the need to work towards net zero all speak to the need for a skills system that must meet the demands of an ever-changing world. We need a system that is simple and people-focused, and which is built on effective collaboration across sectors and regions, between the public sector and business and across our public bodies. Members will be aware of the work that is under way to improve

Scotland's school education landscape and, following the Scottish Funding Council's review of coherent provision and sustainability, the development of the purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills development.

Before I move on to the details, I will explain why it is necessary that we complete the picture with a review of the skills delivery landscape. The national strategy for economic transformation gives us a real opportunity to put in place an economic system that works for people and places across Scotland. Priority projects will adapt the education and skills system to make it more agile and responsive to our economic needs, support and incentivise people and their employers to invest in skills and training throughout their working lives, and expand Scotland's available talent pool to give employers the skills pipeline that they need.

Our system needs to respond to the increasing numbers of people whom we expect will require upskilling and reskilling. As I have laid out, it needs to adapt to shifts in our economy and workplaces as a result of digital transformation, the demographic challenge of an ageing population and an ageing workforce, and the imperative to respond to the climate emergency and work towards net zero. We must also support employers who have welcomed EU workers and are now struggling, post-Brexit, to fill vacancies. That is having a disproportionate impact on sectors such as health and social care, tourism and hospitality, agriculture and food and drink.

The report by the Auditor General for Scotland in January this year on "Planning for Skills" focused on progress in better aligning skills and education provision to the needs of the economy, now and in the future. The report laid out how Government and our partners could do better in collaboration. We have heard, we have reflected and we have acted. We have published the "Shared Outcomes Framework", which sets out the detail of the collaborative projects that are being undertaken by SDS and the SFC and, along with my regular engagements with both agencies, bilaterally and collectively, I have established a shared outcomes assurance group to oversee progress on implementation. That has helped to identify areas where we believe that further clarification of roles and responsibilities would be desirable to ensure that duplication and unnecessary complexity in the landscape are removed, ensure that we create the right conditions for collaboration, and ensure that we create a system that is more straightforward for people and employers to access.

I am acutely aware that Government must provide the leadership to ensure that our skills

delivery public body landscape remains effective and efficient. I embrace that role, and I am committed to driving it forward. I am also aware of the importance of making decisions based on evidence. That is why I am asking for independent advice on how the landscape could be adapted to deliver maximum benefit for Scotland's employers, places and communities and, above all, for Scotland's people.

I want to make it clear from the outset that those who work in our agencies can be assured. This is a review about what we need in the future; it is not a review of performance to date, and nor it is about seeking to remove or replace SDS or the SFC. SDS was established in 2008, and over the past 14 years it has delivered key Government priorities in relation to Scotland's apprenticeship programmes, national training and employability initiatives, sector and regional skills planning, and the national careers service. I greatly value the work that it does.

My recent visit to Inverness showed the strength of the partnership work that SDS undertakes at the local and national levels. Taking the specific problem of skill shortages in the hospitality sector, SDS has worked with industry, the local developing the young workforce group and local schools to put in place training support for young people to enable them to move into jobs. That is exactly the type of activity that we need to see more of.

I am grateful to all staff for their work and commitment, and to the leadership of the board and the senior management teams at both SDS and the SFC for the work that they do day in, day out to support the many successes of our skills system. They have my sincere thanks.

We know that we face significant challenges in the economic, social and institutional context, which have emphasised the need for our approach to skills planning and workforce development to be more clearly embedded in and aligned to our wider education system. We recognise the need to ensure that our post-school skills and education provision is part of a single, holistic ecosystem that can respond effectively to the needs of industry and learners, while delivering wider societal benefits.

The purpose and principles for post-school education and skills will help to drive that vision. That applies equally to the need to support the transitions that learners make through the senior phase. On-going work on education reform and the career review will help to deliver such alignment. To achieve that end, we must have the right structures, governance, responsibilities and balance of capacity across our public bodies.

With the ambition of joining up resource to best effect, I am initiating the independent review. Its purpose is to make recommendations on how the skills delivery public body landscape can be adapted to drive forward our ambitions in the national strategy for economic transformation and our response to the SFC review.

The review will not focus exclusively on Skills Development Scotland, but it will give particular consideration to SDS's interface with and role in the wider skills system. The review's terms of reference are being published today and will be freely available for all members and anyone else who is interested to see.

The review starts with no preconceived notions or predetermined outcomes. It will be independently led, to ensure that the exercise is robust and is informed by the evidence that it gathers. I am pleased to set out today that I have appointed James Withers to lead the review. He is known to many of us, as he was until recently the chief executive of Scotland Food & Drink. He has a wealth of experience in industry that will bring objectivity, creativity and rigour to the review. His remit will be to engage widely with stakeholders across the skills and education landscape—including, of course, the staff of our agencies—to inform his recommendations and to report to ministers by spring 2023.

James Withers is not being asked to revisit work that has already been done. The review will take account of, and not seek to duplicate, wider reform recommendations and review work that is under way, including the outcomes of the Muir report and those that arise from the Hayward review. The review will not revisit the steps that we previously set out for taking forward the recommendations of the SFC review of coherence and sustainability and the career review that Grahame Smith has been leading on.

James Withers will focus on areas such as the design and delivery of apprenticeship programmes, regional and sectoral skills planning, employer engagement and how SDS and the SFC interface with each other to ensure that we achieve a more aligned skills system. He will look across the public body and related advisory landscape, to deliver recommendations that ensure that the wider skills delivery public body and advisory landscape is equipped to respond to the needs of our society and economy.

We start from strong foundations but, as we look ahead, there is more to do if we continue to aspire to deliver world-class support and interventions across the wider skills landscape. The skills delivery review will be an important step in ensuring that we have in place a public body landscape that supports an agile, people-centred system that helps individuals to improve their skills

and reach their potential and ensures that employers can access the skills that they need to flourish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for that, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I ask members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible, if they have not already done so.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for the advance sight of his statement. It is vital to ensure that Scotland's young people are equipped with the skills that our changing economy will need in the coming years. In June, the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board called existing skills structures "too complicated". Of Scotland's working-age population, 10 per cent have a low level of, or no, qualifications, and 23 per cent are economically inactive. Businesses are increasingly short of skills. On top of that, there has been a £53 million cut to employability spending.

Given all that, I hoped that the statement would outline bold reforms to the Scottish Government's approach to skills delivery. Instead, we are looking at a mere rearranging of the deckchairs. The review needs to bring about real structural changes to produce genuine improvements.

The independent adviser will not report to ministers before next spring, so what is the Scottish Government putting in place now to address the array of skills shortages that employers are already struggling with? Will the minister ensure that the review finally tidies up the confusing array of bodies that currently make up Scotland's skills sector?

Jamie Hepburn: I thank Pam Gosal for her questions and I agree with much of what she had to say. Of course, she referred to the comments of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, and part of the rationale of the review is to take head on and consider some of the complications that people report around the system that we have in place now. The purpose of the review is to come forward with recommendations.

However, I am surprised that she has suggested that it is, in some way, a timid approach and that it is about rearranging the deckchairs. As far as I am aware—and I appointed him—I am not yet aware of having received the recommendations from James Withers. Therefore, I am not going to second-guess what he recommends to us before I see his comments.

Some of the points that Ms Gosal made around attainment are, of course, issues of concern. We want to make sure that we are doing more to

support those who have not achieved the level of qualification that they require in order to get ahead in life.

However, let us also reflect on the successes of our system. Let us reflect on the fact that, in 2021, 95.5 per cent of school leavers were in education, employment or training three months after the end of the school year. That is a record high since consistent records began in 2009-10. Let us reflect on the fact that the level of tertiary education qualification in Scotland is the highest of any European country—ahead of the rate of the United Kingdom overall. Let us reflect on the fact that we have the fourth lowest youth unemployment rate in Europe—ahead of the United Kingdom position. Let us not talk down where we are, but recognise that there is more to be done. That is the purpose of the review. I look forward to seeing what it recommends, and we will consider how to move forward from there.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): At a time when we are experiencing labour shortages and real wage suppression, measures that look at how we maximise the talents and capacities of our people—and, most importantly, maximise their wages—are critically important. There are long-standing and enduring criticisms about the flexibility and responsiveness of the skills regime in Scotland. Indeed, in January, Audit Scotland stated that there needed to be "urgent action". Above all else, my one criticism is about whether the review represents the "urgent action" that Audit Scotland was calling for.

I have three key questions. First, I would like some clarity on the scope of the review. Although the minister applauds the performance of SDS and the SFC, there is certainly an implication that their scope and footprint will be looked at. Is that a precursor to a merger of institutions in the education and skills sector?

Secondly, I welcome the appointment of James Withers, who has a depth of experience in food and drink and agriculture. However, how will those who have experience in the skills and education sectors, as well as other industrial sectors, be drawn into the review?

Finally, how will flexibility be looked at in the review? Many businesses report that they find it difficult to access skills, that there is often a one-size-fits-all approach and that adopting and implementing new apprenticeship frameworks can take three years. How will flexibility be reviewed and looked at in the scope of that work?

Jamie Hepburn: Those areas are within the scope of the work but, as I have just said to Ms Gosal, I am not going to second-guess what James Withers will come forward with and recommend. Within the parameters of the terms of

reference that we have established, he will look at those areas and set out recommendations to ministers to consider how we can make improvements in the system.

I have heard and know that there are concerns about the flexibility and adaptability of a system. Again, that is part of the rationale for having the review. Candidly, yes, the Audit Scotland report was also one of the catalysts for taking forward the review. I do not want Mr Johnson to be under the illusion that this is the first piece of work that we have undertaken in respect of the review. I already referred to the shared outcomes assurance group that we set up. That group is working to a shared outcomes framework, which is designed to make sure that Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council work much more collaboratively. A lot of good work is under way, and we will be happy to share more information about that.

It will absolutely be incumbent on James Withers to draw on others with experience of industry and so on, but given that it is an independent review—as I think members would expect it to be—it will be for him to determine how to do that. Of course, I expect that he will reach out to all those who have an interest in these matters.

Perhaps the most fundamental question that the member asked was whether this is a precursor to a merger. I can give a very straightforward and simple answer—no.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): During the summer, I visited many businesses in East Lothian, and the thing that came up all the time was labour shortages. The Office for National Statistics recently estimated that 1.3 million people had left the UK workforce due to Brexit. Scotland's percentage share would be between around 105,000 and 125,000 people. In context, that would mean that about 2,500 people have left the workforce in East Lothian. How much analysis of that issue will be carried out with regard to labour shortages and the skills delivery outlook in Scotland?

Jamie Hepburn: That will form part of the consideration. Indeed, that already informs our consideration of skills delivery. We already discuss and look very closely at what labour market information is telling us about trends, as well as understanding the wider social and demographic changes that are taking place. Things such as the Scottish employer skills survey and the sectoral and regional skills assessments from SDS are important in that regard. That can help to inform the review that James Withers will take forward.

I make the point again that we have not rested on our laurels and that there is other work under

way. We are establishing a group, which I will chair, with various ministers who have skills in their remit, to ensure that we take a cross-Government approach to these matters. That group will carefully consider any findings from the review.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): A recent Audit Scotland report highlighted the Scottish Government's inability to settle differences between the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland. At the Education, Children and Young People Committee yesterday, it was even suggested that the two organisations might be merged, yet the minister has stated that it is not about seeking to remove or replace SDS or the SFC, and the independent review appears to focus very much on the interface between the organisations.

Not wanting to prejudge the outcome of the review, does the minister agree that the skills landscape is currently confusing, with an array of different agencies that fail to properly integrate with one another? Will he ensure that the review changes that and, indeed, if James Withers recommends wholesale change, will the minister ensure that that will be implemented?

Jamie Hepburn: You will hear me repeatedly say that I am not going to pre-empt what the recommendations might be. We will need to see what they are, reflect on them and move forward from there.

On the points that Ms Webber makes about the failure of the system to integrate, I would not say that there is a failure, but I would say that it could be done better. We have recognised that across a range of initiatives that we have taken forward. Part of the purpose of the review is to consider precisely that question: how can we continue to improve the alignment of provision between different agencies and players? Fundamentally, I think that we will get more for our economy, for our society and, above all, for our people if we can achieve that aim.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As the minister will be aware, one of the Auditor General's key recommendations in the skills planning report was the provision of clarity on the governance and oversight arrangements for skills alignment activity. How will the review achieve that?

Jamie Hepburn: That goes to the very heart of what the review will look at; it is at the core of what it is trying to do. As I have said, we have already taken steps to address governance and oversight issues at ministerial and official levels. I have referred to the shared outcomes framework that we have established for both agencies to work towards and the shared outcomes assurance

group that is making sure that that work continues in a positive direction. That is work that is happening but, of course, the review can look at how we can build on and further support that work. My ambition for the review is that the recommendations that it makes will help to further clarify the delivery landscape, and I look forward to receiving them from James Withers in due course.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): When the Government's enterprise and skills review reported, it recommended the creation of a new vehicle to meet the enterprise and skills needs of the south of Scotland. However, when the enterprise body was delivered, the skills element was largely dropped and instead remained with Skills Development Scotland. Will this review properly recognise the regional variations that often exist when it comes to our gaping skills gap and look at whether the roles of our agencies should be strengthened to deliver skills programmes in local areas that meet the needs of the local businesses and workforce?

Jamie Hepburn: On Mr Smyth's latter question, that will be for James Withers to consider in any recommendations that he wants to make, working to the terms of reference that we have published. He will also be able to draw on the strength of information that already exists; indeed, one of Skills Development Scotland's great areas of work is its regional skills planning.

Of course—and this is very much in line with the alignment agenda—one of the Scottish Funding Council's pathfinder projects, which look across the range of academic institutions, is in the south of Scotland with the full involvement of South of Scotland Enterprise in the process. The direction of travel is one that I very much agree with, and it tallies neatly with our alignment agenda. As for any recommendations that James Withers wants to make, that will be for him as part of the review. As I have said, we look forward to seeing what he has to say.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): How will the independent review assess the progress of green skills development in schools and higher education as we move towards transforming our economy and society? Given that those things have been set out in the climate emergency skills action plan, we must ensure that we achieve the mix of skills and job specifications needed to thrive in a net zero economy.

Jamie Hepburn: With regard to assessing progress, of course there needs to be an assessment of how best to go about fulfilling the mission of ensuring that people are provided with the skill set that they need to contribute to the move towards net zero. The climate emergency skills action plan is very much a part of that, but as far as assessing progress is concerned, it is

important to be clear that this review is not about measuring performance or progress to date; instead, it looks ahead at ensuring that we have the right structures, governance, responsibilities and balance of resources across the system to deliver our ambitions. Of course, one of our key ambitions is achieving net zero, and we have to take people with us in that regard and ensure that they have the skills for the task.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We support this review, which we think is needed, but it should not have taken an Audit Scotland report that was heavily critical of the minister's lack of leadership in this area to stimulate some action. We are five years on from when it was agreed that the agencies and the Government would work together to sort out this agenda, so we need urgent action.

Yesterday, college principals delivered a stark message of real-terms cuts to college budgets, with drastic cuts to staff numbers. How does the Government deliver any skills agenda with that dark future for colleges?

Jamie Hepburn: With regard to Mr Rennie's point that it should not have taken an Audit Scotland report to prompt us into action, I say, first of all, that that is not the only thing that has prompted us to consider this review, which I am very glad that he welcomes. However, if we had not done this, I would imagine that Mr Rennie would have been saying that we were not responding to the Audit Scotland report.

As for the recommendations that were made five years ago, I am sure that Mr Rennie is aware of the fundamental challenges that we have all faced—and the Government has been no different in that regard—in gearing our attention towards responding to other situations such as Covid-19. The work continues, and there is good work under way, and this review is fundamentally about enhancing that and ensuring that we have before us the flexible and responsive system that Mr Johnson talked about and which I think we all want to see. Colleges are going to be a key part of that.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As the minister knows, the renewables opportunities in the north-east will require a workforce with a wide spectrum of skills and qualifications, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics—or STEM—skills, and I welcome the forthcoming review's focus on sectoral and regional skills planning. Historically, however, girls and women have been underrepresented in STEM courses and careers, so what consideration will the review give to the issue and to ensuring that the STEM and energy sectors are diverse and prosperous?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course, that is an outcome that we all agree is fundamental. Those are important sectors that require skilled labour, and no sector can afford to overlook a cohort of the population.

The issues that Ms Nicoll has identified are important. As I set out in my statement, the context of the review is about adapting to the challenges of the future labour market. It will consider how we can better ensure that we have in place a public body landscape that supports an agile people-centred system that helps individuals to improve their skills and reach their potential. In that regard, the review must ensure that groups that are underrepresented in areas of our labour market are properly supported.

I would not want it to be thought that there is not work already under way. Education Scotland is considering the matter, SDS is working to an equalities action plan for apprenticeships and the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board is alert to the issue. As we move forward, it will continue to be of the utmost importance.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): It is a welcome review. I particularly welcome the emphasis on meeting the skills needs of the net zero agenda. How will that be taken forward in the review? For example, will environmental non-government organisations and think tanks that might have substantial amounts to contribute in this area but which have not been the usual suspects in skills consultations in the past be involved and have the ability to contribute?

Jamie Hepburn: I am not going to set out to James Withers how he takes forward the review or steer him on that. However, I made explicit reference to the imperative to respond to the climate emergency and fulfil our ambitions in respect of our net zero targets, and we must ensure that people have the skill set to achieve that. There might well be organisations that James Withers reaches out to. I am sure that he will be watching this statement and the questions that have been asked and that he will be taking on board what each member has contributed.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the review look at improving skills support for small and large businesses? Will the Scottish Government consider introducing an export monitoring scheme, as we have previously proposed?

Jamie Hepburn: On the latter point, I am happy to consider a proposition, although I must be clear that that will not form part of the review.

The needs of small employers are of the utmost importance. There has already been reference to the complexities in the system that are sometimes reported. Small businesses, in particular, often

report that, and I am alert to and acutely aware of that. That will be part of James Withers's considerations as he undertakes the review, because we need a skills system that is geared towards supporting our social and economic ambitions, supporting employer need and, above all, supporting the needs of our people.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): The minister recognised the great progress that has been achieved by our skills agencies, SDS and the SFC. What assurances can the minister provide that the review that has been announced today will not impact on the excellent service delivery of our skills agencies?

Jamie Hepburn: That is an important question and I am glad that Kaukab Stewart has raised it. I hope that I have been clear that I am enormously grateful to the leaders and staff of SDS, the SFC and organisations in our wider skills system.

The review is about how things could look in the future and how we can make improvements. However, people out there can be assured that, when it comes to the work of the agencies, it is business as usual. They will continue the good work that they do. The work of the agencies will not stop. They will continue what they do day in, day out, which is delivering for people in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are running a little ahead of schedule. There is a lot of interest in the statement, so I intend to invite to speak each member who has pressed their request-to-speak button. However, they will need to do so briefly and the responses will need to be brief, too.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister has stated that the review will not look at the performance of Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council. Why has he chosen to exclude those agencies from the scope of the review, as the evidence shows that skills development has been a disaster in Scotland for the past decade and, in the past year alone—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Jamie Hepburn: Maybe I was not clear enough. The agencies are not outwith the scope of the review. The fundamental point that I have made is that it is not a performance review—it will not review the performance of the agencies. There are other mechanisms by which we can review how they have performed, and we can hold them to account for that purpose. Fundamentally, this is about looking ahead to ensure that we consider how we can have better interaction between the agencies and improve our skills system. It is not about looking at what has gone before—it is about looking ahead at what we will need in the future.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister will know that Scotland's employers want

transparency on how the apprenticeship levy is spent in Scotland. Will the review include that element? Will that be part of it? Will the voices of business—small, medium and large businesses—and the college sector be heard in relation to the apprenticeship levy in the review?

Jamie Hepburn: Those voices will be an essential part of James Withers's consideration. He may well look for clarity on the apprenticeship levy; I would simply like clarity on how it is raised. The levy was, of course, implemented without any form of consultation or any form of interaction unilaterally by the UK Government. Frankly, right now, as I stand before Stephen Kerr, I could not tell him who pays the apprenticeship levy in Scotland. If we want more transparency, maybe that should start with the UK Government letting us know who pays that. We can then get on to the—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Michael Marra should be brief.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Audit Scotland's report was very clear that this is about lack of leadership from ministers. Why does it fall to Mr Withers to provide the leadership? What are we paying the ministers for?

Jamie Hepburn: I thank Mr Marra for that very constructive question, which I will turn on its head. If I were to stand up here and unilaterally announce what we might be doing, I think that the very first question that Mr Marra would ask me would be: what evidence did we take to make those decisions? James Withers is working to make a series of recommendations for ministers. Ultimately, it will be for ministers to make the decisions and for Parliament to hold us to account for them.

Parliamentary Procedures and Practices

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-05983, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on future parliamentary procedures and practices.

15:28

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the SPPA Committee's second committee debate on future parliamentary procedures and practices in the chamber and in our institution.

I thank members of the committee—present, recent and less recent—for all their work on the report. It is a great pleasure to see so many familiar faces around the chamber—I look forward to the contributions of those members. I also thank the clerks—both current and recent—for their efforts and work in the preparation of the report. However, most of all, I thank the members who are here today.

The report was published on 6 July. At a mere 41 pages and 207 paragraphs, it is a small, trivial report by committee standards. Therefore, I hope that it has been well digested and well thought through, and that members have come here today with questions.

One of the lessons of the pandemic is that change should not be shied away from. The ways in which the people of Scotland work and engage have changed profoundly since the beginning of 2020 and this Parliament would be out of step with those changes if it reverted to its previous practices. It is the committee's view that it is important to be mindful of the kind of institution this Parliament will want to be in 10 years' time, not just in the next six months or two years.

Evidence has been gathered from members from across this chamber, from Parliaments and parliamentarians from across the United Kingdom—including the Scottish Youth Parliament—and from far wider. We have spoken with experts in democracy and change, and with those who speak for those who find it challenging to engage with this Parliament currently because of geography or disability or who feel excluded.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I was struck by the contributions in the report that reflect on the importance of face-to-face discourse and debate. Might those comments lead to future work by the committee to look at how we can maximise face-to-face discourse, which is clearly a core role of this Parliament?

Martin Whitfield: Almost in anticipation of that intervention, my speech will come to that. I also put on record my thanks to everyone who contributed evidence to the report.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Mr Whitfield says that much has changed because of the pandemic, which we all accept, but some things should not be scrapped or changed. For example, we have a bill that we will put through this place in a matter of a few hours and with minimal scrutiny—the cost of living (protection of tenants) (Scotland) bill. Does the member agree that we are driving a coach and horses through any scrutiny that this Parliament can give?

Martin Whitfield: It would probably be slightly perfunctory of me, while I stand here as convener, to anticipate the scrutiny of a bill that will arrive next week. However, I will comment later on the question of how the Government is scrutinised by this chamber.

I am grateful for the two interventions, as I was about to signpost to members the areas that I will cover, thereby enabling them to slip their interventions into their social media. I will look principally at the hybrid nature of this chamber and of our committees. Finally, I will raise the question of proxy voting. Members now have the headlines, so they can either wait to intervene on those points or they can leap up if I have not covered something that they would like me to.

Regarding hybrid debate in the chamber, the evidence presented shows that the Scottish Parliament did great work to ensure members were enabled to speak, to ask questions and to vote. However—this answers the most recent intervention—that enabling of Parliament does not mean that things are the same as they were prior to our hybrid meetings, and we recognise that there have been challenges in conducting scrutiny while using the hybrid method.

The committee notes that, in comparison with other legislatures, we introduced more measures to ensure that members were able to participate in parliamentary business, that all types of business continued and that all MSPs were able to vote. That important achievement, which should be acknowledged with thanks, should also endure.

The report's conclusions and recommendations confirm that there is a case for the continuation of hybrid meetings and that it is important to provide for and enable iterative change in the future. The committee considers that, rather than returning fully to previous practices, there is potential to build on gradual and progressive change as technology improves and that that can bring the Parliament closer to the people of Scotland in accordance with the key principles that have

underpinned its work since it was established in 1999.

Although we must recognise that the voting process has been cumbersome at times, it has been extremely important in allowing every member to vote on every occasion. Statistics show similar levels of voting prior to and during the pandemic and following our return. Although some still consider the voting process to be cumbersome, that is proof that people have been able to exercise their democratic right, which is the reason that they were sent to this place.

The committee very much welcomes the specific plans to introduce a new platform for hybrid meetings and, as I indicated earlier, it considers that that will help to improve members' ability to debate by allowing interventions to be made or taken both by members in the chamber and by those who are participating remotely.

The committee believes—it heard a substantial amount of evidence to the effect—that the Parliament is currently most effective when its members come to Holyrood to represent their constituents and participate in person in the chamber. However, we also recognise from the evidence that there is a number of circumstances in which members should have the option to participate remotely. Those circumstances might include situations in which illness, bereavement, caring commitments, travel or weather disruption—imagine that, here in Scotland—or personal commitments inhibit their ability to come to the Parliament.

The committee heard very strong arguments for requiring ministers to always be present in person in Parliament. The committee agrees that that is important for scrutiny, and it calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that ministers are present, apart from in exceptional circumstances, when they are being scrutinised by the Parliament.

A further reason for continuing hybrid arrangements is to encourage a more diverse range of people to stand for election to Parliament. That will provide the Parliament with the flexibility in the future to offer alternative means of participating in parliamentary business, rather than requiring elected members to fit into an established method of working, notwithstanding their personal circumstances.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I appreciate the points that the member is making around better representation in the chamber, but considering that the exception relates to ministers, does he realise that that would create an issue for those who are disabled or face other challenges? It would make their becoming a minister unattainable.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the intervention, which raises an extremely important question about how every person who seeks election to Parliament would be able to move through the system—should they wish to do so—including up to the grander heights of Government. It is a point of scrutiny and review, and it is why the report and the committee talk about iteration—slow movements of change—to confront the problems that are in front of us, and to have a system that is flexible enough to allow for that. I absolutely understand the member's point; however, I suggest that our report—and supporting our report—does not prevent that iteration from occurring as we are confronted with the issue, and we need the flexibility to do that.

I am conscious of time, so I will speak about committees. The committee very much feels the same as MSPs more generally that committees need to remain in hybrid format. A responsibility needs to be placed on members to be present at committee meetings. There are different committees across the Parliament with different remits, so it is important that each committee retains the flexibility that hybrid arrangements provide. Most important, from the committee's point of view—

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield: I am slightly conscious of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr Mountain.

Edward Mountain: Has the committee, which I was on previously, fully considered how members who are attending virtual committee meetings should get classified papers, given that it is not possible to send them out in advance by email under the current parliamentary system?

Martin Whitfield: The report says that the Conveners Group has asked for guidance on how to deal with a variety of committee matters. I think that some conveners sought that guidance to support their right to say to members, "Please can you come and be here?"; other conveners sought that advice to give them evidence to say, "This is how we want matters to be dealt with." Having witnessed challenges with regard to papers, I envisage that that is one of the areas that will be addressed.

I am desperately conscious of time, so I will seek the indulgence of members to raise the question of proxy voting. Following consultation, the committee will propose a temporary rule change, which would provide for a scheme that would permit members in certain defined circumstances, including parental leave and long-term illness, to nominate a proxy. We believe that

such a scheme should be allowed to run, and be monitored, for a period of around 12 months before we re-evaluate the system for any permanent rule changes. I will put to one side the lovely and poetic platitudes that I was going to use to explain the wonders of and the need for proxy voting.

During the inquiry, the committee said that it is thinking about what the Parliament should look like in 10 years' time. We believe that the Parliament should commit to a culture of iterative change to allow it to be more representative, more open and more accessible in 10 years.

On behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 6th Report 2022 (Session 6), *Report on inquiry into Future Parliamentary procedures and practices* (SP Paper 213).

15:39

The Minister for Parliamentary Business

(George Adam): I thank the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for opening the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to participate on behalf of the Scottish Government. Although instances of national emergency are never welcome, they necessitate real-life action during inherently challenging circumstances for all concerned. It is vital that the Parliament not only maintains its scrutiny function; it must also be equipped and available to pass any emergency legislation that is required to protect the public interest. The Scottish public rightly look to both Government and Parliament to protect their interests, even more so during times of trouble, and to do so swiftly, flexibly and effectively.

Stephen Kerr: I know that the minister sincerely believes that Parliament should fulfil its scrutiny function, as he has just mentioned, but how on earth is that the case in relation to the proposed cost of living (protection of tenants) (Scotland) bill, which drives a complete coach and horses through the conventions and procedures of this place?

George Adam: Mr Kerr is never one to labour a point. As other members have said, let us wait to see what comes before us and we can take things from there. It is important that the emergency legislation goes through, as we are talking about real people and real-life issues.

Although the pandemic led to a steep learning curve for all and presented us all with many challenges, the operational adaptations that the Parliament has subsequently developed and adopted have proven essential to maintaining the good governance of Scotland. I thank everyone in

the Parliament for the close partnership working that we have enjoyed. That partnership helped us during Covid, and it will no doubt be important in helping us to respond quickly and flexibly to all future challenges. The finding in the committee's report that, despite recent events, the Parliament was able to fulfil its scrutiny function was especially welcomed by the Scottish Government. That is a principle that the Government has worked constructively with the Parliament to uphold.

Concentrating now on the committee's report itself, the Scottish Government welcomes the findings of the committee's recent inquiry into virtual and hybrid procedures. The recognition in the committee's report that the working practices of all Scots have changed is well observed by us. The Government very much supports the overarching principle that the Parliament should maintain the flexibility of arrangements to enable hybrid and virtual proceedings.

The new ways of working were born out of necessity, but many of the people who gave evidence to the committee noted the opportunities that have arisen for increasing participation in proceedings and for Parliament to engage generally with the public. Those aims have featured strongly in the governance principles that we aspire to in Scotland, and the committee's report shines a light on the possibilities that might develop from increased flexibility in our business methods. Business has had to adapt under hybrid or virtual circumstances, but the Parliament's continuing ability to function and act is paramount.

I remember when we first dealt with that challenge in the early days at the Parliamentary Bureau, when I was chief whip. We effectively moved from having absolutely nothing in place to a system that, although it might have been clunky at times, was functional and the Parliament was still able to commit to its duties.

I note the committee's findings as to the action that it considers that the Parliament should take to build on and improve virtual and hybrid proceedings in future. The Government stands ready to assist the Parliament in whatever measures it sees fit to pursue.

One on-going issue, which is sometimes seen as a thorny one, is the attendance of ministers in Parliament in person. I touched earlier on the committee's finding that the Parliament was able to fulfil its scrutiny function despite recent events. The availability of ministers is clearly crucial to its achieving that objective. The Government is aware of its accountability to the Parliament and its membership. That responsibility applies whatever the prevailing circumstances. Given the recent pressures that we have all experienced, it is especially welcome that the committee found that

scrutiny had been fulfilled, despite the impacts of the Covid pandemic.

Martin Whitfield: I would reflect that the minister is in a better position to give the Government's assurance regarding people who are differently challenged attending the Parliament. That would not prevent anyone succeeding in Government, if their ability allowed them to do so, simply because of their inability to attend, in the way that was referred to earlier.

George Adam: With my background—my wife has multiple sclerosis and I am her primary carer, although she sometimes wonders who cares for who—I think that it is always a positive thing for people to have the opportunity to achieve all that they can when they come to this place.

It is testament to the excellent partnership working between the Government and the Parliament that we managed to get ourselves into a place where we could continue. The important point for everyone here is that the default position remains one of caution. However, ministers operate on the basis of physical attendance in the Parliament wherever possible. That is consistent with the findings in the committee's report.

That brings me to proxy voting. It is for the Parliament to consider any proposals in relation to the operation of proxy voting, including any changes to voting arrangements. The merits of a proxy voting scheme are clearly outlined in the committee's report, as is the need to ensure that any such arrangement is robust and fit for purpose. In my role as a member of the Parliamentary Bureau, I am aware that the committee has already sought comments on some of the finer details of any such proposal.

One key aspect would be the criteria for seeking a proxy and the period of time for which it is sought. Also, the definition of illness is not altogether straightforward. Clarity on that issue would be central to management of the scheme and evaluation of its fairness.

Daniel Johnson: I wonder whether it is important to consider the parameters when a member is seeking a proxy, as well as the duration and circumstances.

George Adam: Mr Johnson brings me to the next line of my speech, which is that a balance requires to be struck between recognising the personal circumstances of members and representation of constituents' interests in Parliament. The Scottish Government notes the Speaker's oversight in the equivalent arrangements for the House of Commons.

Whether proxy voting is to be permitted for all parliamentary business also requires careful consideration. The Government will closely follow

developments in that area, including the operation and experience of the pilot scheme.

The Presiding Officer and members will be pleased to hear that I do not propose to take up much more time.

I consider it beneficial for as many members as possible to offer their thoughts on the committee's report.

The Government commends the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its work on these matters. We welcome the committee's report, its findings and the direction of its recommendations for Parliament's further consideration. We also note the scope for the Parliament to derive long-term benefits from new ways of working and, in so doing, build further resilience into the operation of the Parliament, as well as Scottish governance more generally.

I look forward to hearing other contributions to this important debate.

15:48

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate the committee and convener on their report and their on-going work.

I am really pleased to be able to speak on the topic of parliamentary reform. The minister might have thought that he had seen the last of me as a sparring partner, but here we go again. I assure him that my interest in parliamentary reform remains as strong as ever. I have always found the minister to be someone who genuinely believes in the scrutinising powers, and the other powers and authority, of this Parliament. I respect that enormously.

As we have heard, the committee's report covers a number of issues, such as hybrid working and proxy voting. During my time on the Parliamentary Bureau, I considered both those issues when drafting the Conservative and Unionist Party's response to the committee.

Although I know that hybrid working is here to stay, I do not personally think that it has necessarily changed everything for the better. I absolutely believe that there is no adequate online substitute for an in-person debate.

However, I do believe in proxy voting. I think that it should exist, particularly in the case of parental leave. I also believe that the party whips' offices should not be in charge of allocating proxy votes. The member on leave should be the one to choose who will vote for them, and I look forward to seeing how any upcoming trial might progress. We should start that trial as quickly as possible so that we can make an assessment.

The report also mentions the iterative approach that Parliament will take on identifying and implementing reform going forward. I fully support that, too. My concern is that the minister, on behalf of the Scottish Government, has in the past raised the view that changes to Parliament would need to be done in one go, rather than through what he has described as a "piecemeal" approach.

First, I point out gently that parliamentary reforms are not in the minister's, or the Scottish Government's, gift. His comment highlighted something that I am deeply concerned about, which is the blurring of lines between Government—the executive—and Parliament, and how that has been allowed to happen over the past couple of decades since devolution.

In an answer that the minister gave in a previous debate, I think that he simply assumed that the Government's word would be final in respect of parliamentary reform. Sometimes I am afraid—I say to the minister that this is my perception—that the Scottish National Party views this Parliament as a branch of Government; I also fear that Parliament has started to succumb to that view.

George Adam: There is nothing that I can do about Mr Kerr's perceptions and interpretations of what I say, but I fear that he veered quite far from what my intention was. If that misunderstanding was because of anything that I have said, I apologise to Mr Kerr. However, I fear that it might have just been his interpretation.

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful for the minister's clarification. He is, once again, being true to the colours that I pinned on him at the beginning of my speech, which are those of a genuine parliamentarian.

Secondly, anyone who has a connection with any kind of project management knows full well that the iterative process of improvement and reform has its merits. It delivers change in an agile way, which allows for a greater focus on individual changes, and therefore I was very pleased to see the committee back it and even more pleased to hear the minister agree with its use.

Thirdly, it is no surprise to me that the Scottish Government, at one time—I accept the minister's correction—might have wanted this done in one fell swoop, because that would have been a great excuse for not doing anything. However, I take the word of the minister, as a man of honour, that that is not the Scottish Government's position, and he has said that on the official record.

George Adam: I fear that Mr Kerr has reinterpreted his reinterpretation of what I said previously. What I said in that debate was that it was better to do parliamentary reform as one big area. At no time did I say that it was within the

Scottish Government's control to do it. Throughout my speech in today's debate, and at any other time, I have said that the Scottish Parliament makes the decisions about how Parliament works.

Stephen Kerr: The minister is showing admirable accountability to Parliament in the way that he is allowing me to be corrected through his interventions. I am pleased to hear all these interventions—I welcome them. I hope that the minister's position—because I know that it is genuine—reflects that of his party, because sometimes I think that the SNP quite likes a weakened Parliament, so that it, as an executive, can run roughshod over procedures, practices and conventions, such as I have mentioned in two interventions in relation to a forthcoming bill.

What should the Scottish Parliament be? I have long argued that this Parliament's powers to scrutinise the Government are too weak. The Government has ignored motions that it does not like and it has imposed its will on our acclaimed committee system. I am afraid that, too often, it appears to me—

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Of course I will.

Katy Clark: I know that the member has experience of another place. Does he not accept that all Governments do that? Although he is absolutely correct in what he is saying, does he accept that that is a feature of the executive and one that we collectively need to address?

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree. Whether I was speaking here or in another Parliament, I would say the same thing. Parliament provides a crucially important constitutional role in checking the powers of the executive and holding it to account. That is as true here as it is at Westminster.

I do not like to think that the Government whips its committee members, but sometimes, frankly, I am left with that conclusion because of the evidence of my experience in this Parliament since I was elected. Given the design of the committee system, I do not think that it is right that, in committees, we should be led by anything other than evidence that builds consensus, which is then used to produce reports that are based on evidence and not political dogma. Committee rooms cannot simply turn out to be echo chambers for Government orthodoxy.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I will be summing up later on, as deputy convener of the committee, but I have a question for Mr Kerr. Does he think that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has done its best to reflect, without

political interference or political dogma, the balanced views of Parliament in a measured and responsible way?

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely do, and I am pleased to be able to agree with Bob Doris on that point.

I have wider concerns that come from the report in relation to the spontaneity of Parliament. Before anyone intervenes, I will say that this is not true of today's debate, but, sometimes, proceedings in this chamber feel like a stage-managed and scripted puppet show. Because of that, we are not getting the respect of people who observe our proceedings. On that point, I note that it is quite hard to observe proceedings. Anyone who wants to watch this debate will have to go through myriad Google searches and clicks to find it. That, in itself, causes me concern, because this Parliament needs to have the respect—should earn the respect—of the people of Scotland, but the people of Scotland need to be able to see the proceedings of this place.

We need to be more spontaneous and more responsive. At the moment, the Presiding Officer has the power to call urgent questions. Why does the Presiding Officer not have the power to call an urgent debate? I think that they should have that power. On leaving the Parliamentary Bureau the other day, I said to the Presiding Officer that my motto is, "More power to the Presiding Officer."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In that regard, the Presiding Officer will now seek the co-operation of the member in bringing his remarks to a close. I have been generous with the member's time, as, indeed, the member himself has been generous in taking interventions.

Stephen Kerr: You have, indeed, been generous, Presiding Officer.

I have much more that I wanted to say, but I will close on a point about the need for this place to be rigorous in its debate. I cite the example of the statement on the programme for government. We all sat through a half hour where the First Minister enjoyed interruption-free, intervention-free speaking time, but the first response to that statement was a speech from Douglas Ross that was subject to interventions and interruptions. I do not think that the Government should have protection from the rigours of this place—I do not think that the First Minister needs the protection of the Presiding Officer in that regard.

I draw a comparison with Westminster. When the Prime Minister gave that important energy statement on 8 September—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I think that you are digressing a wee bit in terms of where you said that you would end up. We want to allow

other members to speak. I am sure that you will have opportunities to intervene during the debate.

Stephen Kerr: I appreciate that. I think that I have made my point about rigour, spontaneity and debate, which this place needs to get a deserved reputation for.

15:57

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I start by thanking the committee for the report. It is right that the Parliament keeps its procedures under review and ensures that they are modernised as required. That said, none of us could possibly have foreseen the impact of Covid-19 on our procedures. That the Parliament successfully found and implemented a system that enabled people to participate in parliamentary business so quickly is down to our support staff—those people behind the scenes who work hard to find solutions. On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party—I am sure other parties would concur—I thank them for that. I also want to thank them for their patience while we all got the hang of the system. Given that some of us are still grappling with it, they must be so looking forward to the new system coming online.

There is a balance to be struck with regard to meeting online in a hybrid format or meeting in person. Each system has benefits and drawbacks. We took meeting in person for granted but, as we saw during the pandemic, there are times when that is not possible or even safe. Before the pandemic, people came into the building when they were unwell, simply because they had to do that in order to take part in proceedings. Colds and viruses spread because of that but, if people did not come in, they were not able to represent their constituents. Because we now have the hybrid system that was set up to deal with Covid-19, people who would otherwise not have been able to participate can do so. However, those taking part remotely lose out—the flow of the debate is stilted and it is difficult for them to get a feel for the mood of the debate. I hope that the new system will enable people online to intervene on people in the chamber, and people in the chamber to intervene on people online.

What cannot be replicated is meeting people in the time around the debate and exchanging more information that way, or even having informal chats with ministers and cabinet secretaries. All of those activities are useful in terms of enabling us to represent our constituents.

We need to balance that against the benefit of enabling people who are unwell or who have caring responsibilities to take part. Certainly, from my point of view, allowing people who are at a distance to take part in giving evidence to

committees has been successful. I would often suggest the names of people from the Highlands and Islands to come to committees, only to discover that they could not commit the time. Allowing remote contributions also allows the Parliament to open up and take evidence from all over Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: Rhoda Grant is making some very important points about the nature of debate. Does she think that it would be helpful to the flow of debate in the Parliament for us to ban laptops, iPads and the use of iPhones in the chamber?

Rhoda Grant: As someone who is pretty much chained to my Samsung—not my iPhone, I have to say—I do not think that I would like that. I would feel absolutely bereft if those devices were to be banned from the chamber. I am owing up to that.

Daniel Johnson: Rhoda Grant has some support.

Rhoda Grant: I thank my colleague for supporting me.

In the previous session, a number of women stood down because the Parliament was not family friendly; it did not allow them to bring up their children in the way that they were happy with and be parliamentarians at the same time. That is disappointing.

However, rather than responding to that positively to find solutions, the Parliament appears to have become even less family friendly. Here we are in a new session, yet late sittings and variable decision times are causing members real problems. A decision time that runs a few minutes late can have an impact on what train a member, or, indeed, a member of staff, can catch and whether they can pick up their children as organised, as can adding statements at the last minute and pushing decision time way back.

We should adhere to a set decision time if we are going to be family friendly. The Scottish Government needs to be more organised with regard to business planning and it needs to support the family friendly ethos that the Parliament was set up to deliver. I really do not want to see a system where those who have caring responsibilities need to remain remote because the Scottish Parliament cannot be more disciplined.

As I have said, people who are working remotely lose out on the other activities of the Parliament, so they must have choice and flexibility. Due to fluctuating decision times, a number of members have indicated to me that they drive rather than take the train—I include myself in that. For people who live away from home while attending the Parliament, it has never

been family friendly. Remote working could provide an alternative.

If I may, I will turn quickly to proxy voting. I believe that there is a place for it within our system. We currently have a pairing system for those who are on maternity leave, but a proxy system could work just as well, and it could also be used during sick leave and compassionate leave, when remote voting does not work. I am pleased that the committee is going to pursue that, albeit with some caution.

I am also pleased that the committee is keeping an eye on future developments and what the Parliament should look like in 10 years. One of the advantages of having a new Parliament was that there were no traditions or cultures. Over the years, I have seen that each new Parliament is very different from the previous one—and I like that. I hope that the Scottish Parliament continues to evolve as a result of circumstances and challenges, and that it remains fresh and modern while retaining its founding ethos.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. Speeches will be around four minutes.

16:03

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I apologise to Stephen Kerr for having the audacity to read my speech off a screen.

I welcome not only the report but the fact that an inquiry was carried out at all. Given the talent that the Parliament has lost due to working practices that many consider to be anachronistic, an inquiry was, in my opinion, overdue. I am aware that many would have liked to never see an inquiry take place, so I thank the committee for conducting it and for allowing me to give evidence.

This place can be a bubble. Things that would not even register as an issue for most people feel like the battle of the day: who gets called for a supplementary question, which reception a colleague chose to go to or whether your synonym made it into a committee report—I have seen all of those things cause serious rage and upset. Those who are listening know who they are.

The bubble is more pronounced for those who live far from the Parliament building. Last year, in my first few weeks as an MSP, I realised that, when I was sitting on the train somewhere around Dalwhinnie, I would feel like I had passed through a portal and returned to earth from some other planet where we breathe coffee instead of air and use votes as currency.

Central belt politicians, with a few exceptions, do not understand the different challenges experienced by representatives of other places,

and that is before we even consider caring responsibilities, disability or other factors. They do not understand the travel—the extra time that is needed just to get around and speak to constituents. My work travel so far this year has been the equivalent of 50 per cent of the circumference of the earth. For many people I want to meet in my island communities, my recess is their holidays, and they often shut up their shops or businesses, with many using the Scottish Government's annual gift of two return ferry journeys to come over to the mainland for a bit.

When explaining that being here on a Tuesday morning and later than 5 o'clock on a Thursday means that I cannot carry out regional work on a Monday or a Friday—the so-called constituency days—I have been told that my constituents want to see me here in Parliament every day. That is not true. For the most part, in the minds of highlanders and islanders, being here every week is a sign that I am not doing my job. The north of my region is further away from the Parliament building than the House of Commons is—that is as the crow flies, before taking transport links into consideration. Presiding Officer, I represent people who are further away from where you are sitting than Liz Truss is during Prime Minister's questions. I am sure that my colleagues, particularly my SNP colleagues, will understand why folk living in my region might not feel connected to decisions that are made this far away from those they affect.

In 2015, the then Scottish Cabinet came to Inverness to listen and be visible. I went along and asked Nicola Sturgeon how she was encouraging 18-year-old teachers like me to be politically involved. Being there was how she was doing that—that was progress—but we need to keep it going.

Technology now allows us to vote, to contribute to debates and to scrutinise legislation and ministers from anywhere with an internet connection. If we want people in the Highlands and Islands to feel represented and heard, and if we want Highlands and Islands representatives to be able to connect with people outwith this bubble and know what is happening on the ground, we need to be able to reliably be in our region.

In my very first speech in the Parliament, I applauded the hybrid system and said that I was looking forward to doing my job here, but also

“from Skye, Sutherland or Shetland from time to time.”—
[*Official Report*, 1 June 2021; c 42.]

Acceptance in the Parliament of more flexible, more inclusive—and, frankly, better—working practices is not where it needs to be.

I hope that the report and all its detail will mean that, next time, we do not lose more Gail Rosses

and Aileen Campbells, and that more of the rural and island voices that, as we have been hearing over recent weeks, are so important to Government decisions can dial in to the conversation as well.

16:07

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I come to this debate not sure whether I have anything terribly useful to say—before some members say, “There’s no change there, then,” I do have a number of observations. The first observation is something that I said in the original debate on this topic. I did not think that I would be open to change, but then, to my surprise, I found that it actually worked perfectly well and to the benefit of the Parliament and I have therefore become quite a fan and quite an advocate of it.

However, the point that I would start from is this: when do we take the view that we are at a settled position in which to make any judgments? If we take out the summer recess, the Parliament has had really quite a short working period since we returned to an environment in which we did not have social distancing in the chamber. Therefore, what has become almost quite normal again quite quickly is actually not a practice that we have lived with for very long.

I notice that the number of contributions that are now being made remotely has shrunk to very few altogether, but who knows what is coming this winter? There could be a major flu epidemic, a revival of some other issue or very bad weather, as Martin Whitfield said, and the remote engagement of members in the chamber could change again.

We have to be very careful and watch how things develop over time. We should not rush to any settled view as to when we are at the point at which we can say, “This is now how it should be.” Let us keep an open mind.

Daniel Johnson: Do the very remarks that the member has just made not exemplify, though, that we can change quite quickly and well?

Jackson Carlaw: Yes, we can, and I think that that is the point. However, we had better be careful that we do not close down the point at which we think that we are in a position to say, “These are the ways in which we think the Parliament could work better”, because I think that things could continue to evolve and change.

Martin Whitfield: Does the member agree that part of the report’s value concerns the empowerment of back benchers as a result of hybrid working, in particular when—as we have heard—distance is an issue and the option to participate virtually is still available to them? We

do not necessarily see such practices being used every day, but that does not mean that they should not be available when circumstances—which can be very broad—mean that members need to use them to represent their constituents on an important matter that is being debated in the chamber.

Jackson Carlaw: I absolutely agree with that, and I do not think that a member has to be somewhere remote or at a great distance to need that option. As a member who represents a central belt constituency, I note that there are days when I feel that I could represent my constituents much more productively by being in the constituency and participating in a number of events that are taking place, which would directly benefit them, than by being in the chamber. Historically, I have sometimes been in Parliament only to participate in five minutes of business before hanging around until 5 o’clock for decision time, which is a wholly unproductive use of time. The virtual option is one of the real advantages that has been demonstrated during the hybrid working arrangements.

I agree with Stephen Kerr on one point: the use of remote technology in the chamber. I believe that people should put up or shut up, and I do not like it when members do not intervene in a debate but then, from a sedentary position, tweet out that what somebody else in the chamber has just said is absolute rubbish and they fundamentally disagree with it. I do not think that that is quite right.

We should start to consider afresh in what way social media should be used, if we want the Parliament to have respect and to evolve not just through its infrastructure but in the way in which we conduct ourselves. During the years in which I have been a member of the Parliament, the level of courtesy that is shown has declined, as has the wider understanding of parliamentary business. We all used to get a written *Official Report* and people used to read what had been said in other debates beyond their particular focus and discipline. A lot of that has been lost.

In 2024, the Parliament will be 25 years old. We should work towards that date, not necessarily 10 years hence, to see what more we can do to radically improve the way in which the Parliament works and the way in which we operate.

Sitting above that is the fact that the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has been charged with carrying out an investigation into deliberative democracy. We are currently awaiting the Scottish Government’s response to its own working group on that, but that, too, will provide some challenging questions for members as to how we sit alongside a culture of deliberative engagement in our politics.

Ross Greer was here for the previous debate—he is not here now, but I know that he is a big fan of Churchill. I say, therefore, that

“This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning”

of our consideration of how we might evolve as a Parliament.

16:12

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank the committee for bringing the report to Parliament, and I commend the convener, Martin Whitfield, and the deputy convener, Bob Doris, along with the other committee members, for producing it.

In May last year, 43 new MSPs were elected, which amounted to one third of all MSPs. It was a much more diverse intake, and we need to ensure that that continues. We were all elected in the midst of Covid, and alternative forms of working were the norm for many months.

It is great that the SPPA Committee agreed to look at future parliamentary procedures and practices and to give us the opportunity to debate the issues this afternoon. I was fortunate enough to be a member of the committee for a period of time, and I know how much work went into the report.

In December last year, as the convener said, the committee held a debate to inform key areas for its inquiry. A range of issues were debated, and the committee agreed to look at the following areas: scrutiny and debate, and whether that is best conducted in hybrid or virtual format; the resource implications of virtual participation, which have not really been touched on today; wider changes to procedures and practices that would improve parliamentary scrutiny; and—as has been mentioned today—different methods of voting, including proxy voting. I will look at some of those areas in the short time that I have available this afternoon.

With regard to hybrid and virtual meetings, when we came into Parliament, we went straight into virtual meetings. That went quite well, and it made the Parliament—I think—more inclusive and accessible for everybody. Emma Roddick and Rhoda Grant both touched on that, and it is a key point.

As the report says, hybrid working

“will provide the Parliament with the flexibility in the future to offer alternative means of participating in parliamentary business, rather than requiring elected members to fit into established methods of working notwithstanding their personal circumstances.”

Jackson Carlaw touched on that, and it is important.

The committee says that

“the impact of hybrid meetings should be monitored over the longer term to assess the extent to which they provide for equal participation in parliamentary business, promote diversity and support participation levels.”

That is important.

On virtual participation, the committee’s view is that

“committees, like the Chamber, should continue to have the capacity to hold hybrid meetings.”

In the time that I have been involved in various committees, virtual participation has gone well. It needs to continue, because it gives members and witnesses more flexibility, which is incredibly helpful. That is a key thing.

The committee

“believes that Members being present supports effective and collaborative work in undertaking scrutiny and for this reason considers that the normal expectation should be that Members come to the Parliament to participate in committee meetings.”

That is maybe for debate. As we have heard, that might be something for the committee to consider.

The committee also

“welcomes the introduction of the new platform for remote participation in committee meetings as well as in the Chamber.”

A couple of members have touched on proxy voting, which I will look at a wee bit. The committee

“considers that there is a value in piloting a proxy voting scheme.”

I remember that the issue was brought up in evidence to the committee and well debated. I would very much support such a pilot. The committee

“intends to consult on how such a scheme would function with a view to proposing a temporary rule which would provide for a scheme that would permit Members, in certain defined circumstances including parental leave and illness, to nominate a proxy.”

The committee

“suggests that such a scheme should be allowed to run for a period of around 12 months and that any permanent ... changes to provide for proxy voting should ... be considered following a full ... evaluation of the scheme.”

That approach is correct, and the issue should come back to the chamber.

The committee’s report quotes a witness who said that, in the inquiry,

“we should be thinking about what the Parliament should look like in ten years’ time”,

and the report says that

“the Parliament should commit to a culture of iterative change to allow it to be more representative, more open and more accessible”.

That is the key closing line in the report, because that will allow us to attract a more diverse range of candidates to stand for election. The committee also

“hopes that the Parliament can be more inclusive, seeking evidence from witnesses all over Scotland who reflect Scottish society more fully.”

16:17

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the report and its recommendations on hybrid working and remote voting, which enable MSPs to better balance their responsibilities in the Parliament and in their constituencies and which support family-friendly practices. I agree with Rhoda Grant that fixed times for decision making help those who have caring responsibilities and help with meeting other commitments.

We should support the proposed pilot of proxy voting, particularly for members who are suffering from long-term illness, having an operation or taking maternity leave. I agree with Stephen Kerr that the member themselves should choose their proxy.

It is fair to say that the Parliament’s operation of remote voting during the pandemic maximised members’ participation in voting, which was not always the case in other Parliaments. The use of points of order when the technology failed was a feature that this Parliament used and other Parliaments did not always use. We need to incorporate scepticism and cynicism about the reliability of technology in our working patterns, because we are reliant on the technology that is available to us. I look forward to the day when we have the technology to make interventions possible in hybrid situations, which will make a considerable difference when a person who is participating virtually wants to intervene on someone who is contributing in the chamber.

Any move towards hybrid working must be made in a way that allows for effective scrutiny, so ministers and key witnesses should continue to need to be present in person to be scrutinised. It is worth noting that, although the proposals came out of consensus, many of the changes that the Parliament needs might not necessarily be fully agreed on and might not be the subject of consensus in the Parliament now. We need to debate how we ensure that this Parliament operates in a more effective way and we must listen to some of the criticisms that have been made, which have already been referred to today.

Wider changes are needed. We need to look at how we scrutinise legislation and at the quality of

some of the legislation that the Parliament is asked to consider. We also need to look at why some people are calling for a second chamber to provide that scrutiny function. We need to take on board some of the criticisms that are made about the lack of spontaneity and about the increasing stage management and choreography. That is partly a result of the way we organise ourselves.

We are right to be positive about what is successful in this Parliament. Much of this culture is a massive step forward, but we also have to look at the criticisms. Therefore, I hope that we will look at the founding principles of this Parliament and at how we can, for example, improve freedom of information legislation, so that there is a presumption in favour of publication. I hope that we look at the rights of individual MSPs, at how this place operates, at how speakers are chosen and at how committees can be more effective.

I hope that the committee will look at those issues, that we have a transparent view of the Parliament’s processes and that these debates continue to happen.

16:21

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): As the only female member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I am happy to speak in the debate and I will focus on the challenges and opportunities of hybrid working.

I thank the committee clerks for all their help in getting us to this stage. In our report, we noted that, compared with other institutions, the Scottish Parliament was ahead of the game, because we had appropriate measures to ensure that committee and chamber business continued and that members were able to participate sufficiently and vote. I pay tribute to all the Scottish Parliament staff who were instrumental in making the switch to digital chamber sessions at the beginning of the pandemic and who have continued to work hard to improve and develop the hybrid model that we now have.

Many of the committee’s conclusions focused on the need to continue with hybrid arrangements, in order to give members the flexibility to participate remotely. It is important that we build on the lessons that have been learned over the course of the remote and hybrid participation and to try to improve the experience, as the new platform should do. The potential for proxy voting was also considered as part of the inquiry, and it will be interesting to see what happens next with that—including any pilot trial.

The ability for witnesses to join committee meetings remotely brings clear benefits and possibly makes it easier to facilitate evidence

sessions. A permanent hybrid model for cross-party group meetings could ensure that we maximise public engagement with the Parliament, and ensure that CPGs are as accessible as possible to members of the public.

When it comes to accessibility for MSPs and members of the public, there is a need to consider people with disabilities, women and people from rural or remote areas.

Martin Whitfield: The committee will return—not far in the future—to the issue of gender balance of committees, so I give warning on that, because it is a very important element.

Does Ms Stevenson agree that one of the interesting aspects of the evidence that we heard was about witnesses who find it challenging to come in because of the very nature of this building? Being able to give evidence remotely, with support from officers in the Parliament, often allows people to share their experiences, which otherwise would go unheard in this chamber.

Collette Stevenson: I whole-heartedly agree with the member and, having attended several CPGs, I know that that issue is firmly evident. We see it regularly in the attendance of witnesses who can give evidence remotely, compared with that of those who have had to come in and attend meetings in the building.

For example, we know that, in general, women are disproportionately impacted by caring responsibilities, so hybrid working in Parliament could ease some of that burden. I also very much welcome the Presiding Officer's gender sensitive audit, which will investigate the representation and participation of women in the Scottish Parliament. The SPPA Committee will commission an academic to do a full analysis and to consider who is participating virtually and see what else can be done.

We received an interesting bit of evidence from Karen Bradley MP, who is chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee. She told us that female MPs were participating more during virtual proceedings than they had previously. We also heard from Professor Meg Russell, who cautioned that on-going hybrid work should be well defined so that we avoid a situation where the only people attending Parliament in person are the non-disabled white men.

Overall in our report, we have recognised that Parliament is most effective when MSPs are in Holyrood but that there are circumstances where remote participation is necessary, as has been pointed out by several members in the debate. For example, during periods of illness or bereavement, or—particularly with winter approaching—if there are any travel or weather disruptions, members would still be able to vote and participate. One

possibility could be that every member engages virtually perhaps once per month, so that remote participation is normalised, and some can do so more often if required.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Collette Stevenson: I have very little time left.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The member is already over her time, I am afraid.

Daniel Johnson: Would the member recognise that virtual working excludes some people with some disabilities?

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Ms Stevenson.

Collette Stevenson: I will move on as quickly as possible.

There are lots of things to think about in terms of what Daniel Johnson pointed out as Parliament adapts. However, any change is an iterative process, as has already been pointed out, and not an end of parliamentary reform. The report sets out many sound recommendations and I hope that members and others find it useful.

16:27

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank the members of the SPPA Committee for their work on the inquiry, and thank all who gave evidence. One of the key points from the report was that, compared with other legislatures, the Scottish Parliament introduced more measures to ensure that our members could continue to participate and that the functions of Parliament could continue. I place on record our thanks to all those who made that possible and worked to ensure that Parliament could continue to function.

As a new MSP and one with a disability, the hybrid system has allowed me to participate when I might otherwise have struggled to be here or have exacerbated my condition as a result of trying to get here—or, indeed, as this week, when I am recovering from a cold.

We were rightly proud at the start of this session when Scotland elected its most diverse Parliament yet. I hope that, by continuing and improving remote participation, more people may consider putting themselves forward to stand. We cannot be complacent or content with the progress that we have made so far.

As well as enabling diversity among elected representatives, the hybrid system has allowed committees to take evidence from people we might otherwise not have been able to be physically present. That opens up opportunities to hear, either formally or informally, from groups and

individuals who for health reasons, or because of caring responsibilities or travel implications, would not normally have attended Parliament.

Remote participation is also one way to move towards the Parliament's net zero ambitions, as was pointed out in the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body's contribution to the committee's report.

I hope that, in committees, those factors will continue to be taken into consideration and that remote participation will be offered as a genuine alternative, rather than simply seeing a default return to in-person participation. I take on board the comments in the report that, particularly for committee proceedings, the current system is not ideal for discussion compared with having everyone in the room. I hope that the upcoming roll-out of the new system will allow hybrid proceedings to more accurately reflect how chamber and committee business function.

I agree with the committee that there should not be a system to request remote participation and that it should be left to the discretion of individuals. Putting in a system to request remote participation would, in my view, be onerous.

Proxy voting, which has already been mentioned—and, indeed, is mentioned in the report—would be a good addition to the adaptations that have been made so far. The report notes that there is

“value in piloting a proxy voting”

system and that the committee would consult on

“how such a scheme would function”.

It would allow those who are unable to attend sessions remotely to cast their votes and to represent their constituents. Paragraph 194 of the report refers to

“certain defined circumstances including parental leave and illness”

and I ask that, in its consultation, the committee add bereavement leave to the list of eligible circumstances for a proxy vote. I do not think that anyone in the chamber would expect a member to have to be present after the loss of a loved one.

The system that is used to request proxy voting should mirror human resources practices that are conducted elsewhere in Parliament. We expect our staff teams to give sick notes and, although I respect everyone's right to privacy, especially with regard to their health, such an approach would provide a straightforward way of making a proxy voting request.

However, we should be aware that caring or parental responsibilities that would stop a member being able to vote might need to be met suddenly, and whatever approach we design should be

adaptable to such situations. I also recognise the comments that were made earlier about the parameters for a scheme. That issue will require careful consideration and is probably not something that we will sort out this afternoon.

We would very much welcome a wider conversation on substitute arrangements for committees. The suspension of standing orders in the first part of the session allowed parties to adapt quickly if someone was ill or unavailable, and we would like that flexibility to be made permanent. It would provide greater flexibility to parties and has the potential to stop knock-on disruption to multiple committees as a result of one MSP's absence.

I am pleased that there is agreement on keeping the hybrid system, because I believe not only that it will allow those in the current chamber to deal with workload, health and family situations in a flexible and manageable way; if we continue to make progress, it might be the change required to ensure that more people consider standing for elected office in 2026.

16:31

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate as the Parliament considers how it will carry out its business in the most effective way possible, just as the Scottish public rightly expect.

As with many modern Parliaments, the Scottish Parliament has always strived to be flexible, open and accommodating to members from all different backgrounds. It is therefore to this Parliament's credit that Scotland was ahead of the curve in responding to the pandemic and introducing changes to ensure that all members could participate in parliamentary business.

Although remote or virtual contributions were originally introduced as a necessity, members will agree that the period helped shine a light on what were old ways of thinking. With committee evidence-taking sessions, for example, the hybrid format has significantly expanded the potential pool of witnesses. The committee process is a vital part of the scrutiny provided by the Parliament, and there is no doubt that certain aspects of the process are now more effective, because of the hybrid format.

However, it is clear that the introduction of virtual contributions to the chamber, particularly in debates, has not been entirely unproblematic. Although such contributions are more seamless now than when they were first introduced in 2020, it is clear that there is a problematic divide between contributions made in the chamber and those made remotely. Although many important improvements and contributions have been made

through the virtual format, it cannot be said that, even with their heartfelt contributions, those who are not in the chamber but in a remote situation are as deeply involved in a debate.

The chamber is where members can participate in the cut and thrust of debates; indeed, as has often been pointed out, the situation is only made worse by the fact that those making such contributions can neither make nor receive interventions. Losing the spontaneity of responding to others' remarks has been a price that people have not felt prepared to pay; I hope that the proposed hybrid platform is able to address the issue properly, and I look forward to seeing that happen. It should be up to members to decide how they contribute to debates. After all, the Scottish public expect to see MSPs representing them as effectively as possible in Parliament, and they will be able to judge for themselves whether that is the case.

Given Parliament's role in holding the Government to account, it would be reasonable that such an approach is discarded for ministers. It is important that ministers are subject to the highest possible levels of scrutiny, which is something that can take place only in the chamber.

The Parliament is already a better place as a result of the hybrid measures that were introduced two years ago, but there is still much more work to be done to ensure that those measures complement parliamentary business and do not detract from it or diminish the Parliament's role. It remains the case that in-person contributions to Parliament are very much to the fore.

We all want a Parliament that can accommodate members from as many different backgrounds as possible. I know that that can be achieved without diluting the Parliament's vital role in our democracy, and, by setting aside time for the debate, we have set a clear goal to help to achieve that. Alongside other members of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I will continue to work collectively to strike the balance that is required to ensure that we accommodate, support and encourage members, including new members. As we have heard, many new members joined the Parliament this session, and it has taken them some time to get used to the format, which is not the same as in previous sessions. We have a lot to learn and a lot to give.

16:36

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is not an exaggeration to say that the Covid pandemic has changed all of our lives for ever. We had no choice but to make changes to

our lives while restrictions were put in place to keep us safe. Working at home where possible was the key to keeping businesses going, and people adapted well to that—so well, in fact, that many employers have changed their business model to accommodate it. Like everything else, there are negatives as well as positives, but at least now there is choice.

Out of necessity, and not before time, we are looking at family-friendly options, a better work-life balance and doing business differently. As we have heard, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee took time to strike a balance when it came to adapting the working practices of the Parliament. With an eye on the future, the committee decided that the pandemic had been a watershed and that it was an opportune time to examine practices that had been in place since the Parliament began in 1999.

All praise must go to the Parliament authorities, which reacted quickly to introduce a remote voting system to enable normal business to continue while most staff were working from home. There were teething problems but those were, largely, overcome as time went on.

The report shows that there was a variety of views and opinions when it came to deciding whether hybrid meetings should continue. That is hardly surprising in a place that is full of opinionated politicians. The majority view had to prevail, which was to seize the opportunity for greater flexibility and to become more accessible and inclusive to encourage diversity. Hybrid voting allows members with caring responsibilities and those who are ill to fulfil their duties, and it takes into account unforeseen family emergencies and travel difficulties.

As my colleague Collette Stevenson has already highlighted from the committee report, it is important to note that, according to the evidence that the committee took, in comparison to other legislatures,

“the Scottish Parliament introduced more measures”

to allow important business and scrutiny to continue, which I welcome.

Proxy voting was another important focus for the committee. As we have heard, it would be the subject of a fully evaluated pilot before any permanent change to the Parliament's rules and procedures were made. I look forward to hearing more about that. It would be an important development, and I hope that it comes to fruition.

I am fully supportive of the proposals in the committee's excellent report, which strike a sensible and realistic balance. However, the hybrid platform does not and should not replicate in-person participation in parliamentary business.

There is no doubt that having fewer interventions, which are not yet possible in the remote system, reduces the quality of debate, and members who participate remotely can feel isolated and lose out on the atmosphere of a debate.

Committee work in Parliament is crucial for making legislation, conducting inquiries and scrutinising Government on the issues that keep Scotland running. Remote participation can be limiting for members and for witnesses who give evidence, and it should always be a last resort. However, the committee notes

“the Conveners Group support for the production of guidance to accompany the formalisation of long-term hybrid capability for committees and suggests that the Guidance on Committees be updated.”

That is eminently sensible.

Most importantly, MSPs were elected to represent their constituents in Scotland’s Parliament and it is vital that we do just that. As the report notes,

“unless exceptional or urgent, constituency work and interparliamentary business should be undertaken on non-sitting days.”

We should be here. The default position is that parliamentarians should be at their place of work on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, allowing time in constituencies on Mondays and Fridays. The public deserve nothing less. Technology has given us options, which I welcome. The report sets out the way ahead.

16:40

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I thank the committee for its excellent work and, more important, for the opportunity that it has given us all to talk about the way that we work and how we can make the Parliament better. It is only by having the time and space to talk about ideas about what works and what does not work that we can do that. We have too few such opportunities. I encourage the committee to think about what future reports it can bring to the Parliament so that we can have further opportunities to discuss that, because it is important that we make progress.

I am thankful for the broad scope of the report. I have looked at the proposals on accessibility, the use of technology and proxy voting, and at the important reflections on the nature of what takes place in the Parliament, the broader nature of discourse, the fact that debates are not confined to the chamber or the committee rooms, and the importance of face-to-face meetings. That is one of the things that we have discussed this afternoon.

It is important to be mindful that there is a difference between the work that we do in the

chamber and committees and the demands of scrutiny, and what different forms of technology enable us to do. There is no doubt that virtual working makes the Parliament more accessible, and that is a very good thing.

Emma Roddick’s contribution was excellent in reminding us what is important about the job that we do. It is fundamentally important to serve our constituents, to hear what they have to say, to understand their concerns, and to represent them. If technology makes that more feasible, Emma Roddick is absolutely right that we must embrace it and entrench it in the way that we work.

I am a central belt member, and it is only two minutes’ walk to my constituency. That makes me ever more mindful of the fact that I can nip out of an afternoon and do a constituency engagement. Most other members cannot do that. In fact, I get home to my house every night after I have been in this place. Most members do not get to do that. That is a true privilege, but it makes me think about what more we can do to ensure that that happens.

However, technology is not a panacea. As Rhoda Grant pointed out, the wider participation is important. I caution against the thought that virtual work is somehow the only way in which we can make the Parliament family friendly or accessible. The things that we do with our timetabling, the other provisions and the support that we provide in the Parliament are just as important, if not more so.

Stephen Kerr: May I tempt Daniel Johnson on to the subject of decision time? A number of colleagues have mentioned, in relation to family-friendly hours, the constant moving of decision time. Given that decision time moves only because of the business that is allotted in the time in which the Parliament sits, would it not be better if we sat for longer on one night a week and had a set decision time—maybe at 7 o’clock or even 8 o’clock?

I can see that Daniel Johnson is going to have something to say, so I will give up.

Daniel Johnson: I was almost with Stephen Kerr until he proposed decision times at 7 o’clock or 8 o’clock. Perhaps our flexibility should not be about the timing of decision time but about what decisions we take at what points in time. If business has to continue further, perhaps it could continue after decision time for members who want to continue. Decisions could take place later. However, that is probably an equally bad idea to other members. My point is that there are options that we could look at for how and when we take decisions compared to when the business has been dealt with.

The issue of proxy voting is critical. For all manner of reasons—whether that is bereavement, illness, maternity or paternity—it is vital that members are given the ability to do the most fundamental part of our job, which is to vote, while we are not in the Parliament. Proxy voting is the best way to do that, but that must have caveats. Other members have pointed out that it should not be about giving the vote to the whip; that has to be given to members.

The Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Likewise, I think that there should be very specific mandates.

We should embrace technology, welcome flexibility, and look forward to further opportunities to discuss how we work in the Parliament in future.

16:44

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Unsurprisingly, as a member of the committee, I think that our report is spot on and I thank the clerking team and the convener for all their support in driving the inquiry forward. I welcome the debate, which I have found really interesting. I think we all agree that Parliament must embrace change and that change must always protect the core values on the basis of which the Parliament was set up.

The biggest change that we have experienced recently is the introduction of virtual technology in the chamber. That was forced on us by the pandemic. If we are honest, the technology in Parliament prior to the pandemic was poor and remote working would not have been possible. I remember holding a committee meeting in a room below the canteen, with five committee members huddled round a screen trying to take evidence from witnesses from Transport for London. They could not see us and we could hardly see them.

We have been through a change that was really important because it stopped our democracy from becoming an autocracy, but we struggled as we went through that change. Members will never forget the technical issues that led to voting delays in the “robust” system that we were told we were working with. There was also a complete disconnect in delivering virtual speeches without being able to see a live feed to the chamber. I speak from experience, having been forced into remote working for six months. It was perhaps pleasing in my case to look at the screen and see myself, but I would have liked to see how the speech was going down in the chamber, which was not possible, and it was certainly not possible to take interventions.

The on-going development of the hybrid Parliament is something that we can now control, as we should. I am pleased to hear that MSPs who are attending debates virtually after recess will be able to make interventions and will actually be able to see how their speech is going down in the chamber, which I think is really important. It will stop them feeling detached, because you do feel detached if you are speaking to a computer for what seems to be hours on end, if you get the chance and the Presiding Officer does not cut you off. There is a lot to be done on that.

I do not think that having virtual meetings of Parliament should stop parliamentarians from coming in. To my mind, it remains crucial to attend Parliament physically. You cannot bump into someone for a coffee or sound them out on an idea on Zoom—that just does not happen. To me, that is what politics is all about: meeting and talking to people and building trust and cross-party relationships. Hybrid working can complement that, but it will never replace the ability to look someone in the eye and see how things are going.

Another way in which Parliament could improve the system would be by allowing proxy voting. There has been a lot of talk about that. I concur by saying, as a former member of a whip’s team, that it is not the place of whips to hold the proxy vote. That vote should be held by someone that the person who gives it believes will represent their views.

I believe that we have failed to address the issue of how parliamentary business is carried out. I believe that the domination of business by the Parliamentary Bureau is not satisfactory. I ask members who are present if they have ever been to a Bureau meeting. You can go if you want to. You have to ask permission and get approval from the whips, but you ought to go and to see whether it is as edifying as you think it might, or might not, be.

My other big bugbear, which we have not discussed, is that members come to this chamber with prepared speeches along party lines and with patsy questions. I do not believe that many members are prepared to take interventions or to engage. Debate is about just that: it is about debating issues and having an informed discussion. I think that is really important and I think that Parliament needs to mature to allow that to happen.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Edward Mountain: Of course I will give way.

Daniel Johnson: I thought that I would take up the member’s invitation to engage.

Does the member think that, in their contributions, members should, at the very least,

reflect previous speeches rather than just read out their own speeches?

Edward Mountain: Of course, and Mr Johnson will not be surprised that I now come to do that, and I am sure that the deputy convener will also do exactly that.

I agree with the convener that we should be looking forward 10 years, and I agree with the minister that it should not be the Government that dictates the way in which the Parliament changes. I also agree with Stephen Kerr that Parliament should agree on and make the changes that it wants to see.

I was delighted to hear from Jackson Carlaw that he is progressive and open to change. He did actually have quite a lot to say, despite the fact that, at the beginning, he thought that he would not.

There is one area that I would like to drift on to—

The Presiding Officer: If you could do that very briefly, Mr Mountain.

Edward Mountain: Katy Clark mentioned the issue of decision time, which is something that we need to discuss. I believe that limiting a debate to a set time is wrong, although that might mean that decision time is carried forward to the next day. That might be worth considering.

In summary, the Parliament needed to evolve, and it has evolved. We need to go further and make our IT work for parliamentarians. However, our IT can never replace the Parliament, and we should never lose sight of the fact that the best way to work together as a Parliament and as parties—which might have different ideas—is by sitting down, talking to one another, trying to find consensus and realising that we do not have a monopoly on good ideas.

16:51

George Adam: Presiding Officer, you and I meet up regularly, as you do with all business managers in the Parliament. You have mentioned to us all that you want open debates in which ideas are pushed forward and members intervene. I feel that today's debate is probably an example of that. Therefore, having seen you earlier today, I feel that I have delivered exactly what you wanted. The debate has been full of ideas, although members have not always agreed with one another.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not interesting that we saw an example of a remote contribution during which a member in the chamber sought to intervene—although they were unable to do so

due to the technology—and no one seemed to bat an eyelid and the flow of debate carried on?

George Adam: Yes, and I look forward to the technology being available to us to allow interventions to happen in a debate, because they do make a difference. I am also—

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

George Adam: Okay, although I have hundreds of things to say.

Stephen Kerr: The debate has set a good example. In relation to the problem around decision time, I think that the idea of deferred decisions that has been put forward is a cracking one. Does the minister agree?

George Adam: I am coming on to talk about decision time, if I can get to that point in my notes.

I understand some of the criticism of the technology. As I said before, I was on the Parliamentary Bureau at the time when there was a major worldwide pandemic, Parliament had shut up shop and we needed to do something about it. During that period, what the parliamentary officials did to set up a system was nothing short of remarkable. The system did have problems, which was difficult at times, but, as I said in my opening speech, it gave us the opportunity to continue to scrutinise the Government and it allowed the Parliament to do what it had to do during a very important time for the people of Scotland.

The operational adaptations that were developed and adopted by the Parliament in the light of Covid have been essential in maintaining good governance of Scotland. I welcome the committee's view that the Parliament should maintain that flexibility to enable hybrid and virtual proceedings. That principle is very much supported by the Scottish Government and it will no doubt be important in helping to respond quickly and effectively in the future. The finding in the committee report that, despite recent events, the Parliament was able to fulfil its scrutiny role, is especially welcome to the Government.

I will talk about some of the contributions to the debate. Martin Whitfield, the convener of the committee, spoke about how we will deal with matters in Parliament in 10 years' time. I agree that we have to challenge ourselves in that regard because, regardless of what happens in the future, we do not want to be in a position of having to go from a standing start to develop new ways of working.

We need to see that the technology works and we need to find other ways of making it better. However, as we will all experience with the new technology to allow members to intervene, the technology must be in place and it must be robust.

We must ensure that the technology is working for us. Mr Mountain brought that up; he has, at times, been a critic. He participated from a rural location, being unable to attend for six months. He had to rely on the technology, and it was quite difficult.

Daniel Johnson brought up an important point about the need to maximise the time for face-to-face discussions. Having sat next to Mr Johnson in a committee, I know the reasons why he wants that. He asked a question about that during the debate, and I am probably one of the few people who understood why he did. It is exactly as Rhoda Grant said—she referred to how we want to judge the feeling of what is happening in the room. For Mr Johnson, that is even more the case when it comes to being able to make a contribution. I understand why that can be difficult when we are not physically in the same room. Online, we could all find ourselves misjudging what we say and going to a completely different place. There needs to be a balance, and we need to ensure that you, Presiding Officer, are not sitting in your chair on your own in an otherwise empty chamber, which is hardly a good look for Scotland's Parliament.

Katy Clark and Rhoda Grant discussed decision time. As you will be aware, Presiding Officer, I try to keep things within certain parameters, but there are certain challenges. Those challenges can come from me—they sometimes, but not always, come from the Government perspective, and sometimes they come from other members, who possibly push things a certain way. I want to see my grandchildren before they go to high school, and I want to have family-friendly hours so that I can spend time with them.

Rhoda Grant: I recognise that the minister understands that to an extent. It must, however, be terrifying for a parent sitting here, watching the clock tick by, knowing that their child's childcare is finished, and that their child may be standing outside in the rain on their own, waiting for their parent to turn up. That must be really difficult for a parent.

George Adam: I am totally appreciative of that situation, and I try to work to that.

There are always challenges, from my perspective. We all know—because we have been here for many years—that December and June will always feature the end of our consideration of legislation at stage 3, when times will be pushed. We need to find a way, in between those busier times, to keep decision time at 5 o'clock and to adhere to the family-friendly ideals of this place, as Ms Grant and, I think, Katy Clark, rightly mentioned. It is important that we stick to that, and that is one of the points that we continue to bring up.

This has been a very good debate, Presiding Officer, and I hope that, after asking us, over many weeks, to have debates full of ideas, you have enjoyed it. They are ideas that the Scottish Government will listen to and take forward. It is the Parliament authorities that will make the decisions, and we will engage in whatever way we can to be constructive.

The Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris to wind up the debate on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

16:58

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): My thanks go to all members for their contributions this afternoon. Just as was the case when, a few months ago, parliamentarians had a debate that kick-started our committee inquiry, today's debate has been invaluable and informative. It demonstrates the commitment of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to have an ongoing dialogue with MSPs and wider society about any reforms to working practices in this place and how those practices may change.

The committee heard from MSPs at focus group sessions and through its survey. It was clear that there is a spectrum of views, just as we have heard in the chamber this afternoon, ranging from those who wish to return completely to previous practices—there were some who expressed that view—to those who wish to embrace all the changes, unquestionably and immediately. The debate today has been much more nuanced and balanced, I feel.

On balance, MSPs and others we spoke to would wish—with caveats and safeguards, of course—to build on the innovations made over the past couple of years. Those innovations were necessitated by a global pandemic but they offer a great opportunity to further develop a modern and inclusive Scottish Parliament. They may be gradual, iterative, monitored, careful and considered, but changes are absolutely required.

Inclusive in how it enables us to support individuals and groups across Scotland and beyond who wish to offer evidence to parliamentary committees or to participate more generally in the life of the Parliament, the hybrid Parliament offers a wonderful opportunity. Rhoda Grant, Paul McLennan, Alexander Stewart, Gillian Mackay and other members spoke warmly about that opportunity to involve witnesses. Given the debate and surveys that the committee has carried out, I would say that that is pretty much a bolt-on as a way forward for committees.

The hybrid Parliament is also inclusive of those watching Parliament today who might consider

standing for election but who think that there are too many hurdles to overcome. They are deterred from standing for election in the first place due to family circumstances, geography, health concerns and a variety of other barriers. Indeed, as we heard from Rhoda Grant, Emma Roddick, Colette Stevenson and others, MSPs have left Parliament because it was not suitably family friendly.

The Scottish Parliament is at the forefront of embracing change and continuing to provide for hybrid meetings and virtual voting. Such things will not be an everyday occurrence, because we believe that face-to-face interactions still have significant and enduring benefits for parliamentarians. Rather, a hybrid Parliament is a reasonable adjustment when circumstances dictate—the exception, not the rule. Daniel Johnson and Stephen Kerr were strong on that point. Rhoda Grant and Edward Mountain made important points that we heard in the committee, too, about the informal chats, the ability to read the room in a debate and the quiet corners where MSPs from all parties can have a discussion and build up relationships. That cannot happen in a virtual Parliament.

Rhoda Grant, Colette Stevenson and Rona Mackay said that a hybrid approach should not mean that we do not make the Parliament building as accessible and family friendly as possible to all MSPs. We heard about the danger that, if we say that Parliament can go hybrid, it means that Parliament has to stop being physically accessible to all. As members said, that must not be allowed to happen.

We heard quite a lot about proxy voting. I remind members that the intention is to propose a scheme for proxy voting that will be piloted on the basis of a temporary standing orders rule change. The committee recommended that a pilot should cover parental leave and illness. If the evaluation of the pilot—which will be consulted on before it is embarked on—deems it successful, we would propose a permanent rule change. We have heard this afternoon that proxy voting will not be straightforward. What will the definition of illness be, and who will have oversight of that? One MSP asked whether sick notes will be required, and whether the whips will be involved. My view, and that of Stephen Kerr, Katy Clark and Edward Mountain, is that that should absolutely not be the case. I think that that represents the broad swell of opinion in Parliament, too.

Gillian Mackay asked whether we should extend the list of occasions when proxy voting could be used to bereavement leave. The report does not mention that but, intuitively, it is hard to argue against.

We will soon have the technology in Parliament to allow interventions during a hybrid debate, so

that there can be two-way interaction between those at home and those here, which will improve the flow of debate. The technology is being modernised to facilitate smoother voting and so on. The system will not be perfect—we will continue to have to work on it during the iterative process to ensure that we improve both the technology and our working practices.

Issues were raised in the debate that were not covered in the report. The committee did not look at the wider scrutiny role of Parliament, the role of social media, the issue of spontaneity in debates and the matter of when decision time should be. During our previous debate, Jackson Carlaw suggested deferring decision time to another day. Stephen Kerr and Edward Mountain told us today that, to provide certainty, they would like decision time to be one night a week, and to be longer. I agree with all three suggestions. The problem is that I am agreeing with three Conservatives, but there we are—I am speaking on behalf of the committee.

I thank the clerks—which I did not do at the outset—for their work in marshalling the views of MSPs.

Most members were not in the chamber for the bulk of the debate. I urge all members to get involved in the issue—I urge them to get active, scrutinise the issue and have their say, because the committee needs a measured and balanced view that will garner the maximum support for the changes that we want to introduce. Those changes are being introduced not for MSPs, but for the people of Scotland, whom we all serve. We need to ensure that this Parliament is as accessible as possible and does its core job of representing the people of Scotland in a modern, accessible and accountable way.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-06034, on committee membership, and S6M-06035, on a committee substitute.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): After all that excitement, Presiding Officer, it is back to the usual.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Graham Simpson as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

Stephen Kerr be appointed to replace Oliver Mundell as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Graham Simpson be appointed to replace Alexander Burnett as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Roz McCall be appointed to replace Alexander Burnett as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-05983, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on future parliamentary procedures and practices, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 6th Report 2022 (Session 6), *Report on inquiry into Future Parliamentary procedures and practices* (SP Paper 213).

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-06034, on committee membership, and S6M-06035, on a committee substitute, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Graham Simpson as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

Stephen Kerr be appointed to replace Oliver Mundell as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Graham Simpson be appointed to replace Alexander Burnett as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Roz McCall be appointed to replace Alexander Burnett as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Gas Safety Week 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-05453, in the name of Clare Adamson, on gas safety week 2022—the hidden dangers. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to participate should press their request-to-speak button or, if they are joining us remotely, type R in the chat function.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament marks Gas Safety Week 2022, which runs from 12 to 18 September and is coordinated by Gas Safe Register; understands that this is the 12th annual, pan-industry event, which brings everyone together for the common goal of keeping the nation gas safe while raising awareness of the dangers of poorly maintained gas appliances, which can cause gas leaks, fires, explosions and carbon monoxide poisoning; notes that Gas Safe Register provides a host of support and resources, including an interactive GasMap tool, allowing consumers to find out how many unsafe gas jobs have been carried out in their area, as well as providing helpful tips and reassurance; further notes what it sees as the need to raise awareness for those who live in rented accommodation, including holiday makers, that the law and regulations regarding gas safety are fully understood; commends the efforts of all of the organisations involved, and wishes those involved every success in raising awareness of an issue that could save lives.

17:08

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am delighted to highlight gas safety week 2022, which ran from 12 to 18 September and is co-ordinated by the Gas Safe Register. I thank all colleagues who are speaking this evening and all those who signed the motion to allow the debate to take place. I also thank organisations in the third sector, such as Age Concern Scotland and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and industry organisations, such as SGN, which get behind gas safety week to promote safety in all our communities.

This would have marked the 12th year of the campaign, but the events and activities around the initiative were cancelled in the light of the sad death of Queen Elizabeth II. However, the messaging around gas safety week remains every bit as important.

Gas safety week emphasises the dangers of poorly maintained gas appliances, which can cause gas leaks, fires, explosions and carbon monoxide poisoning. Although I have lodged motions on the initiative and we have held events over a number of years, I believe that this is the first debate on gas safety week in the Scottish Parliament.

I will start with some fundamentals. What is the Gas Safe Register? The body provides a host of support and resources, including an interactive gas map tool, which allows consumers to find out how many unsafe gas jobs have been carried out and identified in their area. Formerly known as CORGI—the Council for Registered Gas Installers—it is the only official registration body of gas businesses and engineers in the United Kingdom. Anyone undertaking gas work in commercial or domestic settings must, by law, be on the Gas Safe Register. A gas engineer can be aligned to a registered business and be issued with a licence to undertake gas work only if they hold a valid and current qualification. The register and all associated services are operated on behalf of the relevant health and safety authority for each region, under the UK Health and Safety Executive.

The Gas Safe Register provides a host of free resources and advice to help people to stay safe. In the interest of raising awareness, I will set out 10 simple steps to help keep people safe and warm in their homes.

Only use an engineer that is registered with the Gas Safe Register to fit and fix services. You can find the register online, where you can check the credentials of anyone who presents as an engineer with their organisation.

Check both sides of your engineer's Gas Safe Register card, as each qualification is listed separately on their credentials. You must ensure that the engineer is qualified in the particular work that they are undertaking in your home.

Gas appliances need to be regularly serviced and checked. If you rent your home, you can ask for a copy of the landlord's current gas safety record.

Know the signs of carbon monoxide poisoning. That is so important. CO poisoning can cause headaches, dizziness, breathlessness, nausea, collapse and loss of consciousness. Unsafe gas appliances can put you and your pets at risk of CO poisoning, which can cause gas leaks, fires and explosions. You might find that the symptoms associated with CO poisoning alleviate when you leave home. I do not think that I am saying anything out of turn by saying that, after one of my MP colleagues attended a gas safety event in Westminster, he realised that he could be—indeed, he was—suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning. That is why raising awareness is so important.

We should check gas appliances for warning signs. If there is a yellow flame instead of a crisp blue one, that could indicate a problem. Black marks or stains around appliances or too much condensation in a room can also indicate a problem.

Every home should have an audible carbon monoxide alarm, which alerts you if there is carbon monoxide in your home. I would go further and follow other safety advice that suggests that you should pack a CO alarm when you are on holiday, particularly when travelling abroad, as such alarms are vital and can indicate whether there is a problem in temporary holiday accommodation such as caravans, where there might be no working alarm.

Keep vents and chimneys clear, so do not block vents that have been put in for gas appliances.

Use gas appliances only for their intended purpose. Do not be tempted to use them for something that they were not meant for, such as heating a room. In the context of carbon monoxide poisoning, it is very important to be aware of the use of camping stoves and disposable barbecues. In a domestic setting, if they are used in a way that was not intended or in an enclosed space, that can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning and, sadly, death.

Know the emergency procedure. If you smell gas or suspect immediate danger, familiarise yourself with the emergency procedure and contact the relevant gas safety numbers in Scotland, which are freely available.

Most important, as we are doing today, spread the word. Share vital gas safety information with friends, family and neighbours to make sure that your community stays safe. The purpose of gas safety week is to raise awareness.

I became interested in gas safety awareness because it is a matter of social justice. Accidents disproportionately impact people in the most deprived areas, so anyone who is passionate about equality and social justice must also be passionate about accident prevention and safety.

Our constituents are facing a cost of living crisis. While budgets are stretched to their limits, safety checks and annual services might be overlooked. However, those simply cannot be a discretionary spend—they are vital. Therefore, I ask the minister, in his discussions with colleagues on the cost of living crisis, to push for providers to offer discounted or free services to those who are at most risk of fuel poverty, in much the same way that fuel cards and payments may be accessed, as the issue could become vital.

As always in these debates, I have quickly run out of time. I thank all my colleagues and ask them to use their social media and their presence in their communities to promote gas safety not just during gas safety week but throughout the years to keep our communities safe.

17:15

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank Clare Adamson for securing this members' business debate and for her campaigning on this important issue. I am pleased that the issue is being debated in the chamber, and discussing the matter further is especially welcome at a time when issues relating to gas are in the news so often.

It is worth reflecting that gas safety has significantly improved from what it was 30 years ago. However, we still too often hear reports of gas explosions in homes and the widespread destruction of properties and even fatalities that result, and about carbon monoxide leaks that result in people being poisoned. Raising public awareness is therefore crucial.

I welcome the fact that we have gas safety week, but that only scratches the surface. Much more needs to be done not just in Parliament but by energy companies to improve on-going public information campaigns, with a focus on the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Before the debate, I was trying to remember whether my council tax information included a piece of information on that. I think that it did, although I also think that I binned that piece of paper. There are ways in which we can ensure that public information is provided.

Overall in Scotland and the UK, our gas network has a reasonably good safety record. That said, there are issues that need to be highlighted. One issue that certainly needs to be addressed is the proper maintenance of gas equipment by registered gas safety engineers. Many people will be unaware of the importance of that and, in many cases, people will be unable to afford the higher cost of paying for an annual check-up of appliances. Clare Adamson has rightly raised concerns about the cost of living crisis and energy bills this winter. Many people will simply not have the income to check their appliances. Organisations and charities already provide such services. I hope that we can promote that through our networks and look at how that can be widely accessed.

It is equally important that we support tenants who request gas safety certificates from landlords. All landlords should be aware of the requirement to make those available to their tenants, given that that is a legal obligation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has impressed on all of us the importance of having reliable and safe gas appliances in properties, as people have spent more time in their homes. According to staygassafe.co.uk, one in five homes in Scotland inspected by gas safety engineers had unsafe gas appliances. It is vital that consumers stay safe by checking their gas appliances every year and by

checking that their engineers are Gas Safe registered. As I have said, it is not just the duty of consumers to do that; it is also important that we look towards the corporate social responsibility that Clare Adamson touched on. Helping to protect customers and save lives is vital, and carbon monoxide poisoning should be a concern of the past but, regrettably, it is not.

I was taken with a point about tourism and the suggestion that, when going to caravans or visiting properties, people should take an alarm with them. Those properties should be fitted with alarms, and people should have confidence in the appliances that they will use while they are on holiday. That is an important issue to come out of this debate.

According to a report by CORGI HomePlan Ltd in 2015, one in 10 Scottish adults has suffered carbon monoxide poisoning in their home. That truly staggering statistic reinforces the need to be vigilant about unsafe energy appliances.

Awareness of carbon monoxide poisoning is still not where it should be. I hope that this debate will help to demonstrate that. People often associate carbon monoxide poisoning with death but, as has been highlighted, flu-like symptoms often present. In many cases, that can potentially help to drive brain damage, strokes, depression or personality changes. Therefore, there are other changes that we need to highlight.

Carbon monoxide is also odourless, which only adds to its menace. It is therefore crucial that utmost care is taken to ensure that leaks and faulty appliances are identified and that we prevent such poisoning.

As we approach the Scottish winter months, I would like to see all organisations involved in gas provision throw their weight behind the campaign and consider how we might extend it beyond gas safety week.

I very much welcome Clare Adamson's bringing the debate to the chamber. I hope that it will be the beginning of a substantial piece of work that aims to drive down all deaths during this period.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mark Griffin, who joins us remotely.

17:20

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I own a rental property in North Lanarkshire.

I am grateful to Clare Adamson for bringing the debate to the chamber. Given that we face a winter with increased costs for heating, housing and food, it is more important than ever that we recognise the risks of unsafe gas appliances.

Having an annual service is key to ensuring that we can go through the winter without potentially facing a cold bath or shower and that our heating does not fail when temperatures are really low.

Worryingly, I suspect that—as Clare Adamson and Miles Briggs have touched on—it will seem to many households who are struggling this year that the costs of servicing gas appliances are an expense that could be saved. Having had a look at the gas map tool that Clare Adamson referenced in her motion, it is really concerning to see the numbers of unsafe gas appliances in every community across Scotland. I looked at the areas around my home in Cumbernauld, where the map shows hundreds of unsafe boilers, cookers and fires.

For tenants in private and social sector housing, servicing of appliances should be conducted regularly, but we know that some landlords fail to fulfil their legal duties to maintain properties, or sometimes have problems in gaining access to them to carry out annual checks. Plenty of tenants are unaware of their rights to have their appliances serviced or even of the very existence of the repairing standard. A report by RentBetter that was published in May found that, among the people sampled, private tenants were dissatisfied with repairs and the condition of their homes, had low awareness of their rights, including the repairing standard, and had a lack of confidence in, or a fear of, exercising their rights due to potential repercussions of rent increases or being evicted, simply for asking for a safe standard to be maintained.

I absolutely welcome the Government's plan for a tenants' rights campaign, but perhaps our awareness campaigns need to be broader—or, at least, more integrated—when it comes to different strands of tenants' rights.

I want to touch on the risks and dangers of poorly maintained gas appliances that Clare Adamson's motion refers to, which can cause fires and carbon monoxide poisoning. We all know the measures that we can take to make our homes safer—[*Interruption.*]—but they can be costly. Sometimes—[*Interruption.*]—that will be a cost that people cannot afford right now. As I have said, people will be reconsidering whether they should service their gas appliances—[*Interruption.*]—this year. In February, the new smoke and fire alarm standard was introduced, which costs each household an average of £250 to implement—a cost that they have already borne. Compliant households will now have much better protection, but the cost was far from insubstantial. The costs and the benefits are a double-edged sword for low-income home owners.

The £1 million that was eventually allocated to help low-income households was not quite

enough. I have obtained replies to freedom of information requests regarding the first tranche of cash, which put the cost of each installation at £325, so the total funding would probably deliver about 3,000 installations against an estimated 60,000-plus eligible applicants whose appliances need upgrading. What action has the Government been able to take?

I hope that, in closing the debate, the minister will outline when the next housing quality standards survey, which will detail the progress that has been made in meeting that standard, will be published. As Clare Adamson and others have said, given the cost of those installations, it would make sense to see what work can be done to reduce the cost of an annual service for people who are struggling the most.

This year, many people will avoid turning on the heating for as long as possible but, when they do turn it on, having those appliances working and in the best order could be a matter of life or death, so it is of the utmost importance that those appliances are serviced.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Griffin. It is good to hear that your doorbell is in fine working order.

17:25

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank my colleague Clare Adamson for bringing this important debate to the chamber and for highlighting some important points in her speech. It is so important that people understand the importance of gas safety and the dangers of gas, which can cause death and serious injury.

Worryingly, figures from research by the Gas Safe Register show gas safety being at the bottom of the list of priorities for home owners. Only 12 per cent of home buyers would have a new boiler fitted, whereas 27 per cent would prioritise redecorating the home first.

Unfortunately, I have a community in my constituency that has been devastated by a gas explosion and which knows only too well the devastating consequences. Last year, at around 7 pm on Monday 18 October, a major gas explosion devastated the Kincaidston community in my Ayr constituency. The explosion was heard miles away in neighbouring towns. I remember vividly my windows rattling and hearing a big bang, which I dismissed as my children perhaps jumping off a bed upstairs. Shortly afterwards, an image of devastation, panic and chaos appeared on social media.

Fire, police and ambulance services were all redeployed at pace to assist at the scene. Sometimes, one does not appreciate the

emergency services until one sees them in action in a national emergency such as the one that occurred on that night. I want to offer my thanks and gratitude to all the members of the emergency services who worked relentlessly that night and in the days after that awful event.

In the moments after the blast, there was confusion, panic and fear. Hundreds of people were evacuated, four houses were destroyed, windows were shattered, cars were destroyed and the community was in panic. Rather than what you would expect in a quiet neighbourhood in Ayr on a Monday night, it was comparable to a war scene. For many hours, nobody knew what had happened or how many people had been injured. The local community centre opened its doors and members of the Kincaidston community pulled together in an effort to make some sense of what had just happened and to support one another. Because of the devastation, it took days to confirm that, thankfully, there had been no deaths, although, unfortunately, a family of four were hospitalised that evening.

In the following days, not only the community of Kincaidston but the whole of Ayr pulled together. Individuals donated food supplies, and local businesses made sure that people who had been affected had essential supplies and a safe place to sleep while they waited for the all-clear to return to their homes.

One year on, the people of Kincaidston are still haunted and recovering from that night. As time went on, the community demanded answers. Why did the explosion happen? What could be done to prevent such an event from happening again in the future? A recent Health and Safety Executive report revealed that the explosion was caused by corroded pipes running through the estate, which had been laid down by the predecessor to SGN. Before the report was published, SGN prioritised replacing all the old lead gas pipework that was laid in the area in the 1970s with new, safer plastic pipes. I ask that lessons be learned from the gas explosion in Kincaidston. We need to prioritise replacement of the old lead pipes with the new, safer plastic pipes as a matter of urgency throughout our communities.

I raise the incident in Kincaidston because it shows that gas is something to be treated with respect and with caution. Failure to do that could result in life-changing consequences. We go to turn on our heating or hot water without thinking about it. The problem is that we often do not realise how dangerous gas can be until it is too late.

Although the Kincaidston explosion was unrelated to the residents' activities, we can still take important lessons from that night. I echo the statements that have already been made. If

someone smells gas, they should shut off the gas emergency control valve, open the doors and windows to let fresh air in, extinguish all naked flames and not smoke. They should not operate electrical switches, even to turn them off, and should call the gas emergency number, which is 0800 111999. I urge people to write that number down, save it on their phones and share it with family and friends. It is an emergency number that we should all remember.

We can also take important and easy steps to prevent gas leaks. We should have our gas appliances serviced and safety checked every year using a Gas Safe registered engineer. It is a small thing to do, but it will provide peace of mind and might save our lives.

17:30

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): As others have done, I thank Clare Adamson for lodging the motion for debate.

I also thank all members from around the chamber for their contributions on an important and life-saving matter. Whether we are talking about sudden and traumatic events such as the one that Siobhan Brown described—thankfully, they are rare but they are nonetheless traumatic—or the slower, invisible dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, which Clare Adamson and others mentioned, the whole debate is a reminder of how important and potentially life-saving it is to take gas seriously.

Gas safety week is an annual week that provides a platform for the industry, consumer organisations and individuals across the UK to raise the public's awareness of gas safety issues and the importance of taking care of gas appliances. It is co-ordinated by the Gas Safe Register, which administers the official list of gas engineers who are legally allowed to work on gas appliances.

As Clare Adamson mentioned and all members appreciate, the Queen's death meant that the Gas Safe Register did not undertake much of the gas safety week activity as planned. However, despite some scaling back of the planned activity this year, gas safety week has been active since 2011 and has gone from strength to strength in engaging the wider public in innovative ways, as the motion rightly sets out. I commend all that work and everyone who has been involved in it. They have our thanks for keeping people safe.

Clare Adamson is also right to ask the Government to consider what more we can do to ensure that support and prevention work is targeted at the people who need it most, including the households that face the most severe cost of

living impacts. I will certainly take that up and have a discussion with colleagues about it. It might be that there is a role not only for Government but for industry and the third sector in helping to make that happen.

Members will be aware that my role as minister with responsibility for heat in buildings and for zero-carbon buildings makes me minister for the post-gas future. My job, the Scottish Government's priority and, indeed, a priority for all of us who supported Scotland's ambitious and essential climate targets is to support households and businesses to move not only towards more energy-efficient buildings but away from gas and towards zero-carbon sources of energy.

As things stand, gas plays a significant part in how we heat our homes and buildings and how we cook, so it is important that, even as we accelerate the transition towards decarbonised homes, gas safety remains on our agenda all year round, not only during gas safety week. However, it is not always at the front of our minds as individuals and householders, so the importance of having gas appliances safely checked by Gas Safe engineers at least once a year cannot be overestimated. If left unchecked, poorly serviced gas appliances can cause gas leaks, fires, explosions and carbon monoxide poisoning.

This year, gas safety week focused on the steps that consumers can take themselves to ensure that they stay safe. Those include some things that we should not do. For example, we should not attempt do-it-yourself work on gas appliances. We should also be aware of the warning signs of unsafe appliances, such as dark or sooty staining. It is also worth reiterating the important positive actions that people can take to ensure that they remain safe.

A faulty gas appliance can cause injury or death and it is important to ensure that all appliances and associated equipment are safe to use. They should be regularly serviced by qualified, competent gas engineers who are Gas Safe registered. Only Gas Safe registered engineers can service gas appliances and equipment, including boilers, portable heating or lighting, gas fires and cooking appliances. Of course, no one must ever use gas appliances that they think might be faulty, and everyone must ensure that vents, grilles and flues are kept free from obstruction.

As we have heard, faulty appliances and restricted ventilation can lead to a dangerous build-up of carbon monoxide in the home. As Clare Adamson said, fitting and maintaining a carbon monoxide detector can give people a warning of a faulty appliance. That is why the Scottish Government made it a legal requirement to include a carbon monoxide detector in any room with a carbon-fuelled appliance. I strongly

encourage everyone to look into fitting such a detector as soon as possible, if they have not yet done so.

As members will be aware, gas safety legislation is reserved to the UK Government and applies across the UK, covering a wide range of gas safety issues. Regulation 36 of the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 sets out the statutory duty for annual gas safety inspections. As is the case in each UK Administration, our building regulations also set out requirements relevant to the initial installation of gas appliances. The person who is responsible for the building is required to ensure that any new combustion appliance is installed to operate safely. Our support and guidance cites the UK legislation that is applicable to the installation of gas-fired appliances and the competence of the installers.

As Mark Griffin mentioned, for those who live in rented accommodation—whether social or private—landlords are responsible for ensuring that necessary safety checks are carried out. Our proposals on a new deal for tenants show our determination to continue to strengthen the position for tenants in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's legislation on prescribed information for private landlords began on 16 September 2019. It means that, when a landlord is either applying online for registration for the first time or renewing their registration online, they will be required to complete questions on gas safety certification.

Landlords have three main responsibilities: to carry out gas safety checks every year; to provide the tenant with a copy of the annual gas safety certificate; and to ensure the continued safety of pipework, appliances and flues by carrying out maintenance work. It is a legal requirement for landlords to provide a gas safety certificate for their property for the current year, and to check and retain the certificates for the previous two years. The certificate confirms that the gas installation is safe and that all gas appliances are safe and free from danger.

We have heard about the various regulations that are in place to protect consumers. Those play a vital role, but it is also important to recognise the role of supporting consumers to protect themselves. Householders must remember that they should use only engineers who are on the Gas Safe Register, which is easily accessible online and can be used to find a local registered business or to check whether a particular business is on the register.

Initiatives such as gas safety week have a vital role to play in supporting consumers in making wise choices when they have work done on gas

appliances. Once more, I put on record the Government's sincere thanks to all who have supported gas safety week, and I hope that people will make use of the available material and ensure that their gas appliances are checked over by Gas Safe engineers, so that they and their family members are safe.

Meeting closed at 17:38.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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