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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 8 November 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Dr Maureen Sier, director of Interfaith Scotland.

Dr Maureen Sier (Interfaith Scotland):

Scottish interfaith week begins on Sunday. It is a festival when communities come together to celebrate Scotland's rich spiritual story. Every year, Interfaith Scotland chooses a theme for the week, and this year's theme of storytelling was chosen because it is Scotland's year of stories.

The power of storytelling, for humanity, goes back to the beginning of time and transcends many boundaries. In addition to sharing stories as a way to connect with each other, our doing so can facilitate the healing process for ourselves and those we share our stories with. I have personally found the stories from my own faith tradition as a Baha'i enhancing and incredibly empowering. But.

I first became aware of the power of storytelling to heal in 2014. I had just picked up a survivor of the Cambodian genocide from Glasgow airport. Arn Chorn Pond was from a family of musicians, all of whom were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Arn was kept alive and forced to play music as a young boy while people were being murdered. His story of survival is both harrowing and humbling. On that car journey from Glasgow airport, I asked Arn if music helped him heal—he was a musician. He looked at me very intently and then said something that has remained with me ever since:

“The only thing that heals me is telling my story.”

He then spoke of how, during the horrific years of the genocide, he learned to completely block his feelings in order to survive. To weep or cry or show feelings meant certain death. For Arn, the only release from pain and grief was to speak his truth, share his story and feel himself and others transformed by the power of that story.

Using storytelling as a vehicle for truth telling is captured in this wee anecdote:

“Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers' doors and was readily welcomed into the people's houses. They

invited her to eat at their table and warm herself by their fire.”

What stories can you share during Scottish interfaith week 2022?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Dr Sier.

Point of Order

14:04

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on a matter that I believe cuts to the heart of the Parliament's standing. I hope it is not controversial to say that the truth is essential to the way that Government interacts with the people and with the Parliament.

Scottish National Party ministers and MSPs have been repeating the claim made by the First Minister on 29 September that 98.8 per cent of our energy was from renewable sources. The First Minister corrected her incorrect claim quietly in the *Official Report*, but it remained inaccurate.

I sought clarification from the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority, who has written to me. He states that the First Minister's clarification is incorrect. The First Minister will no doubt seek to clarify that her clarification was wrong. The figure is, for the record, 63.1 per cent.

Whether the First Minister misled Parliament on purpose or otherwise is a matter for her conscience, but she has a responsibility, as we all do, to be accurate. When ministers say things to the Parliament that are untrue, correcting the *Official Report* behind the scenes, and on the quiet, is not enough. Furthermore, the *Official Report* should not be treated by ministers like a "Nineteen Eighty-Four" ministry of truth that gives ministers a get-out-of-jail-free card for mistaken or misleading statements.

Once the misleading statement is made, it is in the public domain, through the Scottish Parliament TV archive, and through the way that we all use the videos of these sessions. I very much doubt that many people check that everything that was said in the chamber is reflected in the *Official Report*.

It has been said in the past that if you tell a lie big enough and repeat it often enough, people will believe it—[*Interruption.*]

The truth is important, despite the heckling from members on the SNP benches.

Presiding Officer, what powers do you have to compel ministers, especially the First Minister, to come to the chamber and clarify in person, verbally, when they have made a mistake? What powers does the Parliament have to allow oral statements in the chamber to correct mistakes and misleading information? We must find a way to avoid the perception that lies are being told for political ends.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Kerr for his point of order. I remind all members that we have a duty to treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times. I would certainly prefer it if we did not have suggestions that members were treating one another in the way that Mr Kerr describes.

Mr Kerr will be aware—as will all members—that members have a personal responsibility for ensuring that their contributions in proceedings are accurate. In the event that a member becomes aware that they have provided inaccurate information, they can seek to make use of the existing corrections mechanism.

Mr Kerr asked what powers the Presiding Officer might have. This Parliament has previously agreed a mechanism and appropriate steps to make other members aware when a correction has been made. Corrections are highlighted in the *Business Bulletin* and on the Parliament's website to ensure transparency around the use of the mechanism.

The procedure also allows for a member to seek to make a statement to the Parliament if they realise that a significant error has been made. The decision on whether or not to seek to make such a statement is a matter for the member concerned.

Topical Question Time

14:08

Fireworks and Pyrotechnics (Misuse)

1. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of misuse of fireworks and pyrotechnics on bonfire night. (S6T-00942)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): The disorder and thuggery that occurred on and around bonfire night, which involved not just fireworks and pyrotechnics but bricks and even petrol bombs, was sickening. I express my heartfelt thanks to our emergency services for their dedication and bravery in working in appalling situations to keep our communities as safe as possible.

I welcome the fact that Police Scotland has made it clear that investigations are on-going and that it aims to bring the culprits to justice. I urge any member of the public who has relevant information to get in touch with the police, either directly or anonymously through Crimestoppers.

Katy Clark: Thank you. I warmly welcome the minister to her new role and associate myself with her comments about the emergency services.

Between 2016 and 2020, there were only four solemn and 16 summary firework convictions, and there were no firework convictions whatever in 2020-21. The way in which the Scottish Government has constructed its proposed licensing scheme makes it even more important that there are convictions. How will the minister ensure that there are convictions arising from this year's events?

Elena Whitham: I thank Katy Clark for her question and her welcome.

There is no equivocation on the part of the Scottish Government. Where there is offending of the type that has been seen over recent days, we will fully support Police Scotland in pursuing investigations, and, where sufficient evidence is obtained, using its powers appropriately to make arrests and bring charges.

It is difficult to get an entirely comprehensive picture of convictions because of the range of common-law and statutory offences that may be relevant.

This is also a matter for the courts, and it would be wrong of ministers to criticise or second-guess the sentences that the courts impose, as only the courts have all the weighted evidence in front of them. I am clear, however, that the courts have extensive sentencing powers in this area, under a

range of common-law as well as statutory provisions, and I will be keeping a close eye on how things develop.

Katy Clark: When the Criminal Justice Committee considered the recent fireworks legislation, there was considerable discussion about how people might bypass the licensing system by buying online or on the black market. Will the minister take steps to find out where the fireworks that were misused came from and whether they were bought in a shop or online or obtained elsewhere?

Once there has been a full investigation into the circumstances of this year's events, will the minister ensure that there is a full report to Parliament?

Elena Whitham: Although, at this point, we are not aware of any clear evidence to suggest that there are a lot of black market sales and that it is widespread issue, we know that there have been isolated incidents involving the supply of illicit firework products. Enforcement agencies have well-established processes in place to tackle black market sales. Every year, there is a big multi-agency planning operation to identify and tackle emerging issues, involving Police Scotland, Trading Standards Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

I plan to work closely with enforcement bodies to monitor illicit firework sales in Scotland. As part of that, the Scottish Government has funded Trading Standards Scotland to undertake a fireworks enforcement engagement project with retailers, building on the success of similar projects last year. I will keep a close eye on that and come back to Parliament on it.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): It is important that we acknowledge the appalling behaviour by some over the bonfire weekend, including during the incident in the Sighthill park area of my constituency. However, we should also note that the number of calls that the police received relating to such behaviour was down from 581 last year to 483 this year—a 17 per cent reduction. With that in mind, I ask the minister what work was carried out by the Scottish Government and partners in preparation for the bonfire night period.

Elena Whitham: Although I welcome the year-on-year reduction in the numbers—the 17 per cent reduction is very welcome—it is absolutely imperative that we ensure that bonfire night does not happen again as it did, because it was intolerable. We support the vast amount of multi-agency partnership work that is undertaken by our emergency services, local authorities and wider community safety partners in preparation for the bonfire night period.

On bonfire night itself, I attended the operation moonbeam gold command room in Bilston Glen to witness the effectiveness of the partnership working and see the scale of the challenge faced as events unfolded in real time, and I cannot praise the police and partners enough. Planning and preparation for bonfire night includes prevention and diversionary work in local communities by a range of partners, particularly in the areas most affected by fireworks, where there is serious and multiple deprivation.

With partners, the Scottish Government has also launched our three long-standing national public awareness-raising campaigns to enhance the messaging on the new proxy supply offence. Again, we have funded Trading Standards Scotland colleagues so that they are better able to promote and enforce the new legislation around sales.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): A constituent of mine wrote to me yesterday to express their concern about the disgraceful scenes across Edinburgh at the weekend, after violence erupted and police were injured in petrol bomb attacks. A substantial number of youths terrorised residents by throwing fireworks at innocent car drivers and incendiary devices at emergency response vehicles. Police vehicles were attacked and officers suffered facial and eye injuries. That utterly disgraceful behaviour cannot be repeated.

The Scottish National Party rushed through the Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Bill in June but has done nothing to address community safety concerns. Will the minister commit to reversing the SNP budget cuts to the police to ensure that our officers have the resources to tackle that type of disorder and keep our communities safe?

Elena Whitham: Although I associate myself with Sue Webber's comments on the intolerable behaviour that we saw, at this point in time we have only a resource spending review in front of us; we do not have a budget set. I will keep a close eye on the situation, because our communities cannot endure what we saw last weekend. We need to have in place enough resources to do the early intervention and preventative work that we need to do in communities where there is multiple deprivation and we see a rise in such cases.

I will get back to the member on the issue.

Avian Influenza

2. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to mitigate the threat of avian influenza outbreaks among domestic poultry

populations, in light of its impact on wild bird populations in Scotland. (S6T-00951)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government has already taken steps to mitigate the threat of avian influenza in the wider domestic populations through the introduction of the national avian influenza prevention zone on 17 October, which made it a legal requirement that all bird keepers follow strict biosecurity measures to protect their flocks. That was in response to a risk assessment and follows the worst outbreak of the disease on record.

Rachael Hamilton: Birds do not stop at borders between Scotland and England. As long as that is the case, nor will avian flu. The same threat that exists south of the border, which the United Kingdom Government has acted decisively to mitigate, exists here, in Scotland. This is the largest outbreak of avian influenza that the UK has ever seen: since October 2021, there have been more than 200 cases and many culls, according to a freedom of information request from *The Ferret*. Why is the cabinet secretary just monitoring when England is acting decisively?

Mairi Gougeon: I do not think that that is a fair assessment of the situation at all. I hope that the member appreciates that we take decisions on the basis of the best available scientific advice and expertise that we have in the Scottish Government, including through our chief veterinary officer.

The member is referring to the mandatory housing order that was implemented in England this week, but any decision to require mandatory housing has to be based on risk and animal health and welfare concerns, including the positive and negative impacts that housing otherwise free-range birds might have. That is not a simple or light undertaking.

As the member and the chamber will be aware, the situation is being kept under constant review. The decision on whether a housing order will be introduced is a matter for Scotland's chief veterinary officer, and it will follow the analysis of a wide range of available evidence.

Rachael Hamilton: NFU Scotland has labelled the Scottish Government's response "wholly inadequate". As we speak, more outbreaks are being confirmed across the country, in Aberdeenshire and Orkney. There has also been reported striking of wild birds in distress in my constituency in the Scottish Borders.

Evidence shows that housing flocks would reduce the risk of birds being infected. Birds are no respecters of borders, so the Scottish Government must explain the basis for its decision, given the importance to businesses

approaching the hugely significant Christmas market and the on-going devastating loss of wild birds on the coast and in our countryside.

Mairi Gougeon: I emphasise that I completely appreciate the member's concerns. I have heard those calls from the NFUS and I have had those discussions. I completely understand how concerning the situation must be for poultry keepers in Scotland, given the number of challenges that the industry faces as a whole.

As I said in my previous response, this is not a simple or light undertaking and it needs to be based on scientific analysis and the evidence that we have. The member talked about the number of outbreaks that we are seeing across the UK. There have been a number of outbreaks in England—I believe that the latest figure is 107—and we have seen six in Scotland. The CVOs in Wales and Northern Ireland have not taken the decision to introduce a mandatory housing order.

The types of issues that we have to consider when that decision is taken include the geographical distribution of poultry cases, epidemiological reports on risk pathways and risk assessments of disease risk level, alongside case numbers and the geographical distribution of wild bird findings. Those are just some of the considerations that the CVO and her team have to look at when making such decisions.

I hope that the member will appreciate that we depend on the advice of the chief veterinary officer, the expertise of those involved and the scientific analysis that is undertaken when we are looking to make these decisions.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): This is clearly a worrying time for poultry farmers. My understanding, though, is that keeping birds indoors is not a silver bullet for combating avian influenza. The recent comments of the chief veterinary officer give us assurance that Scotland's approach to the situation is being led by the evidence.

Will the cabinet secretary set out some detail of how other methods to prevent direct and indirect contact between flocks and wild birds could help to protect poultry from the disease?

Mairi Gougeon: The Scottish Government has published some guidance, which was developed jointly with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Welsh Government, on our gov.scot web pages. It includes guidance on biosecurity and preventing impacts on the welfare of poultry and captive birds. The advice is for all keepers of captive birds and poultry, including game birds, waterfowl and pet birds. The Government has also published an avian influenza prevention zone self-assessment checklist.

It is important to emphasise some of the key requirements that we would be looking for keepers to follow. Those include checking the integrity of buildings where birds are kept for any defects that could potentially allow water ingress or other contamination; fencing off or netting any ponds, standing water or waterlogged land within range to prevent access by poultry or other captive birds; and using a Government-approved disinfectant at the correct concentration.

All of that advice, which has been developed jointly, is available on our web pages. I encourage keepers to look at it.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The impact on the poultry sector of the worst-ever avian flu outbreak has been devastating, with more than 90,000 hens alone culled. With new cases still emerging, that number will rise, as will deaths among wild birds. However, the cabinet secretary has ruled out introducing a housing order at this time. We need to see robust implementation and monitoring of biosecurity standards.

There have also been worrying reports in England that avian flu has been found in game birds such as pheasants, which are reared in captivity and then released into the wild for hunting. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the likely number of pheasants that have died of avian flu and of whether their release has had any impact on spreading this deadly disease?

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to get back to the member with further information on that. I would, though, come back to the initial point that he made about the difference that excellent biosecurity measures make in this type of situation. Again, we have not ruled out a mandatory housing order; we are continuing to monitor the situation every day. That position could well change, and we would look to implement such an order, but we need to base what we do on analysis of the evidence that we have.

Agriculture Support and Food Security

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Mairi Gougeon on future agricultural support and food security in Scotland. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Today, I will set out clearly the approach that the Scottish Government will take in the coming years to reforming support for agriculture, and I will update Parliament on our food security work.

In March this year, I was delighted to announce Scotland's vision for agriculture, which is a vision that has food production at its heart. It makes clear our support for farmers and crofters in providing the country with healthy, nutritious food, while also ensuring that Scotland meets its world-leading climate and nature restoration outcomes. From the outset, there is a point of principle that I wish to make clear: there is no contradiction between high-quality food production and producing it in a way that delivers for climate and nature. That was clear in the reports of the farmer-led groups, which are the blueprint for the detail in our future policy.

Our vision for agriculture is rooted in that understanding. It sets out proudly our ambition that our producers, and so our nation, are recognised as global leaders in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. Since publishing our vision, we have, of course, seen the implications of the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Although immediate supplies of food are secure, we continue to remain concerned—as are most countries—about the production, supply and price of produce, and the need to do more to protect and support our food and drink sector.

Through the challenges of Brexit, Covid-19 and now the on-going war in Ukraine, we have seen just how resilient the food sector is. However, it continues to face significant challenges that put at risk its ability to provide accessible and affordable produce.

Earlier this year, together with industry, I set up a short-life food security and supply task force to monitor, identify and respond to any potential disruption to food security and supply resulting from the impact of the on-going conflict in Ukraine. The final report of the task force, which was published on 23 June, contained a series of recommendations. We have worked since then to deliver on those recommendations.

We have already delivered a new food and drink-focused business support landing page, which went live on 14 July, and the Scottish Government and Food Standards Scotland have opened engagement with the Groceries Code Adjudicator, having met with it in the summer.

Another key recommendation in the report was the establishment of a dedicated food security unit, which we reaffirmed our commitment to in this year's programme for government. The unit is now being established in the Scottish Government, with a view to monitoring on-going supply chain vulnerabilities and linking with future food security work.

The task force also recognised that the United Kingdom Government holds many of the levers that could help to address the issues that currently affect the food and drink sector, among the most significant of which are CO₂ shortages and sharp increases in fertiliser, energy and fuel costs. It was recommended that the Scottish Government should raise those matters with the UK Government, and I subsequently wrote to the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but there has been no response to that communication to date. I have since raised those critical matters again with the latest secretary of state, Thérèse Coffey, and I will continue to urge the UK Government to take immediate action.

The task force report outlined that there could be further meetings of the group in a monitoring capacity. We met on 11 October, and a further meeting will be arranged in the coming months. I will, of course, keep Parliament updated as we make further progress on the task force's recommendations.

Sustainable food production is an outcome that we know can be achieved only by working with our producers, rural Scotland and our nation more broadly. That thinking is at the heart of all that we do. The task force that I co-chaired with the chief executive of Scotland Food & Drink exemplified that joined-up Government and industry approach. Likewise, I have been delighted to have the president of NFU Scotland as my co-chair of the agriculture reform implementation oversight board since its inception last August.

That partnership work is a driving force of our national test programme. For example, in track 1 of the programme, on preparing for sustainable farming, we listened to the needs of the industry, and are supporting businesses to undertake carbon audits and soil sampling. Those elements are live and open for claims, and we know from discussion with the sector that many farms are already engaging in that work.

We will add measures to our national test programme as it develops in the coming years, including measures to improve animal health and biodiversity. Those tools help farmers and crofters to prepare for the coming changes by creating a baseline from which they can build environmentally and economically resilient businesses.

Similarly, in the second track of the NTP, on testing actions for sustainable farming, we are working with farmers and crofters across Scotland and taking the measures presented by the farmer-led groups to establish future conditions for support that really can and will work.

We launched a public consultation on our proposals for a future agriculture bill in August, and the Scottish Government is now hosting in-person and online events across the country to ensure that we hear from all who wish to contribute to the consultation on the bill and the powers that are needed to deliver our vision. I know from those events, from the rally at Parliament last week and from listening to farmers and crofters directly that there is a real desire to understand more about the next steps and discuss the detail.

Our consultation outlines the model for future support payments and sets out a four-tier support system of base support payments and enhanced, elective and complementary support tiers, which will provide comprehensive powers to support our food producers to farm in a sustainable and regenerative way. However, the climate and nature crises that we face mean that we cannot simply wait for the implementation of those new powers. That is why we are already progressing and testing our proposed approach through our national test programme and delivering action on farm today.

We will go further than that. I confirm today that I will deliver new conditionality under existing powers for the 2025 single application form calendar year. That will use our existing agriculture support schemes to introduce enhanced conditionality that is built directly on the work of the farmer-led groups. It will also deliver on our manifesto commitment and the statement in our vision for agriculture on integrating enhanced conditionality of at least half of all funding by 2025. I am therefore signalling my intention to Parliament to bring forward legislation to amend the 2020 act to enable the first part of the transition.

I turn to the new agriculture bill. Under the proposed bill powers, the enhanced payment will be our key mechanism to deliver positive outcomes for climate and for nature. It will also allow for those who are pioneering best practice right now to be recognised and rewarded. I know

that that is a concern. Many farmers and crofters have already been leading the way in the actions that they have been undertaking on farm, and it is only right and fair that that is recognised.

During the fortnight of the 27th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP27—it could not be more clear that we need to support our farmers and crofters to tackle climate change. Equally, as we approach the biodiversity COP15 in Montreal, the need to restore our natural environment is coming into ever sharper focus. We will soon publish a new biodiversity strategy that will set out our vision to 2045 and outcomes that are required to address the on-going decline in biodiversity.

It is for those reasons that I am prioritising the co-development of the enhanced element of the new framework. I will work with the industry to ensure that we get that right. It is my intention that that will be launched in 2026, using the powers that are proposed in the bill consultation. We will balance the ambition of that approach with the need to take the industry with us on the journey. That will not happen overnight, but it will reflect the sector's willingness to engage and our commitment to a just transition.

Once we have established the enhanced mechanism, we will seek to deliver further elements of the future support framework, including elective and complementary schemes, such as future incarnations of the agri-environment scheme and the Farm Advisory Service. Our approach means that the present payment regions will be kept as they are in the early part of the transition. I can confirm that we remain committed to reviewing the current three-region model to ensure that the tier 1 base payment is fit for purpose for the future.

I recognise that this statement does not answer all the queries that I have had about the exact detail of the schemes. More information will be made available over the coming months as we develop the proposals. However, we know that many farmers and crofters are already undertaking the necessary actions that we want to be taken now and for the future. I encourage farmers and crofters to engage with the support that is available to learn and find out more, regardless of where they are on their transformation journey. They should join the national test programme and look at our networks—the integrating trees network, the agriculture, biodiversity and climate change network, the farming for a better climate initiative and the Farm Advisory Service. Those networks and services offer peer-to-peer learning and support and show how, for example, improving soils, enhancing nature and adapting or changing practices have improved the efficiency, resilience and profitability of businesses.

I have set out the pathway to reform of agricultural support in Scotland. Scotland's vision for agriculture is about enabling the essential role that our food producers play in our food security and feeding our nation, in driving our rural economy and in ensuring that our world-renowned food and drink industry can deliver our climate and nature outcomes. Only our farmers, crofters and land managers can deliver those outcomes, and all of Scotland owes a debt of support to them. As we transition to the future, I reiterate my commitments that we will communicate clearly, will ensure that there is a just transition and that there are no cliff edges in support, and will continue to develop the details with our farmers and crofters.

Finally, I reiterate my commitment and the Scottish Government's commitment that we will continue to support our nation's food producers.

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

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance sight of her statement.

Farmers provide the fantastic Scottish produce that we eat and enjoy, but that is not all: they are at the front lines of our efforts to tackle climate change. I am very pleased that the cabinet secretary acknowledged that in her statement. Innovation and well-meaning farmers are driving us towards becoming a net zero nation and protecting dwindling numbers of ground-nesting birds in Scotland.

However, the Scottish National Party-Green Government is holding Scottish farmers back from doing what they do best. It seems to be making decisions based on ideology, not reality. Over the past week, farmers have come to the doors of the Parliament, pleading with the Government to listen to them and give them the support that they urgently need. They are asking for details on the new agriculture bill, which will impact their work; they want to know why they cannot take advantage of safe gene-editing technology, given that farmers south of the border can do so; and they need to know what is happening with the future of farm payments.

I therefore ask the cabinet secretary: will she listen and give farmers clear answers, or will she go on ignoring Scotland's rural communities?

Mairi Gougeon: I refute those accusations. We are not ignoring communities; we are listening to them.

Rachael Hamilton was at the rally last week, as was I, and as were a number of MSPs from across

the parties, to listen to farmers and crofters. A key element of my role as cabinet secretary is to get out and meet farmers and crofters across the country, to hear their concerns about what they are experiencing. To be fair, I also outlined in my statement that we are listening to our farmers and crofters. I completely understand that point about wanting more details, which is why I emphasised in my statement that more details of the enhanced support mechanism will come out in due course.

Listening is a critical element of our development of future policy. As I made clear in my statement, we want to develop our future agricultural support system in conjunction with our farmers and crofters, because we want to make sure that we have a future support system that works for our food producers as well as delivering on all our targets for climate and nature. That is of critical importance to me in my role, and I will continue to do it.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

The clock is ticking towards the end of the transition period, and it is ticking when it comes to meeting our climate commitments. The only clock that seems to have stopped over the past six years has been the Government's. When it comes to post-Brexit agricultural support, we have had dither and delay, but not detail. Although the cabinet secretary has set out today an element of a timetable for change, we—and, more important, our farmers and crofters—still do not know what that change will mean.

The cabinet secretary has said that she will deliver new conditionality under existing powers, to meet the commitment to deliver 50 per cent environmental conditionality on direct payments for the 2025 single application form calendar year, but there is still no detail on what farmers and crofters will be expected to do to unlock that conditional support. When will individual businesses see the exact detail, so that they can plan and get on with the job of continuing to deliver good-quality food while meeting our climate commitments?

Mairi Gougeon: Today, we have taken an important step in setting out that timescale. I hope that that provides some certainty to the industry as to what will be coming—including changes—and when.

However, I also point to the part of my statement in which I talked in particular about going around the country to speak to farmers and crofters and see all the good practice that already exists. So many of our food producers are undertaking the practices that we want to see and doing what they can to lower emissions and

enhance nature and biodiversity on farm, producing food all the while.

That is also why we are running the national test programme. A key part of that programme is to get those who may not have started on that transformation journey to undertake carbon audits and soil testing, in order to get that baseline and to see where their business is starting from and what actions can be taken from that point. What we are rolling out through that programme will become the basis of conditionality for the future. As I said in my previous response, we will make those further details available in the coming months.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Amid the positivity of what the cabinet secretary has set out today, the elephant in the room—Brexite—is still there. Our trade in goods with the European Union was 12 per cent lower in 2021 because of Brexit and it has been reported that the cost of lost exports to the EU is more than £2.2 billion. The food and drink sector in Scotland has been blighted by the hard Brexit that has been pursued by the United Kingdom Government, and our agricultural industries are threatened by its consequences. How does the Scottish Government intend to provide certainty and clarity to those sectors, given the chaos that has been visited on them by the UK Government?

Mairi Gougeon: This has been a tumultuous time for the industry and we know that the UK Government's actions have exacerbated the issues that it faces.

From our analysis, we can see that our trade in goods with the EU was 12 per cent lower in 2021 because of Brexit. That is the cost of the choices that were made to remove Scotland from the world's biggest single market.

Members will no doubt be aware of the reports that came out last week revealing His Majesty's Revenue and Customs data that put a figure of more than £2.2 billion as the cost of lost exports to the EU.

We have seen a 52 per cent fall in exports of fruit and vegetables and a 25 per cent fall in exports of dairy and eggs in the first half of this year compared with the same period when we were in the single market.

Contrary to the shocking collateral damage to farming that the UK's actions have caused, my intention is to provide as much clarity and certainty as we can through our reform journey.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I have been part of a family farming partnership for more than 40 years.

Cabinet secretary, I welcome your statement, although it is woefully short on details. As you

know, farmers plan years in advance and they need to know about subsidy payments being made in 2025 now, not tomorrow. Let us see whether we can get an answer to my question. Will you confirm that all farmers will have access to all the potential agrifarming funding that replaces the single farm payment scheme, and that some will not be excluded from all that funding because they are not in priority areas or they do not have priority habitats? In the interest of brevity, I will happily accept a yes or no answer, cabinet secretary.

The Presiding Officer: I ask that members speak through the chair at all times, please.

Mairi Gougeon: Today, I am trying to set out that, in 2025, we will see a roll over of all those schemes. We have said—we set this out in our manifesto—that we will be introducing conditionality on at least half of those payments in 2025. That is exactly what we will be doing at that time.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Scottish Government has indicated its aim to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. High nature value agriculture is prevalent in places such as Uist in my constituency, where agricultural activities on the machair support such high levels of biodiversity. Given that, how can the Government support crofters in high nature value areas to ensure that they continue to work and support nature and biodiversity?

Mairi Gougeon: Much crofting land is recognised as being of high nature value. The traditional low-intensity management and the mixture of activities that are associated with crofting support a special range of species and habitats. One example of that is the internationally renowned machair of Uist.

Each year, through a range of support schemes that we have available, the Scottish Government invests heavily in croft businesses. By taking action to ensure that future support mechanisms complement one another, we can optimise the unique role that crofting plays in the sustainability of many rural and island communities and their landscapes.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to hear from the minister's statement that action is being taken to improve food security in Scotland, because increasing local food procurement will reduce our carbon emissions and our reliance on imports.

As highlighted by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, low pay and insecure work are endemic throughout our food supply chains. That issue must be addressed if we are to tackle food insecurity. Will the minister give a commitment that

improving pay and conditions for agricultural workers will be a condition of future agriculture support?

Mairi Gougeon: The member has raised some really important points. We have consulted on some of those proposals in our bill consultation. Obviously, I will not pre-empt the results of that consultation. I urge the member to take part in that. We are committed to fair work.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary clarify that we are discussing the development of enabling legislation that will give the industry the scope to respond to potential future challenges? NFU Scotland's director of policy, Jonnie Hall, previously said:

"Put simply, the Bill is not policy and it does not, and will not, set policy."

Will the cabinet secretary set out some of the advantages and flexibilities that the Scottish Government's approach allows for, to better support our hard-working food-producing farmers?

Mairi Gougeon: As I have outlined, we should consider the challenges from and impact of global shocks such as Brexit, the pandemic and the illegal invasion of Ukraine in recent years. Those have emphasised why we need an adaptive and flexible framework for the future. We do not know what technological changes or other events might take place in the future, so we must ensure that we have in place a payment system and support structure that can adapt to not just challenges but future opportunities.

I know that there has been some criticism of the approach of bringing forward proposals for enabling legislation, but it is right for the industry to have flexibility now and in the future in order to respond to the various pressures and challenges that we will face. That is what our consultation sets out.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Given that three quarters of Scotland's land is under agricultural management, our farmers and crofters will play an essential role in our national effort to prevent climate and nature breakdown. The enhanced payment will be key to supporting and incentivising their efforts. Is it not the case that stronger cross-compliance conditionality in tier 1 will mean that 100 per cent of agriculture payments will align behind the three goals of nature, climate and high-quality food production?

Mairi Gougeon: The support that we currently provide to farmers and crofters through basic payments already requires them, through cross-compliance and greening, to farm sustainably. Today, I have set out how we will go further in order to achieve the goal of high-quality food

production while restoring nature and tackling climate change.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): The Scottish farm business income estimates that were published in March this year show that more than half of farms have diversified activities that generate additional—and often essential—income for their businesses.

In the future, diversification projects could involve ways of increasing levels of on-farm biodiversity while maintaining production. To what extent might the enhanced payment support farmers in that regard?

Mairi Gougeon: As the member will be aware, and as I have outlined today, we are committed to shifting 50 per cent of direct payments to climate action and funding for on-farm nature restoration and enhancement by 2025. That will give farmers and crofters the opportunity to demonstrate the positive action that they are taking to address climate change and support nature. It will also reward the action that is already taking place, which is an important part of what I outlined today.

However, we will continue to offer elective payments for nature. We need to co-design the detail of the enhanced and elective payment tiers, and we want to support farmer choice and to promote, rather than constrain, opportunities.

As part of our national test programme, the testing actions for sustainable farming that I outlined look directly at what measures could form part of the enhanced payment tier. We are working with internal and external stakeholders to produce a suite of measures that might be appropriate conditions for an enhanced payment. Those include a range of biodiversity measures and animal health and welfare measures, which were co-designed with NatureScot. The measures will be refined using a multicriteria approach, and we will simultaneously be mindful of production and the impact on farm business income and sustainability. Subsequent stages of the programme will involve refining the measures and then assessing how they can best be implemented in a future framework.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome what has been said about the work of crofters and farmers who are already making the transition to more sustainable means, thereby addressing the climate and nature crises. However, I have heard serious concerns from those in the sector about the lack of detailed information, which is needed to make long-term plans for their future business.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise that, for aspiring young crofters and farmers, the lack of clarity might be hindering entry to the sector? Does she also recognise the anxiety that such

uncertainty causes and its impact more generally on the mental health and wellbeing of those in the agriculture community?

Mairi Gougeon: I completely understand those concerns, which is why, in my statement, I outlined another step on that journey and tried to set out the timescales and at least give clarity and certainty as to what people can expect in the next few years. I realise that that does not answer all the questions about further detail, and I acknowledged that in my statement. That is why I also said in my statement that we will be bringing forward more of the detail in the coming months.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I recently met a farmer from my constituency who advised me of his concerns about rising costs in operating his farm and producing beef and lamb. I am acutely aware that the main levers to ease that burden sit with the UK Government. When did the cabinet secretary last engage with DEFRA on the rising costs of farming and food production, which are causing great concern across the agriculture sector?

Mairi Gougeon: As I outlined in my statement, one of the key recommendations of the food security and supply task force was that the Scottish Government should raise those matters with the UK Government. On the back of that, I wrote to the DEFRA secretary of state to highlight that we had published the report, and I followed that up with other correspondence seeking a reply. We know that there have been a number of changes in the UK Government in that time, but we are yet to receive a response on those critical and urgent matters. I reassure the member and others across the chamber that I continue to press the UK Government on those matters, and I have already raised them with the new DEFRA secretary of state, Thérèse Coffey.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I welcome the mention of food security in the statement. It is critical that we get food security right, due to the war in Ukraine. However, the SNP-Green coalition is not taking food security seriously enough. Little or no clarity has been provided on its agriculture bill proposals, and there is certainly not enough clarity in the statement. It does nothing to address the total lack of clarity with regard to payments, and it raises more questions than answers, in the vacuum of information that already exists. We are all tired of hearing the Government saying that more details will be forthcoming. Did the SNP-Green Government learn nothing from last week's rally outside the Parliament, when farmers expressed their concerns? When will the Government prioritise our farmers and food security?

Mairi Gougeon: The Government has prioritised food security. I believe that we were one

of the only parts of the UK that established a task force specifically to consider the issue. In our vision for agriculture that we published earlier this year, high-quality food production is one of the key pillars, and it is a key part of our future support framework. As I have reiterated and emphasised in my statement, I was out at the rally that the member mentioned, and I listened to the farmers and crofters. I also listen to them when I travel across the country to speak to them. I understand the point about more detail, but we are committed to supporting the food producers in this country, including supporting them through the transition that I have set out the path towards today.

National Planning Framework 4

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Tom Arthur on national planning framework 4. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:53

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): Today marks world town planning day, so it seems particularly appropriate to be publishing the fourth national planning framework, or NPF4 as it is known, and associated documents in Parliament. Last year, when I published the draft framework, the world had come to Glasgow for COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties. Right now, many of the world’s political leaders are in Sharm El Sheikh at COP27—although some of them are more willing participants than others, it seems—with the focus on the global imperative to reduce emissions and to help society to prepare for, adapt to and mitigate climate change.

We have some very important decisions to make about our places locally, and about our contribution globally, and the framework demonstrates that Scotland will not shy away from that task. It confirms that we support sustainable development in Scotland. We are not compromising; indeed, we are fully committing to tackling the twin crises of climate and nature.

We could not have anticipated Russia invading Ukraine, nor the extent of Westminster mismanagement amplifying the costs crisis here in the UK. However, Scotland’s fully devolved reformed planning system is well placed to play a key role in helping us address all those challenges. The framework creates the foundation upon which to build the fairer, greener Scotland that we want to see for the benefit of future generations.

Members will recall the extensive conversation and debate that we had on the draft NPF4 through public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny last winter. I thank the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for its thorough and constructive report and members for their wider input from across the Parliament. I also thank members of the Cabinet and ministerial colleagues for their involvement in what has been a truly collaborative and cross-cutting Government endeavour.

I especially want to thank the many people and organisations who gave their time, experience and expertise to engage with us and help create an

NPF4 that reflects all our aspirations and which will help drive change. The wealth of evidence and opinion that they shared has guided our approach to revising NPF4 to produce the much clearer and stronger version that I have laid before Parliament today.

We engaged, we listened and we have responded. As a result, the revised version looks quite different from the draft. The changes respond directly to Parliament’s recommendations and stakeholder responses to the consultation, but the fundamental objectives have not changed and the policy intent remains. NPF4 is now more focused and, just as important, it is stronger where people told us that it needed to be.

We have substantially reworked the framework’s national spatial strategy, which sets out how our approach to planning and development will help achieve a net zero and sustainable Scotland by 2045. We have updated the strategy to reflect extensive comments on development priorities for different parts of Scotland. It recognises the unique contribution that each part of our country can make, enabling the national plan to be delivered locally, as appropriate.

The spatial strategy is now set out across three themes—“Sustainable Places”, “Liveable Places” and “Productive Places”—that better reflect the three pillars of sustainable development. We have restructured NPF4’s policy handbook to clarify expectations for local development plans and decisions on planning applications, and to bring greater confidence, predictability and consistency to decision making. We have also strengthened the language throughout the policies, directly responding to many people’s views that the use of words like “should” and “should not” left the policy intent lacking the necessary clarity and direction.

The final version makes it clear what is to be delivered, and how it will be delivered. It is now clear, through the weighting applied to different policies, that the climate and nature crises are the priority. That is reflected in a new policy called “Tackling the climate and nature crises”, which underpins all other policies in NPF4. There is now a clear expectation on the role that planning must play in delivering the expansion of renewable energy needed to realise the just transition from reliance on fossil fuels. Parliament specifically asked us to reflect on the views of the renewables industry, and the revised NPF4 now reflects the need to get behind the delivery of renewable energy to achieve net zero.

The planning system has a big part to play in both protecting and restoring biodiversity. That is a cross-cutting theme in the revised NPF4, and it means that new developments can include appropriate measures to conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity, including the creation of

strong nature networks. Our local places will need to support lower carbon living. We have also responded to queries about the practicality of embedding 20-minute neighbourhoods across Scotland, and we have revised that policy to support a broader and more flexible approach to living well locally.

However, tensions remain; indeed, they will always feature in planning to some extent. There is a balance to be struck in relation to protecting the landscape and promoting renewable energy developments. That will not be easy to achieve, and Scotland will look different in the future. People want liveable places with local services and thriving town centres and, as a Government, we want to cut car kilometres travelled by 20 per cent by 2030 to help cut transport emissions. However, many developments—in the retail, health and learning estates—are often still planned and made out of town.

Perhaps the biggest tension that emerged during the process was housing—and that tension remains, too. Sustainable, liveable and productive places look and feel very different and mean quite different things to different people and communities. That is perhaps most true when it comes to new housing and how we support the delivery of quality, affordable homes. Some people argued that our proposed figures would lead to too much house building, while others said that there would not be enough new housing.

I assure members that I considered all views carefully during the revision process. I determined to maintain a robust, evidence-based process for housing policy and targets. Let me be clear: this is about enabling development, not restricting it. The policy will ensure that housing delivery supports and is supported by democratically agreed local development plans.

Many other changes have been made in NPF4. I encourage members to read the explanatory report, which explains the changes in detail and sets out the rationale for them.

I hope that Parliament will approve the framework. I will, of course, make myself available to assist in that process, including by giving evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and engaging with groups or members who wish to discuss the framework's content.

The Parliament and Government have spent considerable time reforming our planning system and developing the policy framework. Now we must move to implementation. Therefore, I am pleased today to publish the first iteration of the NPF4 delivery programme. It will be an evolving document, updated as delivery progresses, to support strong alignment between planning,

infrastructure and place-based investment. The programme sets out how we will monitor and evaluate NPF4's impact and how we will learn, progress and deliver over the years to come.

NPF4 does not stand alone—nor should it. It provides a crucial underpinning to strategic Government objectives and policies. Planning provides the base on which to deliver on those priorities, but delivery cannot be the sole responsibility of Government. Many aspects require investment by a range of partners, including the private sector. NPF4 can and will be supported by a range of funding and finance solutions, which will put the three pillars of sustainable development into practice. Working together will be key, and I am therefore announcing the establishment of a new planning, infrastructure and place advisory group to build collaboration, realise opportunities, identify barriers to delivery and strengthen the alignment of NPF4 with our plans and investment in place and infrastructure.

There is no doubt that delivering on the new framework will be challenging, given the current severe financial constraints. I am particularly alert to the pressures on planning authorities, which will now be expected to take NPF4 and develop local plans that flow from it. However, NPF4 will streamline current practice and make it more consistent, freeing up resource to take us in a new and bold direction. Such a shift in culture and approach will not be without its challenges, so it is vital that authorities feel supported and that we work together to deliver the framework. Let me be clear, though: our statutory and moral obligations to tackle climate change mean that change is necessary, urgent and desirable.

There is international interest in what NPF4 represents and seeks to achieve for Scotland. In June, I attended the World Urban Forum in Poland, which is a gathering of Governments to discuss the future of sustainable development. Everyone is in the space that we are in, but few are as advanced as we are in Scotland in putting planning and the sustainable development of our places at the heart of all that we do.

The planning profession is committed globally to addressing climate change and making better places in which people can live, work and play, but planners cannot achieve that on their own. Here in Scotland, we now have the framework that we need to enable planning to deliver the change that we seek—but only if everyone who has an interest in the design and creation of the spaces and places of Scotland commits to delivering on its policies and outcomes.

Today marks the end of the beginning of a process that shows that Scotland will not compromise on climate change and that we are

determined to plan differently now, so that future generations get to live in a fairer, greener Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement and for a 160-page document to read in 50 minutes. I welcome many of the changes that he has outlined and the fact that he has taken on board many of the constructive proposals that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee put forward. That should be put on the record.

The number of new homes built in Scotland has fallen by 25 per cent over the past decade, at a time when previous national planning frameworks were meant to help deliver housing targets. In the past decade, Scotland has had the lowest number of new builds completed in any decade since during world war 2. The nation faces a housing crisis, especially in the capital. It is therefore essential that we see the homes that Scotland needs being built.

Access to land is an issue that I do not think has been fully addressed in the revised draft. I put to the minister the need to create a mechanism to address future land supply issues, particularly in areas such as the capital. The majority of land being suggested in local plans as suitable for brownfield development is already in use by businesses. I ask the minister what steps will be taken beyond that suggestion to help us adapt to situations in which land for housing development is not forthcoming?

The minister mentioned planning authorities, which face increased responsibilities and serious financial pressures. How will ministers ensure that local authorities actually have the staff and resources needed to deliver NPF4?

Tom Arthur: I welcome the member's support for the changes that we have made in response to the report by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

To touch on the member's final question, the issue of resourcing is absolutely critical. I said that a year ago when I introduced the draft framework to Parliament. We must ensure that our planning authorities, along with our other partners, are capable of delivering. We have taken a number of actions. We increased planning fees from April this year, which is providing additional resource. There is evidence to suggest that that resource is feeding directly into planning departments. Through the high-level group, we have also worked with partners such as Heads of Planning

Scotland and the Royal Town Planning Institute to develop the future planners project to address the number of people in the profession, to encourage more people into it and to ensure that they are fully equipped with the skills that they need. That is a live issue.

We should note that the challenge of recruiting and retaining planners is not unique to Scotland. That does not excuse us from our responsibility to address the issue, but we are all aware that that challenge is echoed in many other professions. We need to retain people within the profession but also to attract more people into it. The national planning framework and the ambitions in the document create an opportunity to encourage more young people to go into the profession and to make them think that shaping our places as part of the moral imperative to reach net zero by 2045 is a great thing to be involved in.

I recognise that housing is a highly contentious issue. We have updated policy 16 on quality homes. It is important to recognise that that will have a crucial role in local development plans. We have set a minimum through the all-tenure housing land requirements, but we expect local planning authorities to go beyond that in their land allocations. We want to see a plan-led system. That is why it is so important for local planning authorities to allocate land in advance through their local development plans, and for there to be clarity about that.

We have also set out and clarified policies regarding the issue that the member raised of when development and build-out is happening quicker than anticipated. That is provided for within the revised planning policy. I appreciate that there is a lot of material to read, but I encourage the member to read the explanatory report, which contains quite a detailed commentary demonstrating how we have taken on board and considered the comments that we received about those matters and how that feeds into the revised policy. I would be happy to discuss that with the member in more detail in the coming weeks.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the work done by the minister and by his officials and stakeholders to get the framework to this final draft stage and look forward to scrutinising it in more detail in committee.

I welcome the minister's commitment to maintaining a robust and evidenced-based process on housing policy and targets. Why has the Government dismissed concerns about the all-tenure housing targets being based on historical, secondary data gathered through the housing need and demand assessment process? I have been told that up to 86,000 households have not been counted because they are either concealed or overcrowded, but, crucially, do not come into

the category of being both. The Resolution Foundation reckons that about 1 million are uncounted across England for similar reasons, so the problem is not unique to Scotland.

The targets in the framework are minimums, but local authorities do not have the resources to undertake household surveys when they prepare their local development plans. Will the minister instruct and fund local authorities to undertake household surveys to properly determine demand in their areas and meet the housing need that we know is there?

Tom Arthur: I thank Mr Griffin for his contribution. I welcome his recognition of the work that has gone into responding to the consultation. It is important to stress, as I did in my answer to Mr Briggs—I appreciate that Mr Griffin acknowledged this—that the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement is a minimum and we expect planning authorities, in identifying their housing land requirements, to go beyond that.

However, we need to have a robust, evidence-based approach, and the housing need and demand assessment is the optimum tool that we have at our disposal. Indeed, it is a tool that other jurisdictions have been looking at and applying in their policy making.

Following the adoption of NPF4, subject to the Parliament's agreement, the regulations will be introduced for local development plans. I am very keen to work with planning authorities to ensure that they are fully resourced to carry out their work on both development management and development planning.

I made reference to what we have done on planning fees. An area that we are actively looking at around resourcing is full cost recovery. That is a complex area and there is potential for unintended consequences, but I am directly engaging with planning authorities on it through the high-level group. I am happy to keep Parliament updated on that and to provide the member with more information and detail if he is interested.

It is important to recognise that we need a planned system. We have set the numbers for the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement, but it is for local planning authorities, in devising, developing and implementing their local development plans, to go beyond that, based on evidence that they are best placed to make a judgment on.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The revised NPF4 uses tighter policy language than the draft, following the minister's proactive response to recommendations that were made during the consultation period. Can he explain what effect that strengthened policy wording will have on the delivery of NPF4?

Tom Arthur: I thank the member for her question. In response to stakeholder views, we have, in the revised version, restructured the document to make it easier to navigate and understand. That addressed a key issue that was raised by stakeholders and the committee.

The wording has been refined and clarified and the structure and layout have been made more user friendly with the aim of bringing greater predictability to planning decisions. The provision of clarity of intent across the themes and policies will allow the Government and planning authorities to provide investors with certainty, but also to give communities confidence in the system and indeed to give decision makers greater clarity on the policy intent.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Retail Consortium has raised concerns that the framework would in effect ban all out-of-town retail development. Can the minister confirm that local decision makers will have the flexibility and ability to approve retail developments that are more appropriately sited in out-of-town locations, such as garden centres and agricultural merchants? I cannot see anything in policy 28 that would allow that.

Tom Arthur: The member raises a very important point. I note that the particular issue that he highlights is recognised in the national planning framework 4. From memory, the policy on green belts allows for the accommodation of limited types of development there. We recognise that that is a distinct category of retail, and it is reflected in NPF4.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted with the proposals in the framework, and particularly those on support for renewables. As we can see, circumstances in the world around us can change very quickly.

How does the Scottish Government intend to monitor and evaluate the key objectives that are highlighted in NPF4? What can he say about the delivery plan being a live document that will continue to develop?

Tom Arthur: Monitoring and evaluation is already an important part of the planning system in Scotland. As I indicated in my statement, we fully recognise the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation in assessing the impact and performance of the NPF over time. That is why I have also published today the first iteration of the delivery programme, which sets out how we will work to do that. We also link the monitoring of NPF4 to wider work on assessing and improving planning performance as we move to a more outcomes-focused system.

As part of that, we are continuing our engagement and collaboration with a range of

stakeholders, including through the high-level group on planning performance, so as to keep our focus on positive planning outcomes through NPF4. I stress the point about the delivery plan being a first iteration. We will very much welcome comment and feedback from stakeholders as we take the plan forward.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The minister said that

“Scotland’s fully devolved reformed planning system is well placed to play a key role in helping”

to address the challenges. However, as he knows, Scotland’s planning departments are underresourced, understaffed, underfinanced, undervalued and struggling to cope.

I was grateful that the minister came to Dunfermline and met representatives of more than 100 community councils in Fife—we had a really good session. One of the main conclusions from all the community councils represented was that planning services are struggling now. How on earth are they going to deliver on the present ambition?

Will the minister get audits done on every planning service in Scotland and then publish them? If we do not know the extent of the problems and challenges, we will not fix them.

Tom Arthur: I thank Mr Rowley for his question and for the invitation to the event that he hosted in Dunfermline. I was very grateful for the opportunity to go along, and I found it a very productive morning. I certainly got a lot out of it. He is absolutely right to raise the issue of resource, and I am conscious that that is a concern for many members.

I do not want to repeat the points that I made earlier about the work that we are doing with the high-level group and on the increase in fees and full cost recovery. We are also considering performance. I recognise that, if NPF4 is going to deliver on the ambitions that have been set, as we all want it to do, we need a high-performing planning system, we need planners to feel valued and we need more people going into the profession. I assure the member that I am absolutely committed to working to achieve that. It will not be easy and there will be no overnight fixes, but I am committed to continued engagement with the planning profession to achieve that. I am more than happy to engage with the member on specific proposals about how we can take that agenda forward.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Can the minister say a bit more about how NPF4 will reshape places for local people and, in doing so, assist with Scotland’s response to the climate emergency?

Tom Arthur: NPF4 puts climate change at the front and centre of our planning system while tackling long-standing challenges and inequalities. The six core spatial principles include local living, which is about improving our places to support health and wellbeing through ensuring easy access to services, green space, learning, work and recreation. The 20-minute neighbourhood concept, which is at the core of that, facilitates delivery of the place principle while providing compact growth, promoting town centres, encouraging the reuse of assets and reducing the need to travel unsustainably. The approach to local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods is not designed as a template, but it is expected to be applied according to the circumstances of each plan area, including in rural areas and islands. The place-based investment programme, NPF4, local development plans and local place plans will support and enable communities as they tackle local challenges while becoming better connected and greener.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister confidently said that the revised NPF4 now reflects the need to get behind the delivery of renewable energy to achieve net zero, yet permitted development rights for solar are limited to 50kW. In England, the limit is 20 times higher, at 1MW, yet the Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants’ Rights, Patrick Harvie, is refusing to exempt bigger schemes to help businesses to get behind renewables—which the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth has just cited. Will the minister investigate that issue and deliver the change on permitted development rights so that we can advance solar?

Tom Arthur: I am grateful for Mr Rennie’s question, and I am already ahead of him. We are working on permitted development rights, and the first phase will have renewables in it.

Willie Rennie: When?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call—

Tom Arthur: Can I—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thought you had finished, minister.

Tom Arthur: I heard the sedentary comment “When?” Very soon in the new year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was two bites at the cherry.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): NPF4 provides needed flexibility in planning, which will better enable local authorities and communities to deal with eyesore, vacant, abandoned and derelict buildings, which, evidence shows, have a negative impact on the wellbeing of communities. The minister will be aware of my campaigning for

buildings in South Scotland, such as the George hotel in Stranraer, the Central hotel in Annan, the N Peal building in Hawick and the Interfloor factory in Dumfries, which need to be dealt with. I have a current petition on the Interfloor factory, which I encourage Dumfries and Galloway folk to sign.

Will the minister comment specifically on how NPF4 will allow for the matter of derelict buildings in our communities to be addressed?

Tom Arthur: As Emma Harper will appreciate, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases. Nonetheless, I understand that vacant and derelict land and buildings can be a blight on communities and can often result in local authorities and other agencies bearing costs to keep them safe. Those bodies are often the owners of some of those sites and buildings, which can be historic and challenging to deal with.

NPF4 will change how we plan our places and will strengthen national planning policy to encourage, promote and facilitate the reuse of derelict buildings to reduce impacts on communities and contribute to meeting climate change targets. We want to direct development to the right location and maximise the use of existing assets, with local development plans setting out opportunities for the sustainable reuse of brownfield land and empty buildings.

However, planning is only part of the solution, which will also involve working with regeneration interests, local communities and other stakeholders to help to deliver place-based solutions to dereliction. The aim is to improve wellbeing and transform our places into more sustainable, liveable and productive places. Of course, one of the biggest challenges to making change happen, particularly in the current climate, will be funding and affordability.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The national planning framework is key to turning commitments in the Bute house agreement into reality, accelerating the transition to net zero and ensuring that development works to support and enhance the natural environment. Will the minister outline what the Scottish Government will do to ensure that new developments conserve and restore diversity, and will he say what support it will provide to enable developers to meet those expectations?

Tom Arthur: NPF4 will rebalance the planning system so that climate change and nature recovery are the primary guiding principles for all plans and all decisions. Improving biodiversity is a cross-cutting theme that runs throughout NPF4. More detailed provision is set out in policy 3 of NPF4, which requires any large-scale development or any development that requires an environmental impact assessment to demonstrate

“that the proposal will conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity, including nature networks so they are in a demonstrably better state than without intervention.”

Policy 3 also requires proposals for relevant local development to

“include appropriate measures to conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity”,

to be supported by NatureScot’s “Developing with Nature” guidance.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The Ardeer peninsula is marked out in NPF4 as

“a significant site for redevelopment”.

With the special development order still in place, there remain concerns locally about the potential impact of development free from the usual planning restrictions. Can the minister provide an update on the commencement of provisions to deal with SDOs, and can he assure my constituents that environmental considerations and the important biodiversity of the site are of key importance to the Scottish Government?

Tom Arthur: Yes, I can, and I recognise Ruth Maguire’s particular interest in the issue. Following the adoption of NPF4, we will continue our programme of work to implement the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, with a focus on delivering its priorities and proposals. We remain committed to bringing forward regulations and compensation on revocation of development orders as part of that. We will progress that work in 2023. In the meantime, NPF4 provides strong protection for biodiversity and sets out requirements for developments to contribute to nature restoration.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have some concerns about the productive pillar. As the minister mentioned, business and investment will be important as we seek to achieve our net zero targets. Footfall in Scotland’s high streets fell by 17.5 per cent in February 2022 in comparison with February 2020. That was the sharpest fall across the whole of the United Kingdom, which highlights the need for concerted action to help our high streets to recover from the impact of the pandemic. Will the minister outline how the refreshed framework will support businesses of all sizes?

Tom Arthur: There are a range of policies. There are the spatial principles, and there are specific policies in the productive pillar, including policy 27, on “City, town, local and commercial centres”; policy 28, on “Retail”; policy 26, on “Business and industry”; and policy 25, on “Community wealth building”. Other policies also have an important bearing on the issue—for example, policy 8, on “Green belts”, can help to promote urban densification, which is very important for our town centres. We recognise,

through the “Local living” policy, that we want to see more people living in our town and city centres, as that is vital for sustaining local commerce and services.

That aligns strongly with other work that we have undertaken, such as the town centre action plan and the retail strategy. A range of actions are contained in the policies and in the spatial strategy and the spatial principles, which are all aligned with the town centre action plan and with our city centre recovery task force, because we want to see thriving towns and city centres. That is vital for our communities, and NPF4 will help to deliver it.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

Will the minister explain why the number of houses to be developed in Edinburgh has been reduced by 4,500 homes at a time when the city faces a long-standing, deepening housing crisis? Will he say whether new general practitioner and local health services will be included in planning proposals for the new housing that is proposed across the Lothians, given the challenges that we already face with GP capacity in areas where significant new development has taken place and is now being planned through NPF4?

Tom Arthur: On the latter point, policy 8, “Infrastructure First”, embeds an infrastructure-first approach in planning across Scotland, which could help to address the issues that the member raises.

With regard to the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement allocations for the Lothians, we will publish an addendum to the explanatory report that we published with the draft NPF4. I would be happy to send that to the member, to provide details of how that was arrived at.

I think that I have responded to all the points made by the member.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think so, minister. If not, the minister can write to the member, because we are running out of time.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister knows that I have had concerns about the protection of woodlands and wild land. I sent him some specific wording that I felt could improve matters. Some of that was around the language, particularly in relation to woodland, but there were also ideas such as compensatory planting, enhancing peatland and introducing wild land impact assessments. Has the minister responded to any of that?

Tom Arthur: We have made changes to policy 6, on forestry, woodland and trees, including clearer requirements and stronger language. That was directly in response to the Woodland Trust campaign, which I believe is what Mr Simpson is

referring to. We have also worked closely with Scottish Forestry to define ancient woodlands, purposely referring to

“Land that has maintained continuous woodland habitat”

and not just to woodland itself. I am happy to take those measures forward, and I am grateful to the member for his contribution and engagement throughout the process.

We have set out a policy for wild land, which can be found under “Natural places” and policy 4. I will allow the member the opportunity to consult the explanatory report. However, if he would like to follow up with any specific questions, I would be more than happy to respond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement on national planning framework 4. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change position.

Remembrance Commemorations and Support for Veterans and Armed Forces Community

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-06637, in the name of Keith Brown, on remembrance commemorations and support for the veterans and armed forces community.

15:28

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

Since 2017, we have updated members annually, to showcase the work that we are doing to improve support, to ensure that our veterans and their families face no disadvantage, and to ensure that Scotland is their destination of choice after service. I welcome the opportunity to deliver our update this year and to provide the chamber with detail on the excellent work that has been undertaken. This week, the Scottish Government has published "Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2022", which details fully the work that we have undertaken over the past 12 months.

Much has changed since I presented our last update in 2021, and I am pleased that, since then, much has been achieved. As we continue to move on from the pandemic, I have seen real progress being made this year across a wide range of areas of support provided to veterans, as well as to service leavers and their families. As always, that excellent work has been made possible only by working collaboratively and productively with partners in the public, private and third sectors.

This time last year, I reported to the chamber that we planned to refresh our veterans strategy action plan. As members will be aware, this year we did just that. In the summer, we published the refreshed plan, which details the important services and support that the Scottish Government and our partners continue to provide. During the development of the plan, we undertook a light-touch consultation with key partners to determine the extent to which our existing commitments remained valid, and whether there were opportunities to add more detail to those commitments, or indeed to add new commitments altogether.

During that process, we identified seven new commitments, one of which was to work with the United Kingdom Government and other devolved Administrations to support the delivery of the

commitments in the UK Government's "Veterans' Strategy Action Plan 2022-2024" that impact veterans right across the UK, such as recognising and addressing the historical hurt experienced by some members of the veterans community.

For example, we continue to support and promote the independent LGBT review, which I was delighted to be able to discuss with Fighting with Pride earlier this month. I again encourage people and organisations to contribute to the review's call for evidence, which is open until 1 December. Last year, I was pleased to see the UK Government's commitment to allow veterans who were dismissed from the service on the basis of their sexuality, due to the historical ban on being homosexual in the military, apply to have their medals restored at no cost.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the pandemic is receding, many of its challenges remain, not least the financial stresses and strains that continue to challenge the charitable sector. Last year, I reported on the estimated shortfall across the UK of £250 million in fundraising compared with the amount for a normal year. To mitigate some of those challenges, the 2022-23 Scottish veterans fund was increased to £500,000 per annum. The priorities this year were projects offering support to early service leavers and promoting collaboration within and between the veterans charity sector and other non-veterans organisations. In total, 14 new projects received funding, allowing a range of initiatives to be supported, from employment support to walking with the wounded and outdoor counselling from the Venture Trust.

Support for small local projects includes funding for Networks of Wellbeing to create a programme of away days for veterans in and around the Huntly area, to help to combat social isolation, and funding for FirstLight Trust to establish a new cafe hub for veterans and their families in Falkirk.

I will say more in my closing speech about this year's important anniversary of the Falklands conflict. Connected to that, of course, is the critical issue of the mental health of our veterans and ensuring that we do everything that we can to support those who are most in need.

Since my last update to Parliament, the Scottish Government has published the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan". An implementation board has been established to take that forward and provide clear and timely access to mental health and wellbeing support for our veterans. Linked to that is our commitment to continue to provide funding support to Combat Stress and Veterans First Point in 2022-23.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Susie Hamilton as our new Scottish veterans

commissioner. Susie is herself a veteran, having served in the Royal Navy, and I very much look forward to working with her over the coming months and years. I wish her the very best in the role.

You will be aware, Presiding Officer, that our previous commissioners produced a series of excellent reports, and we continue to prioritise the delivery of the recommendations that they made. We will continue to encourage the UK Government to do the same for those of the commissioner's recommendations that are relevant to it. We look forward to the commissioner's annual progress report, and we are pleased to be able to again provide evidence to support the commissioner's assessment.

I know that Susie will be setting her key priorities and objectives, and that she will work extremely hard to support our veterans and their families. I am delighted that she is our first woman commissioner, not least because of the very important things that we have to consider, such as the way in which women were treated in the Royal Navy when they first went on the ships, the legacy issues that we have to deal with from that time and the many other issues that are particular to women serving in the armed forces.

Knowing how many veterans there are in Scotland, where they are and what support they might need is vitally important if we are to provide them with the right assistance and guidance at the right time and in the right place. We are working very hard to put together an accurate picture, and it was great to see the veterans question in Scotland's 2022 census.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On the interrogation of the census, I urge the Government to try to identify the children of veterans and veteran families. I know that that is a challenge, because of the questions that were asked in the census, but that seems to be a piece of data that we are struggling to identify. How many young people are related to veterans and serving officers?

Keith Brown: That is an important point. In my constituency, we have one of only two schools in the UK to house the children of veterans and service personnel. I am well aware of some of the issues and challenges that children of armed forces personnel face that the school seeks to address.

If it is any reassurance to the member, although the census is quite limited in its questions, we also have three other, comprehensive surveys, including the Scottish household survey and the Scottish health survey, which also provide helpful information about veterans and their families.

We look forward to receiving the commissioner's annual progress reports. She will now be setting her key priorities and objectives.

As has been said, knowing how many veterans there are in Scotland and how their families are impacted by their service is very important. We are trying to put together an accurate picture of that. We expect to see the first data from the question in the census, rather than from the surveys that I have just mentioned, in 2024.

In addition, the three major Scottish household surveys that I mentioned included a veterans question in their current suites. We have also worked with the UK Government on the development of the first UK-wide veteran-specific survey, which we expect to be launched in the next few days. That may also provide some further comfort to Mr Whitfield in the area that he mentioned. That information will help us to improve our understanding of the profile, circumstances, needs and feelings of veterans in Scotland, which in turn will help to inform policy and services.

Most of us are aware of the challenges that veterans can face when transitioning out of the military. Often, we hear of difficulties in finding suitable and enduring employment and of veterans' experience and qualifications not being adequately understood and appreciated. We might hear something along the lines of, for example, a colour sergeant or a warrant officer who has come out and got a job as a truck driver and is told that they should feel grateful, even though that is not a real recognition of the experience, qualifications and abilities that they accumulated and displayed when they were armed forces personnel. Our veterans deserve opportunities that are commensurate with their experience and qualifications.

A great deal of work has been carried out on that—not least by my predecessor, Graeme Dey. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership's qualifications and skills mapping tool went live in February 2022. The Scottish Government will provide a further £13,500 of funding this year to support the on-going development and expansion of the tool. The Scottish Government is also committed to increasing the number of veterans that it employs, and it continues to explore ways to achieve that, including through the going forward into employment programme.

The Scottish Government also had a stand at this year's career transition partnership careers fair in Edinburgh, where we had the opportunity to engage directly with several armed forces personnel. Service leavers and veterans were also involved in discussions on the type of roles that exist in the Scottish Government, where to find

those roles and how to apply. Since 2021, at least 34 veterans have joined the Scottish Government.

We are all aware that we face a very challenging economic situation. The cost crisis affects us all. We are doing what we can to support our veterans and their families. That is why, this year, we have expanded the Scottish veterans fund criteria to encourage projects that offer support to veterans who are suffering from the impact of the current cost of living crisis. According to today's figure, food inflation has increased to 14.7 per cent. That presents real challenges for people. In addition to general advice, we provide financial advice and support for people to get into the right employment.

The cost crisis also affects housing. We are working hard to support veterans and their families in that area. The veterans homelessness prevention pathway was published in January. We continue to provide funding through our affordable housing supply programme to deliver homes specifically for veterans where local authorities identify that as a strategic priority, and we continue to support Housing Options Scotland to provide its military matters project.

Although there have been improvements across Scotland, and to some extent across the UK, it still seems sensible for the Ministry of Defence to advise everyone who joins the armed forces that they are entitled to put their name down for council or social housing on the day that they start their service. I am not saying that they would necessarily want to access that during their time in the service, but when they come out, they will certainly be grateful for the points that they have accumulated for the time that they have been on the list in the areas where that applies. That would seem a straightforward thing for the MOD to do.

As I said, the cost crisis affects housing, too, and we will continue to support Housing Options Scotland.

As always at this time of year, perhaps the most important thing in relation to veterans is our desire to remember those who have served, those who continue to serve and all those who have been marked by conflict. I will speak more about the remembrance side of the debate in my closing remarks, but I announce today that a new scheme is being launched by the Scottish Government to fund the cost of lost or stolen medals that veterans who are resident in Scotland earned during their time in service. Many of our veterans still bear physical and mental scars from conflicts, and their medals are important symbols of their courageous service.

The scheme is part of a wide range of support that is provided to show our on-going appreciation for veterans and their families. Where a veteran is

entitled—we will rely on the MOD to tell us when somebody has been through the process and is entitled to have replacement medals—the Scottish Government will step in to bear that cost on their behalf.

Our veterans and their families continue to contribute a huge amount to our society right across Scotland. I remain committed to providing the very best support for the entire veterans and armed forces community. As ever, I look forward to the contributions of members, and to responding to them in due course.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the enduring importance of the Remembrance period to families and communities across Scotland and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms that people enjoy today; recognises the Armed Forces' and others' efforts in peace-keeping and peace-making across the world as ways of preventing war and the consequences of war; acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports the Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the Scottish Government's progress thus far in delivering the commitments it has made in the action plan, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with the UK Government and other devolved administrations, to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

15:41

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am delighted to open on behalf of the Conservative Party. I remind members that I am the third generation of my family to have served in the forces, and my son has just completed his service, making it four generations in total.

When it comes to remembrance, every one of our servicemen and women will have different views and memories of their time. They will have served in different theatres and done very different things, but one thing is for sure: all those who have served know that, when push comes to shove, they can rely on their fellow servicemen and women to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in never forgetting their shared experiences and the sacrifices that they have made in defence of their country's freedom.

Some veterans and their families who gather on Sunday will remember those who died in two world wars. Others will remember the sacrifices that were made in more recent conflicts in the Falkland Islands, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq. Each person will be united in silent tribute—pausing,

acknowledging and reflecting on all that has been given to secure our future, which is, I am afraid, once again under threat. The devastation of war has returned to our continent in the form of Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

This remembrance Sunday, I will also pay tribute to the Ukrainians who are not only defending their country but fighting to protect the security, freedoms and democracy of the free world. [*Applause.*] Those are the same values that our servicemen and women are prepared to sacrifice everything for.

We should never forget that the oath of allegiance that is taken by everyone in our armed forces is unconditional; if the ultimate sacrifice has to be paid, that is part of the deal that they sign up to. That high price is not always fully appreciated. While we sleep safely in our beds at night, our servicemen and women are watching our backs. Meanwhile, their families face the very real threat of the loss of their loved ones, knowing that their lives could never be the same again. Burying a son or daughter, or wife or husband, before their time is something that no parent or partner wishes to do.

I know how much support families provide to the armed services community at home, and that support is invaluable on the front line. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude that we should never forget. Supporting our armed forces and veterans community is truly vital, which is why I welcome the continued support of the Scottish poppy appeal, and I am delighted that I will help it with its collections tomorrow in Edinburgh's garden of remembrance. That organisation plays a crucial role in helping servicemen and women and their families transition from military to civilian life.

That change can be far from easy. Some fall on hard times and struggle to reach out for support. Others find it difficult to talk about what they have seen and done, and they find it difficult to adjust to civilian life. Passing judgment on them never helps. Their wellbeing and the welfare of all our veterans should mean much more to us than that. That is why I praise the efforts of charities such as Combat Stress and Veterans First Point, which are leading the way in providing mental health support.

I continue to commend the combined approach that is being taken by the UK Government and the three devolved Governments in implementing a joint strategy for our veterans community, which will run until 2028, and I welcome the points that have been clarified and announced this afternoon by our minister, Mr Keith Brown. By working together, we can create a thriving veterans community in which ex-servicemen and women are empowered to play a key role in society long after they have left the forces. To do that, we need

to recognise the skills that they bring from military service to civilian life. That is a vision that we should all work towards and support.

I pay tribute to some of the work that goes on overseas, too. I am always inspired by the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Its duty of care and tireless devotion to the upkeep of war graves in 23,000 locations across the world are commendable. I will give a small example of that work.

When I was serving in Uganda, I was asked to visit a war grave of three soldiers, which I did. It was in an appalling condition. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission dispatched a team out to repair the graves and to make the site as it should be. That happened in an area that was not particularly safe to go to. However, it did not balk at its responsibility.

When I have been around the world, I have seen the immaculate condition of our war cemeteries. That commemorates the huge sacrifices that the soldiers, sailors and airmen and women who are buried in them have made.

We should never forget that remembrance is not just a tradition of one country. I remember being struck while on tour in Egypt, when I visited the German Africa Corps war memorial in El Alamein, by the flowers and messages that were left in the cemetery. I was naively surprised, as I had never really thought about what remembrance means to other countries and the sacrifices of their soldiers. We should never forget that. I learned the lesson that day that everyone who dies in war should be remembered so that we do not repeat the mistakes that our predecessors made.

I confirm that we will support the Scottish Government's motion. Helping veterans is above party politics, and it is right at this time of year that we all come together to support our armed services community.

I wish Keith Brown a successful visit to the Falklands, and I acknowledge his active service on those islands.

At 11 o'clock this Sunday, all those who have served and are currently serving will take time to pause, reflect and remember all those who have served and are no longer with us. We will always acknowledge their sacrifice and their early passing in the service of their country. We should never forget that they gave their all for our today.

15:48

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Remembrance week is a sober period of reflection for many in our country, and it is important for all of us to come together and show solidarity. In that spirit, I was pleased to sign the Government's

motion in support of what it intends to achieve on behalf of all of us for the service of those who have given so much for all of us.

I have served in the Army reserve for 12 years, and I know at first hand the sacrifices that members of our armed forces make. We owe a great debt of gratitude to them. I am proud to wear my regimental tie today—I see that Edward Mountain is wearing his—and I will do so on Sunday, too, when I gather with friends at the cenotaph in George Square in Glasgow to remember our colleagues who have suffered life-changing injuries, and, in my case, one of my best friends, who was killed in Helmand province 10 years ago this coming April.

That is a moment for us not only to reflect on a lacerating sense of pain at a life that was lost too soon, but to get together to have a few pints and a laugh. For many people—in particular, for those who have served—remembrance day is not just about solemn remembrance, but is about catching up with old friends. We often talk about how old pals are getting on and, over the past few years, it has been an eye-opening experience to see the difficulties that many are going through, which they often cannot make clear to their comrades and about which they are reluctant to seek help. There is a culture, particularly in the Army, of not talking about such things.

It is a vocation that not many can relate to, these days—one that requires them to sacrifice spending time with family and friends, and isolates them from everyday civilian life. However, despite that personal sacrifice, they are often not supported properly when they return from tours of duty overseas or leave the armed forces entirely—often, angry and frustrated.

Such individuals are more susceptible than the rest of the population to mental health difficulties, drug and alcohol related problems and, in many instances, homelessness; yet, even though we know that to be the case, the support is still not there to alleviate those issues. That pressure has become only more acute among my own generation, after more than two decades of intense conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which more than 100,000 people from our country served in operations Telic and Herrick.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and now the cost of living crisis are having a significant impact on many veterans, who are already vulnerable and struggling. The Scottish Government must do all that it can to improve the targeted support that they need.

The mental health charity Combat Stress has seen a much higher contact rate from veterans seeking help than in previous years. Such mental health issues often lead to a reliance and

dependency on alcohol and, to a lesser extent, drugs. The Forces in Mind Trust has detailed the impact that alcohol and drug abuse can have on veterans and their families. Its research suggests that alcohol misuse is the primary substance misuse problem for veterans, with many developing a reliance during their service.

We know that drug misuse is also prevalent in the armed forces more generally. Data from the Ministry of Defence shows that, in 2019, 660 Army personnel were dismissed from their duties after failing a drugs test. That is the equivalent of an entire infantry battalion. Again, we need to ask ourselves why that is happening and how we can create a system in which service personnel do not feel the need to turn to alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism or a way of fitting in.

We may also want to reflect on the fact that that issue is increasingly prevalent in wider society—the Army and the armed forces in general will reflect that—and on whether we need to keep that zero-tolerance policy in which, in effect, we destroy someone's career over it. Could there be a more intelligent way to help people, rather than simply casting them out? Under the current policy, personnel who misuse substances are removed from the services, by disciplinary or administrative means, following a single offence. That seems an unnecessarily destructive and blunt instrument.

Housing is another persistent problem. Positive progress has been made, but too many people still leave the armed forces and become homeless. The most recent figures, for the year to April 2022, show a 24 percent increase, from 33 to 41 people, registering as homeless after leaving armed forces accommodation. Poppyscotland has suggested that a veterans housing action group would help to reduce those figures, and it is to be hoped that its recommendations will be incorporated into Government policy.

Labour supports the establishment of clear statutory targets to underpin the delivery of the armed forces covenant. We also support the implementation of all the recommendations of Poppyscotland's manifesto. It is the Parliament's official charity. We want to strengthen that engagement, implement the veterans' housing pathway, and target provision aimed at ensuring that the most vulnerable service personnel and veterans experience a good transition. Poppyscotland's recommendations from the most recent election campaign remain valid.

Although the cabinet secretary has made constructive and helpful points, it would be helpful if he would address specifically in his closing speech those actions that he is taking to meet each of Poppyscotland's recommendations—in particular, commissioning and acting on an independent review of existing targeted provision,

aimed at ensuring that the most vulnerable serving personnel and veterans experience that good transition; fully exempting military compensation from financial assessments for social security benefits; and addressing how the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland can work with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Defence to collect better data on veterans and ensure that that is shared, where appropriate, in order to simplify the process for injured veterans who apply for or receive benefits under the new system.

I assure the cabinet secretary and the Government that they will have this party's full support on any measures that will improve the lives of our ex-servicemen and women. However, as I have highlighted, we as a country still need to do much more in many areas to help them live fulfilling civilian lives.

15:54

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very proud to rise for the Liberal Democrats in today's important debate. I thank Keith Brown for his remarks and, indeed, for his service—we recognise that at this time. I, too, associate myself with the Government's work in this area. All parties want it to succeed, particularly in relation to homelessness, mental ill health and addiction issues, as Paul Sweeney rightly mentioned.

If I was to make one plea, it would be in relation to Martin Whitfield's intervention about the children of veterans. I remind the minister that, in 2011, my party introduced a dedicated pupil premium for every child of serving armed forces personnel in England, amounting to £320 per child. The service pupil premium has never been replicated in Scotland, but it recognises the disruption and trauma that such children often face. I would ask that the minister reflects on that and addresses that in his closing remarks.

Keith Brown: I thank the member for making that point, which he has made before. My answer has been that we have a different system in Scotland. However, it might help him to know that we are providing funding of around £50,000 this year for the national education officer for children and young people of armed forces and veteran families, to support delivery of the Selous report recommendations, including those on the collection of the educational expenses of service and veterans' children at the current time. [*Keith Brown has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I will give you the time back, Alex Cole-Hamilton.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am very grateful for the constructive content of that intervention. That is a progressive measure to bring forward, and I am grateful to the Government for doing so.

We owe much to our veterans, alive and dead. Over the coming days, will take time to remember them. My mother had two great uncles. One died during the war; the other lived. I have mentioned the first before—I spoke about him in my first speech in the Scottish Parliament. He was a 23-year-old private of the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles out of Saskatchewan. He was killed, along with 80 per cent of his battalion, on the first day of the battle of Mont Sorrel on the Ypres salient.

I will never fully understand the horror of that day. It was the first day that German soldiers had ever used flamethrowers. Indeed, my great grand-uncle was never found; it is very likely that he was buried. He is commemorated on the Menin Gate in Belgium. His name was Alexander Bennett and I am named for him.

The second, who was also Canadian, was an airman. His name was Arthur Roy Brown. He is credited with shooting down and killing Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's famous Red Baron in a dogfight over France. He never accepted that accolade. He explained for the remainder of his life, in characteristic generosity of spirit that, although he had hit the Red Baron, he could never be sure that it was his shot that killed the notorious flying ace. Sure enough, historians and forensic pathologists would later go on to prove that the Red Baron had in fact been taken down by an Australian ground machine-gun crew. However, Arthur's place in history remains intact.

This remembrance Sunday, families the world over will remember stories of tragedy and heroism in equal measure. Although living memory of the two world wars has all but passed beyond us, there is a new poignancy to our commemorations this year. The armistice might have been signed 104 years ago, but we wake to images of trench warfare and mechanised slaughter in continental Europe each morning. Footage of dugouts, dirt, shellfire and carnage are livestreamed across our social media platforms.

As the old adage has it, "Those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it". In addition to the horror of the battlefields of Kherson and Donetsk are blasts that emulate Flanders and the Somme. We see civilian suffering being repeated in Ukraine, too. The bombed-out carcasses of Mariupol and Kharkiv could just as easily be Coventry or Dresden in the 1940s for all that is left of them.

It is not the fighting men and women of Ukraine who have failed to learn the lessons of history but

their Russian aggressors. As they desperately try to roll back the Russian advance along the eastern front, Ukrainians are fighting for much more than their national sovereignty. They represent the front line in a clash of ideals; it is a struggle for the soul of humanity. It is because they decided to take a stand and resist the blitzkrieg of Putin's expansionism that they have ultimately spared others from having to. It is certainly the case that, had they not, Putin's gangsters would not have stopped at Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine, like those we remember on armistice day, could well come to define our century. It underpins why this season of remembrance is so important: for as long as men crave power and dominance over their neighbours, there will be conflict.

This weekend, I will think of my uncles' heroism and sacrifice, but I will also think of those fighting for their lives and their freedom in the towns and cities of Ukraine. For our tomorrows, they are giving their todays. Glory to Ukraine. Glory to the heroes. Let us pray that, when the bloodshed is over and when Putin is deposed and his war machine is dismantled, across the whole of humanity, we will learn the lessons of history and never allow what has happened to happen again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We are now rather tight for time, so I would be grateful if members could stick to their time allocation.

16:00

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): A number of welcome traditions exist in the Parliament. One such tradition is the annual armed forces and veterans debate that is held in advance of remembrance Sunday. This is, I think, the ninth or so such set piece that I have taken part in, mostly from the back benches but, for a spell, from the privileged position of leading it as veterans minister. For the overwhelming part, the debates have been constructive and devoid of party politicking, and I hope that that will be the case today. The signs thus far are certainly positive in that regard.

In that spirit, let me begin by saying how good it is to see Edward Mountain taking part in the 2022 iteration of the armed forces and veterans debate. [*Applause.*] Owing to ill health, Mr Mountain was unable to take part in the debate last year, and both he and his contribution were missed. There is much that he and I disagree on, but we share common ground when it comes to wanting the best for our current and former military personnel and their families. I know that that goes for the wider membership of the Parliament, too.

I will focus my contribution on some of the realities of the here and now for the current military. Last week, I had the pleasure of participating along with colleagues in the Parliament's formal engagement event with the Army in Scotland, which was held at Leuchars station. We were provided with an update, in considerable and welcome detail, on basing plans for the Army there. The plans include increasing personnel numbers at Leuchars, with the relocation of Three Scots—or the Black Watch to those of us of a certain vintage—from Fort George. It will be good to see the Black Watch returning to its traditional recruiting heartland.

What was less welcome was the apparent admission in the presentation of the recruitment and retention issues that the Black Watch and other elements of the Army are facing, resulting in only 301 personnel being captured by that move. That is what has been done to one of our historic regiments by the actions of successive UK Governments. That is so regrettable.

Regrettable, too, is the recent admission by a UK Government minister that, across the British military, more than 2,900 serving personnel, along with 38,000 veterans, are having to rely on universal credit to top up their income. How on earth did a country that claims to value those who serve get into such a situation? I ask that question genuinely to seek improvement, not to make a party-political point.

Let me recognise that, against that backdrop, there has been welcome MOD investment in infrastructure in Scotland. The investment in the Royal Air Force footprint in the north-east is an example of that and, provided that there is no further basing review or a watering-down of proposals for Leuchars, the developments in that regard are positive. If delivered, the plans for Leuchars will result in new accommodation blocks and potentially family housing being provided. Good stuff!

However, what about other military locations? RM Condor in my Angus South constituency has long attracted commentary about the quality of the accommodation that is provided to the marines who are based there. Earlier this year, media reports suggested that the base was to be the subject of long-overdue upgrading. Unfortunately, I understand such reports to be untrue.

I am concerned—I hope that this is misplaced concern—that, given the significant budget challenges that the UK Government faces, the Treasury might look to make reductions to anticipated MOD funding, despite the UK Government's commitment to increase that budget to 3 per cent of gross domestic product by 2030. While he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, was accused of

mounting a sustained “corporate raid” on military spending. Incidentally, that accusation came from the then, and still, Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace.

My plea—it is a plea, not a party-political point—is that, whatever decisions are made on military funding and whatever future moneys are earmarked for hardware, a protected spending priority must be the men and women who serve in the military, along with their families. That is the very least that they are owed.

16:04

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I agree with everything that Graeme Dey has just said. His points were well made, and I endorse them and wish to be associated with them.

I, too, pay tribute to the veterans who are members of the Parliament—specifically, the cabinet secretary and my good friend Edward Mountain—and all those who support veterans throughout the United Kingdom.

I will limit my brief remarks to the subject of remembrance—I will not attempt anything sophisticated or clever; I offer only my humble reflections. The annual act of remembrance is a moment in the year that punctuates our lives, and this year’s remembrance will have added poignancy given the passing of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth. We came to know well how much it meant to Queen Elizabeth to lead the nation in the annual act of remembrance at the cenotaph.

We will once again be called, by the two minutes of silence, to reflect on the sacrifices and losses of the past. With the passing of the generations that experienced world war, it becomes ever more important and necessary for us to take time to consider what remembrance means to us today, and what it teaches us about the present and the future. I am old enough to have had the privilege of meeting veterans of the first and second world wars. The nature of the fighting that those men experienced is beyond my ken. They experienced the sternest test of the most awful type to defend our nation and a set of ideals: democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

It has been more than a decade since the last of the first world war veterans died and, sadly, we will soon bid adieu to the second world war generation. I thank God for that generation and what they did for all of us in defeating Nazism in all its grisly ghastliness.

Many young Scots continue to go to the battlefields of France and Flanders, very often as part of organised school trips, and long may that continue. I know what the experience of visiting

Ypres, the Menin Gate, which was mentioned earlier, Tyne Cot and Thiepval did for our children. Seeing the thousands of names of the missing—most of them young men not much older than our children—was deeply moving for them and for us. It made real the loss and the horror of war. We saw the rows of neatly laid graves and symmetrical gravestones, which are honoured and cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which Edward Mountain mentioned earlier and for which I, too, give thanks. We saw the stories of doomed youth inscribed in stone, with name, rank and service number, and a short personal inscription provided by a grieving family.

Those trips are so important. We must ensure that, whatever financial constraints we are required to endure, those trips continue. Learning those lessons is best accomplished by the incomparable experience of visiting them, and not just by reading about them in a textbook. Our young people must learn about the very full part that Scotland played, but the battle of St Valery and operation Cycle are not part of the national 5 second world war curriculum. I hope that the cabinet secretary would agree that that anomaly should be corrected.

We must continue to ensure that remembrance is fully inclusive of our young people. For many years, we have attended, alongside the cabinet secretary, the act of remembrance at the war memorial in our village. I have been moved by the sight of the pupils from the local high school and primary school laying wreaths, alongside representatives of the scouts, the cubs, the Boys Brigade, the girl guides, the sea cadets, the army cadets and the air training corps.

Remembrance has taken on even more meaning for our family as we have learned more about great-uncles who were killed in action in France. That has made remembrance more personal and the sacrifice and loss more poignant. We have taken time to tell our grandchildren, as they get old enough, what remembrance means in their family history. I keenly sense that it is our responsibility to see that remembrance is renewed and continued, to pass on the lessons and warnings of history, and to teach children what it means to wear a poppy each November and to see it as a symbol of hope, renewal, sacrifice and peace. If we fail to remember and to help our children and grandchildren remember, the hope for a peaceful future will soon be lost, as it was before.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that we are tight for time, and that you need to stick to your time allocations.

16:09

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It hardly seems like a year since many of us attended our local remembrance Sunday events as newly elected constituency and regional MSPs to remember our armed services personnel. Who would have thought that, as we entered this year's national period of remembrance, we would be watching the unfolding illegal invasion of Ukraine?

Reading the daily intelligence updates from the MOD has become part of my routine: narrative and images of the devastation caused, the humanitarian effort and the absolute resolve of the Ukrainian population to win back their territory. At this time of year, the daily updates appear against the backdrop of remembrance, when we pay tribute to the ultimate sacrifice of those individuals from Scotland, the UK, the Commonwealth and allied nations who gave their lives in order to ensure the freedom and peace that we enjoy today.

The imagery captured on social media is a far cry from the photos that I expect many of us have tucked away of family members who saw active service in conflict or in peacekeeping roles across the world—photos like the one that I recently found of my Uncle Adam, who endured the claustrophobic environment of a Royal Navy minesweeper during world war two. As my son described him, he seemed to be smiling in the face of fear. It is no surprise that he returned to civilian life traumatised and suffering from what we now recognise as post-traumatic stress disorder, which went unrecognised and untreated for the rest of his life.

Thankfully we are in a very different place today. Many veterans leave our armed forces with a positive experience and highly transferable skills. However, many experience a more difficult return to civilian life, and the work of veterans charities in Scotland—Erskine, Poppyscotland, Veterans Scotland and many others—is key to ensuring that there is practical support and help in the right place, at the right time.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government commitment to charities and other bodies continues. I particularly welcome the establishment of the Scottish Veterans Care Network, to ensure parity of access to specialist services, and the continued funding for Combat Stress, ensuring that support for veterans who are experiencing compromised mental health continues.

Over the years, the north-east has seen a cohort of veterans take their skill sets into the energy sector. However, it can be difficult for them to navigate into the sector. Therefore, I welcome

the revamped veterans employability strategic group, which I hope will support employment opportunities for service leavers such as those seeking to move into our growing renewables sector.

I particularly welcome the commitment in the refreshed strategy for our veterans to support and better understand the veteran population coming into the criminal justice system—frequently a highly vulnerable group with enduring and complex needs.

The on-going cost of living crisis is hitting those who are least able to afford increased energy and food bills the hardest. I am very grateful to all the people working and volunteering in my constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine for their work in supporting our veteran community, providing practical and emotional support across a range of projects, initiatives and services. The support that is provided by the Scottish veterans fund will be crucial in ensuring that many of those local projects can continue to provide vital community support to our veterans and their families during this period of uncertainty and worry for many.

To conclude, at this time of remembrance, I offer my deep gratitude to all our military personnel—those lost in conflict, those still serving and those now returned to our communities—for their sacrifice, commitment and selflessness.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members who are going to participate in the debate that I will now be cutting you off at four minutes, so four minutes is not the point at which to say, “and to conclude”.

16:13

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The annual act of remembrance is a powerful one. It provides a necessary opportunity to reflect on the crucial moment in our history when the guns stopped firing and peace in Europe was secured. It is also a time to reflect on the fragility of that peace in our world—peace that has often been imperilled, down through the centuries

Of course, in the past year we have been served with a stark reminder of that fragility, with Russia having unleashed a dreadful and bloody campaign of destruction in Ukraine. I am sure that those scenes will not be far from any of our minds as we pause to remember, this coming weekend. Today, I want to take some time to pay tribute to those who support remembrance in communities across West Scotland.

For more than a century, the poppy has served as a poignant symbol of remembrance for all those who have lost their lives on active service, and as

an expression of hope for lasting peace. The work that Poppyscotland and so many other charities do makes a real impact on veterans and their families, and is rightly being recognised in our debate today, but none of that work is possible without the support of the people who fundraise in our towns and villages at this time of year and, indeed, throughout the year.

I take this opportunity to pay special tribute to my constituent Kitty Ramsay, who has received the president's award for her years of fundraising for Poppyscotland. Indeed, it was wonderful to see the Presiding Officer making the presentation in the garden lobby here in Parliament, just a few weeks ago. For decades, Kitty has selflessly organised the sale of poppies in Port Glasgow and across Inverclyde, thereby raising thousands of pounds for Poppyscotland.

It should be noted that the president's award is an extremely prestigious accolade that is bestowed on individuals for exceptional volunteering services to Poppyscotland. I am sure that all members agree that securing the award is an exceptional achievement, and I am sure that Kitty is very proud to have received it. It was a real pleasure to chat to Kitty and her husband Ronald, along with Jamie Greene—who I see is in the chamber—and other members, and to hear her say that she does it for all the people who never came home from war to the streets of Inverclyde.

As Paul Sweeney said, Scottish Labour strongly supports the work of Poppyscotland. We support implementation of the recommendations of the Poppyscotland manifesto, which calls on the Scottish Government to mainstream the armed forces community in the policy-making process and to properly capture the lived experience of armed forces personnel, veterans and their families. I warmly welcome what the cabinet secretary said in that regard.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer. I want to give another local example of people in West Scotland who support remembrance—an example that is close to my heart. As members will have heard me say before in the chamber, I have been privileged to be involved with the Neilston War Memorial Association since its inception in 2011. The association is made up of local volunteers who have given their time to build a new war memorial in Neilston and now act as the custodians of remembrance in the village.

This week, the Neilston War Memorial Association received the sad news that one of our leading committee members, Keith Fergus, has passed away aged just 49, after a period of illness. Keith worked closely with his friends in the association for more than 10 years—from his involvement in the initial fundraising that helped to build the war memorial, to his becoming our official

photographer. During the pandemic, he delivered food packs, Christmas and Easter treats for local children and high teas for the village pensioners. He will be sorely missed. Our thoughts are with his wife Helen and his children Kyla and Cammie at this very sad time. Indeed, as we gather this weekend, we will remember Keith's contribution to remembrance.

As a nation, we should be grateful for the service of all personnel who have given their lives. We should also be grateful for the service of volunteers like Keith and Kitty, whose quiet, determined and dedicated actions keep alive the promise that has echoed down through the years:

“We will remember them.”

16:18

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate.

I echo Paul O'Kane's comments about Kitty Ramsay. I have known Kitty for some time; she came to do a crash course in accounts, way back when the Port Glasgow and St Stephen's high schools had their first joint class, many moons ago.

I am particularly pleased to speak in the debate because I think that people might not always fully appreciate the role of service personnel in peacekeeping missions and assisting during public emergencies such as the recent pandemic. The role of anyone who serves in the armed forces is varied, but that is not always acknowledged outside Parliament.

My Greenock and Inverclyde constituency was traditionally a recruiting area for the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I will mention just one Argylls veteran—Jim Boyland, who is also from Port Glasgow. When it comes to ambassadors for the Army, Jim is very much up there. Since his retirement from the Army many years ago, he has helped many hundreds of young people in the community to achieve more in their lives. He has enhanced the life of everyone whom he has met. Not just his personality, but the sense of discipline and belonging that he got from the Army have helped him to do that. He is a credit to himself, to the Argyll and Southern Highlanders Regimental Association and to our community.

I welcome the support that is provided to our armed forces personnel, including through roll-out of the Scottish Government's veterans' mental health and wellbeing action plan, but I recognise that there will always be more to do. The Scottish Government will continue to target projects that offer new and innovative approaches to aiding our veterans community.

That is why I hope that dialogue between the two Governments about defence and military commitments will increase, so that Scotland can continue to support the sector during UK Government's funding decisions. Management and deployment of the armed forces is a reserved matter, but many of the challenges that are faced by veterans come under devolved responsibilities. Improved engagement will provide better outcomes and solutions for veterans, which is surely what everyone in the chamber wants, irrespective of their political persuasion.

When our service personnel return from combat zones and years of service and retire from their roles in the armed forces, they should not then be expected to wage a battle against bureaucracy to obtain the support to which they are rightfully entitled. Engagement is therefore vital as the UK Government outlines how defence capability will be achieved with cuts to personnel numbers, and against a backdrop of concerns being expressed by the UK Parliament about how programmes that are critical to defence of the UK are being funded and delivered.

That call for greater dialogue extends to Scotland's domestic defence industry, which is vital for Scottish jobs. When the MOD's £24 billion budget for the next four years was published by UK Government, there were no discussions with the Scottish Government about how decisions might impact on Scotland. Some people would argue that because defence is a reserved matter discussions need not take place. However, the effects of any decisions will clearly be long-term, whatever they are, so dialogue and discussion would certainly be helpful.

This Sunday, I will pay my respects in my constituency, first at Well park and then at the Free French memorial, which are both in Greenock. Those sites, and others in the constituency, saw growing numbers of members of the public coming to pay their respects prior to the pandemic. I hope—in fact, I am sure—that on Sunday the number of people attending the two locations and others in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency will again be on the up, because people genuinely want to pay their respects to those who have fallen and to those who have served their communities.

16:22

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): It is a privilege to be given the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

"When you go home,
Tell them of us and say,
For their tomorrow,
We gave them our today."

For me, those immortal words sum up the incredible service of the United Kingdom's armed forces. Today, we stand together in the chamber to thank our service personnel for their exceptional service, while taking a moment to remember those who have paid the ultimate price.

Day in and day out, our armed forces work to keep the British public safe, while supporting our allies further afield. Throughout the past two years, their professionalism and dedication have been clear for all to see. The British Army was instrumental in roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine and played a key role in supporting our NHS staff, thereby allowing us to jab our way to freedom.

During the pandemic more than 100 armed forces personnel were brought in to support the Scottish Ambulance Service in assisting vulnerable people and people facing medical emergencies. Let us also not forget how, more recently, the Royal Regiment of Scotland played an invaluable role in assisting at events surrounding the passing of our late Queen Elizabeth II. The images of our boys carrying the Queen's coffin up the Royal Mile to St Giles' cathedral will stay with us forever.

Just as our veterans have faithfully served the British people, the Scottish Government must live up to its responsibility by supporting them to adjust to daily life back home. We want servicemen and women who choose, on leaving the armed forces, to settle in Scotland to know that they and their families will be supported. With around 250,000 veterans in Scotland, we need a comprehensive strategy to support their wellbeing and provide them with opportunities to thrive.

I welcome the Scottish Government's collaboration with the UK Government to secure a long-term veterans strategy, which has also been welcomed by key stakeholders, including Veterans Scotland. By focusing on key themes, including employability training and financial education, to ensure that our veterans adapt to life back home, the strategy will equip them with vital tools to reintegrate into the communities that they have so faithfully served.

Conservative members would like Scotland's two Governments to build on that collaborative approach to further strengthen the existing strategy, so we can support our soldiers, because the evidence is clear that, unfortunately, many veterans experience challenges on their return home—not least because they are at higher risk of developing physical and mental health conditions.

The Scottish Conservatives propose an armed forces and veterans bill that would enshrine in law the armed forces covenant for devolved public bodies, including NHS Scotland, in order to equip

veterans better with the tools and support that they need in order to transition to civilian life.

No one could doubt the dedication, professionalism and sacrifice of the United Kingdom's armed forces. They must be supported and, in turn, rewarded. In the chamber today, let us with one voice thank our armed forces for their heroic efforts, and let us commemorate the fallen, whose sacrifices will never be forgotten.

16:25

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): In my constituency, I have Glencorse barracks. Thankfully, after years of having the threat of closure hanging over it, it has been reprieved. On the visits that I have made there since I started representing Penicuik, I have been made most welcome by both the service personnel and their families.

I also have the honour each year of representing the Parliament as the local MSP at the remembrance service at the memorial in Peebles, as I will on Sunday. It is always very moving. I pay tribute to Fiona Dunlop, a retired Peebles history teacher who voluntarily takes care of more than 150 war graves in more than a dozen cemeteries across the Borders, supported by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, from which she has rightly received an award.

The families of those who serve, including the parents and the partners, often with children, wait anxiously as their loved ones serve in war-torn countries. They hold the home together, unsure when and, sadly, if their loved ones will return. They are the unsung heroes.

I am mindful each 11 November of the war that I just missed—world war two, when my father, with his great pal Jock Hunter from Hawick, enrolled in the King's Own Scottish Borderers and they were to be sent to Arnhem. At the last minute, dad failed the fitness test—he had trouble with his feet, and army boots made it worse—so he was sent to Shetland instead. Jock, like dad, was in his late 20s. He was parachuted into Arnhem and he died there. Such is the randomness of war.

Dad went on to live into his 90s, having five children with his beloved Margie and a marriage that lasted nigh on 60 years, with numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. That was a life that Jock was never to see. There are many—too many—who lost their futures or suffered life-changing injuries in the ensuing wars.

Sadly, wars continue, with the illegal annexation by Russia of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk and the bombing of Ukrainian cities. The bravery and commitment of the Ukrainian people in and out of

uniform is daunting. The war will end, as all wars do, but not until after the brutalities—the war crimes, the deaths, the devastation of the land, the bomb-torn landscapes and the unburied.

I wear the red and the white poppies—the red is the poppy of remembrance and the white is the poppy of peace—because, when politicians fail or despots and dictators rule the airwaves, it is the armed services and not the politicians whose lives are put on the line. Within the ranks of Russian conscripts, there are young men who do not wish to spend their youth on bullets and bombs in Ukraine. Brave Russian people who speak out risk their lives, and we must pay tribute to and remember them as we remember the fallen and the damaged of all wars.

16:28

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this timely debate. I thank the cabinet secretary for coming to the chamber to report on the work that he has done and I pay tribute on the record to all who have lost their lives or suffered as a result of their service.

Like others, I have family members who have taken part in conflict and died. I also have family members who have campaigned against war. We must always remember that it is politicians who send our armed forces into conflict, and often it is politicians who let them down. As a society, we often fail to meet the duty of care that we owe to veterans.

When I asked veterans what issues they felt the debate needed to focus on, they highlighted the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has had, and that the cost of living crisis is having, on many veterans who are struggling. They mentioned issues around care homes and the impacts that rising costs there are having on veterans.

In the past, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on armed forces veterans' pensions in the House of Commons, I campaigned with veterans for those who had served in the military before 1974. Despite campaigning for many decades, those veterans have still not been awarded an Army pension. That issue and others, such as the need for a triple lock, are obviously reserved matters but, as has already been said, this Parliament has responsibility for many of the issues that impact on veterans' lives now.

We must recognise that gaps remain in the specialist support that veterans need, whether for their physical health or for their mental health. Support is often not available locally or is not structured in a way that meets veterans' needs. Many of us have personal experience of witnessing the system failing former members of the armed services, whether those individuals

have come back from the Falklands, the Gulf war or more recent conflicts.

We recognise that progress has been made to address veterans' social and housing needs, and I welcomed the cabinet secretary's announcement regarding the housing application process, but we know that many people still leave the armed forces and become homeless. The most recent figures show a 24 per cent increase in the number of people registering as homeless after leaving armed forces accommodation between 2020-21 and 2021-22.

In 2020, Poppyscotland, together with the Royal British Legion, published a research report entitled "Making the benefits system fit for Service". It detailed how the benefits system often fails people who are leaving service. Poppyscotland has called for the establishment of a veterans housing action group, with powers to review challenging cases, to oversee the effective implementation of the veterans housing pathway and to act on the recommendations that it makes.

The Parliament needs to recognise that we have failed our veterans in the past. I am pleased with the way in which the debate has been conducted. It is right that we honour those who have fallen, but we must also remember that, too often, we have failed those who have come home, those who have been left behind—including families—and those who have suffered life-altering injuries. I am pleased to support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Dunbar, who is the final speaker in the open debate. After her speech, we will move to closing speeches, and everybody who has taken part in the debate will be expected to be in the chamber.

16:33

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak in the debate and to pay respect to and commemorate all those who have given so much to preserve the freedoms that we all enjoy today.

On Sunday, people will gather to remember. Some will remember family members who died in two world wars; others will remember those who have died in numerous conflicts since; and some will wish to reflect on their own service and those who served with them.

Importantly, however—and I agree with Poppyscotland on this—remembrance Sunday is also an opportunity to educate younger generations on the atrocities of the past to ensure that history is not repeated. Last year, as a Gordon's bairn, I spent my time in the debate reflecting on my ain family's connections to the Gordon Highlanders. This year, I want to pay

tribute to our armed forces and to highlight organisations and folk across my constituency who are working to support our veterans community.

As a former councillor on Aberdeen City Council, I was proud to play my part in ensuring that the council signed up to the armed forces covenant, for which the council now has a gold award.

The armed forces covenant is based on the premise that those who serve or have served, and their families, deserve respect, support and fair treatment. It stipulates that the local authority will, among other commitments: offer up to 1 per cent of its 2,000 new council houses to those who leave the armed forces and adapt up to a further 0.5 per cent for those who are injured in service; support the employment of veterans and work with the Career Transition Partnership to establish a tailored employment pathway; and ensure that armed forces personnel are not disadvantaged when it comes to school places for their bairns.

The covenant has proven to be hugely important for Scotland's veterans and the armed forces community. I pay tribute to all at Aberdeen City Council for supporting it, and I encourage all other local authorities to take part if they have not already done so. The mental health and wellbeing of our veterans community is paramount and I welcome that the Scottish Government has allocated over £2 million in funding to support veterans charities.

I pay tribute to Kate Dean of Aberdeen citizens advice bureau, who has led the armed services advice project in Aberdeen. The project provides targeted support on access to welfare, employment opportunities, debt and finances and housing. Between November 2021 and today, in Aberdeen alone, ASAP has helped 119 veterans, with yearly financial gains totalling £13,000 each year. That can really help. The case studies, which are available on the CAB's website—I encourage members to take a look—speak for themselves. The project has been made possible partly through funding from the Scottish Government. I welcome the commitment that the cabinet secretary made earlier, and I hope that such support will continue into the future.

Throughout wars and crises, we have relied on the selflessness of our armed forces to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm. To do their duty, our servicemen and women have been deployed around the world, wherever and whenever they have been needed. In recent years, our troops have been deployed to Afghanistan and to support humanitarian efforts in countries around the globe. The global contribution of our servicemen and women must be acknowledged.

I look forward to laying a wreath in Aberdeen this Sunday on behalf of the good folk of Aberdeen Donside, and I encourage aabodie to get their poppies out, wear them wi pride and support our service personnel, past and present.

16:37

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It really is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I echo Graeme Dey's comment—the debate has shown very well what this Parliament can do when we come together across the different benches on a subject that is as important as our veterans, our current serving armed forces personnel and the families who surround them.

It is true to say that Scottish Labour remains of the fundamental belief that those who have sacrificed the most for our country deserve the very best possible care. I welcome the new Scottish veterans commissioner, who started work in August, to her post. I wish her well in championing our veterans and their families, and I look forward to receiving and reading her reports in due course.

This has been a special debate. Members have talked about very personal remembrances and experiences and about wider experiences that bring us together across the chamber. I welcome Keith Brown's comments about data on armed forces children. It would be remiss of me not to return to the subject of those children later in my speech.

However, I start by thanking Edward Mountain for his comments. He reminded us that, when push comes to shove, our armed forces around the world stand shoulder to shoulder with each other, and they deserve that level of respect while they are serving. They are sent to serve so frequently by politicians, who have—I might add—perhaps failed when we end up at war. We should stand shoulder to shoulder with our armed forces personnel both during their service and afterwards. Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly reminded us that those who do not learn from history pay the price of going over the same ground again and again.

As Stephen Kerr and others mentioned, this year is different in that Her Majesty has passed. For many of us, one of the solid symbols of remembrance has been Her Majesty standing there on every 11 November and remembrance Sunday. It is a solid image whose first instance perhaps predates many of us in the chamber, and it will be missed. However, I am sure that we will see, in our new King, a similar steadfast support at this time of year.

Audrey Nicoll, among many other members, rightly talked about the illegal war that is going on in Ukraine. This Sunday, we will probably awaken to pictures, film and reports from Ukraine, and then, at 11 o'clock, we will go out to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Paul O'Kane reminded us what a poignant symbol the poppy is and about the work of Poppyscotland. I echo the chamber's thanks to Poppyscotland and the other veterans charities for their work in helping our veterans and serving personnel.

Stuart McMillan mentioned the importance of peacekeeping, because service is not always about war, and service personnel and veterans have done so much by sometimes bravely standing between two groups that would go to war.

With Fiona Dunlop, Christine Grahame put a face to the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The work that is done to support the graves of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice is such a silent, quiet way to show respect. As Edward Mountain said, it also sometimes takes place under challenging circumstances. When I take school pupils to Commonwealth war graves, it always results in a moment of silence, as does visiting the battlefields in France. It gives young people a bit of real-life education that resonates more than what they have heard, read and seen, sometimes even on social media.

I promised to return to our young people, and I will do so by highlighting the Scottish Funding Council's work, along with the Service Children's Progression Alliance, to launch an online platform, the thriving lives toolkit, in April this year. The toolkit, which is underpinned by rigorous research, aims to bring about better understanding in schools and reach out to our service personnel and young people about their experiences. I also highlight the work that Forces Children Scotland did with Edinburgh Napier University to promote the educational opportunities that are open to our service children.

My home town of Prestonpans, in East Lothian, South Scotland, has, without doubt, one of the finest war memorials anywhere in the world. It was designed by the eminent sculptor William Birnie Rhind, whom most people will probably know for the doorway to the Scottish national portrait gallery. It was on Sunday 30 April 1922, just over 100 years ago, that an 8-foot high soldier, dressed in the garb of the eighth battalion of the Royal Scots, first stood on top of a pedestal and looked across our high street. The community, through its community council and East Lothian Council, have done a great deal to improve the sculpture and reopen it for this November.

My final words go to Lieutenant General Sir Francis Davies, who, 100 years ago, asked the locals in Prestonpans to

“give one thought to the brave boys and recall what they did for them and their country. Those who had come through the war were not likely to forget their experience. It is not for their benefit that the monument has been erected. It is for the generations yet to come”.

They are the monuments that speak to us this Sunday.

16:43

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Remembrance is not just a word; it is a profound act of admiration, respect and gratitude. Keith Brown spoke about ensuring that veterans and their families face no disadvantage and about the work that is being done collaboratively with the public, private and third sectors as part of the Scottish Government’s veterans strategy action plan. There is undoubtedly more that we can do, but progress is being made.

The cabinet secretary welcomed Susie Hamilton to her role as the Scottish veterans commissioner. I echo that welcome, as did Martin Whitfield.

Ed Mountain shared his personal experiences and sacrifices, and he highlighted the contribution of veterans in service to their country. He also highlighted the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which maintains graves in 23,000 locations around the world.

Ed Mountain paid tribute to the Ukrainians, as did members across the chamber. Points were made by Audrey Nicoll, Christine Grahame and Alex Cole-Hamilton, who highlighted the suffering and carnage that are being faced, as well as paying a moving tribute to his uncle.

Paul Sweeney gave us an example of the poignant personal loss that, sadly, too many service personnel are forced to endure. My uncle served as a padre, and in that role he conducted many funerals of service personnel who were taken far too soon.

Graeme Dey said that we need to do the best for current and former military personnel. Stephen Kerr highlighted the fact that the armed forces are defending our democracy, freedom and rule of law, and he said that “remembrance is renewed and continued” in order to achieve a peaceful future. Similar tributes were paid by Paul O’Kane, Stuart McMillan, Katy Clark and Jackie Dunbar.

We have admiration for the men and women who risk their lives to ensure our safety and freedom, respect for their bravery and professionalism, and gratitude for the sacrifices that they make on our behalf. Of course, we think of their distinguished service in conflicts such as

the second world war or the Falklands, but our armed forces contribute beyond the battlefield, too. During the dark days of the pandemic, we saw the British Army deployed to help Scotland through the crisis. More than 200 troops helped with the vaccine roll-out, and more than 100 more drove ambulances, as Annie Wells said.

Our armed forces play a central role in Scottish public life. It was the soldiers of the Royal Regiment of Scotland who stepped forth to carry Her late Majesty’s coffin as it arrived in Edinburgh, then on to St Giles’ cathedral for the vigil. Their professionalism was an impressive sight on news broadcasts around the world.

The men and women of our armed forces give us so much, and we must make sure that those who settle in Scotland after their service are settling in a country that does not just call them heroes but treats them as such. Scotland should strive to offer them and their families the most generous support of anywhere in the UK.

There are around 250,000 veterans in Scotland, which is around 5 per cent of our population. The chances are that we will all know someone who served, and, if we do, we also know that veterans, sadly, often face many challenges. Homelessness is a major one. Almost 700 veterans were assessed as being homeless in 2020-21, according to Scottish Government figures. That is only the high-level statistic. If we dig in, we see that the problem is actually much worse. We know, from Homeless Network Scotland, that veterans who are affected by homelessness are likely to experience rough sleeping and that homelessness can occur many years after discharge, due to veterans being reluctant to seek help or due to deferred trauma. All of that is before we consider how difficult it can be for service personnel who are moving around the world to buy or rent a home at the end of their career.

Veterans also face significant health problems. I recently chaired a meeting of the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community that looked at that issue. The report “Trends in Scottish Veterans’ Health” found that, compared to non-veterans, veterans have a 15 per cent increased risk of heart attack, a 16 per cent increased risk of stroke and an 18 per cent increased risk of lung cancer. That is the physical side. The situation is even worse when we look at mental health. Compared with non-veterans, veterans have a 24 per cent increased risk of being diagnosed with a major mental health issue. Those numbers are incredibly grim and demand action.

I am pleased that the UK Government and the Scottish Government have jointly developed a plan, the strategy for our veterans, to address the major issues that veterans face, such as poor

health, unemployment, financial problems and debt. It is a 10-year plan that will run to 2028. That is important because it means that there is an opportunity not only to address immediate challenges, but to develop methods of supporting a new generation of veterans.

There is more to do, though, and the Scottish Parliament has the power to do it. That is why the Scottish Conservatives are calling for an armed forces and veterans bill to enshrine in law the armed forces covenant for public bodies such as the NHS and local authorities. We also want to see a help-to-buy scheme specifically for veterans, along with a new top-up benefit for veterans.

On remembrance day, let us give thanks for those who have served and sacrificed for us and let us make sure that those who continue to serve and sacrifice are given the support and respect that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Keith Brown to respond to the debate. You have nine minutes, minister.

16:50

Keith Brown: I will try to get through as much as I can. I want to refer to several members' speeches, although I will not have time to refer to everyone's.

First, I thank Edward Mountain for his very gracious speech. In particular, I pick out his reference to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This year, I had the chance to visit its headquarters in France to see what it does. The CWGC is still finding remains in France and I had privileged access to see where it takes them, along with other artefacts that are found, such as letters from loved ones. The CWGC does a fantastic job and it is a testament to its work that many countries around the world look to its example to see whether they can deliver a similar service—although hopefully we will never again have that volume of graves to look after.

Paul Sweeney mentioned the Poppyscotland manifesto. I will not go through it line by line, but I will say that I have different figures from some of those that have been raised in relation to its recommendations. There is a danger in overemphasising the levels of homelessness, imprisonment and ill health beyond what they really are. For example, currently, about 2 per cent of all households assessed as homeless have a member who was formerly in the armed forces—that is lower than the rate for the general population. It is important that we have an accurate picture. I will come back to Maurice Golden's points on that shortly.

I was going to say something about the fact that my summing-up speech will be more about remembrance than veterans. I am happy to admit that there may be a lesson there: perhaps we should split those two things in future. It might be that some people are a bit inhibited from having a go at the Government on veterans issues because the debate is tied in with remembrance. That should not be the case. Maurice Golden made some trenchant comments about the Scottish Government's performance. I welcome that—it is the way to improve things. Perhaps we should learn that lesson for next year.

On remembrance, Edward Mountain said that he was the third generation of his family to serve in the armed forces, and his son was the fourth. I have not done this before, but I will speak about my family. I was named Keith James Brown after my grandfather, James Brown, who was called up to the Black Watch in the first world war for a short time—he was only 18. His children included my Uncle James, who served with the Royal Navy; my Aunt Mary, who served with the Army; my father, Atholl Brown, who did his national service in the Army; and my Uncle Douglas, who did his national service in the very difficult environment of Malta. My Uncle Robert died last week. His funeral was this afternoon and I was unable to attend it because of the debate. He served in the Royal Navy for nine years. Realising the impact that service had on previous generations is salutary.

Stephen Kerr made an important point. From 2014 to 2018, the Scottish Government had a scheme to allow pupils from every school in Scotland to attend a battlefield. I find that young people are more affected by that than some older people are. If pupils have studied the battle beforehand and study some of the graves, it has a profound effect when they see that some of the people who died are about 17 years old—the same age as them. I wonder whether we will keep remembrance at the same level. I am not criticising any member, but the debate is not the best attended and there is no one in the gallery, even though the debate started eight minutes late. We all have a job in hand to ensure that we continue to remember. I agree with Stephen Kerr about the need to remember.

Graeme Dey made some important points about universal credit; it cannot be right to expect armed forces personnel to be on universal credit, especially in the numbers that he described.

I disagree with a number of the points that Annie Wells made about how we look after veterans in this country. Remember that we do not get funding for any veterans activity; we were the first country in the UK to have a veterans commissioner and the first to have a veterans fund. We have been the first to do many things that have been copied

by other parts of the UK. I accept that we are subject to challenging criticism, but we do a very good job, although we can continue to improve.

It might have been Katy Clark who said that many people who served before 1974 did not get a pension. Well, there are those of us who served after 1974 who did not get a pension, so that has not been resolved. Some of the work of the veterans organisation at the UK level on pensions and compensation is atrocious, and that has to be improved.

There is much that we agree on, and at this time of year it is important that we reflect on the importance of remembrance as well as highlighting the key events that have taken place this year. We remember the sacrifices that have been made by the armed services community, not, as Christine Grahame said, because we want to seek to glorify war, but to recognise the hardships endured and the courage displayed in the face of adversity.

While we reflect on the impact of war on Scotland, we must remember the suffering of families at home who face the uncertainty of the future and of what will become of their loved ones serving overseas. The remembrance period also plays a vital role in raising awareness of past conflicts, as we have mentioned, among those who were too young to remember them.

It is extraordinary to think that the Falkland Islands conflict is now further away from us today than the second world war was when we served in the Falklands. This year was the 40th anniversary of the war, and I was delighted to attend various events to pay tribute to the bravery and commitment of those involved.

In June, I was pleased that the Government, working in partnership with Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, was able to deliver a national event in Edinburgh commemorating the anniversary of the conflict, and I had the opportunity to lay a wreath and deliver a reading in St Andrew Square. Jackson Carlaw also attended that day, as I recall. The event provided an opportunity for reflection and to remember all those who lost their lives in the conflict.

Those events highlight the strong cultural link between Scotland and the Falkland Islands community. A number of members attended events in the Parliament where that was highlighted. I am honoured to have been invited by the Falkland Islands Government to visit later this week and participate in a series of commemorative events that will provide an opportunity to pay tribute to the heroism of the courageous men and women who made up the task force and set sail to free the islands, and to hear from veterans of the Falklands and members

of the armed forces who currently serve there. I very much look forward to that.

As has been mentioned by a number of members, many of our veterans still bear physical and mental scars from conflict, and it is important that we remain committed to supporting the battles that they still face. In July of this year, I went to the McCrae's Battalion Trust at the Contalmaison cairn in northern France to mark the anniversary of the first day of the battle of the Somme and lay a wreath on behalf of the people of Scotland.

Many lost their lives that day, and I remember standing beside the memorial there and thinking back to sitting there in 2016—the 100th anniversary of the battle—and seeing coachloads of Scottish children stopping to visit. It has almost become recognised as a Scottish memorial, and is important for the reasons that we have mentioned. Alongside the mayor of Contalmaison and representatives of the French military, it was a valuable opportunity to pay tribute to those who lost their lives or were otherwise impacted by the war. I was particularly heartened at the bravery of the Scots who fought alongside the French over the centuries, and who will now be forever memorialised by a commemorative plaque at Les Invalides—I am probably pronouncing that wrong—which is one of France's most important military history sites.

Remembrance day is a time for reflection, and there should always be time in that to reflect on the experiences of underrepresented groups in the armed forces community. I mentioned earlier that I had the privilege of meeting Fighting With Pride, which is a charity that supports LGBT+ veterans, service personnel and their families and works with organisations that support veterans. It is important that, in remembering the bravery and commitment of those who have served and lost their lives in conflict, we acknowledge the additional struggles that some veterans faced.

The work of Fighting With Pride and the whole charitable sector in providing valuable support to veterans and their families throughout Scotland is crucial to the armed forces community. The way they were treated was appalling, and recompense has to be given to those who suffered. They were thrown out, investigated and sometimes imprisoned because of their sexuality when they left the armed forces. I thank everyone who supports those charities in whatever way they can.

As we have heard, the remembrance period serves a vital purpose, and there is a remarkable degree of unanimity and consensus in the chamber on the issue. The remembrance period allows everyone in Scotland a moment to pause, as it will do during events in the course of this week, and to be thankful to those who served.

At the start of the debate, Edward Mountain mentioned the contract. That is probably not understood by many people who are not in the armed forces. If a person signs up, they sign up to put their life on the line. I hope that that will not happen, but there is, of course, always the possibility that it will. I recognise Edward Mountain's service, too. That is the contract. If a person signs up to that contract, surely the contract that we sign up to is to ensure that they are looked after when they have finished their service or are remembered if they die in service.

Finally, all this is not to glorify war—the motion makes that clear—but to recognise the sacrifices made to protect the freedoms that we enjoy today.

Urgent Question

17:00

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest statistics showing that only 63.1 per cent of patients are being seen within four hours in A and E, which is, reportedly, the lowest ever recorded.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The promise, as at the week ending 30 October, is clearly not where we want it to be. Covid continues to impact on the delivery and performance of services, and pandemic backlogs, Brexit-driven staff shortages and inflation costs are all contributing to making this winter possibly the most challenging that the national health service has ever faced.

Delayed discharges continue to be the single biggest factor driving up accident and emergency waits. That is why the relentless focus of our £600 million winter plan is on social care and actions to encourage integration authorities to help to alleviate delays.

In addition, we are working with NHS boards through our £50 million collaborative improvement programme, which looks to drive down A and E waits by offering alternatives to hospital, such as hospital at home, directing people to more appropriate urgent care settings and, where possible, scheduling urgent appointments.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That is not the fault of clinicians or emergency care workers. They are working their hearts out.

When the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care took office in May 2021, A and E departments were able to see 87 per cent of patients within four hours. Today, the figure stands at just 63.1 per cent. That is the worst figure on record.

Things get worse when we look at the longest waits. The number of patients who wait for over eight hours has gone up by 717 per cent, and waits of over 12 hours have gone up by more than 1,000 per cent. All of that is happening on the health secretary's watch.

Does the health secretary think that he is the best person to resolve the crisis? Is he saying that there is nobody at all who could do the job better than him?

Humza Yousaf: When I took office, we still had legal restrictions because of Covid, of course. We no longer have those legal restrictions, so people

are able to interact, and our services in the NHS are able to recover. We did not have elective care—in effect, we had paused it—at the time when I took office.

Since I took office, we have had not one, not two, not three, but four waves of Covid. That is the point that Alex Cole-Hamilton forgot to mention in his tirade. We are still in the midst of a global pandemic.

The Opposition might want to concentrate on personalities; it can do that. However, my relentless focus is on the people who are working on the front line of our NHS. They do not deserve a game of personality politics and the NHS being used as a political football; they deserve the Government and every single person in the Opposition ensuring that we come forward with constructive solutions that will help our NHS at the most difficult time. That is why my relentless focus is on the NHS and those who work on the front line. I am very grateful for all their efforts every day, day in and day out.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I listened to that answer. I am sorry, but how dare the cabinet secretary dodge and deflect the Government's negligence and inadequacies once again by constantly hiding behind the Covid pandemic? That is an insult to doctors, nurses and patients who are waiting in vain.

Nicola Sturgeon's NHS chief executive of five years, Paul Gray, said that the crisis was coming down the tracks long before anyone had heard of Covid. Pandemic or no pandemic, the cabinet secretary should stop abdicating responsibility.

Everyone knows someone who is on a waiting list. When we drill down into the detail around emergency care, things get far worse. In the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh, only 45 per cent of patients are seen within four hours. At the Queen Elizabeth university hospital—the superhospital—in Glasgow, the figure is just 42 per cent. We have not had the first frost of winter, so things could get a lot worse.

What modelling has the cabinet secretary's Government done for A and E waiting times this winter? Can he tell us with confidence that this is as bad as it gets?

Humza Yousaf: I fully expect that there will be fluctuations throughout the course of the winter. I suspect that, in some weeks, we will see improvements, and that in others, unfortunately, a spike in Covid or flu cases might have an impact on A and E waiting times. I am not going to pretend otherwise, nor will I insult the intelligence of anybody in the chamber or anybody who is watching, by suggesting otherwise.

Alex Cole-Hamilton is wrong to suggest that there is no element of recovery in our NHS. Statistics that were published by Public Health Scotland show, for example, that in 75 per cent of out-patient specialties, fewer than 10 people wait for more than 2 years for elective surgery. In elective care, therefore, we are clearly seeing positive progress.

In relation to A and E, that is why the focus of the Government is on the front line and on investing in our staff. It is also why, as I said a few weeks ago when I spoke about our winter resilience plan, we are recruiting 750 nurses, midwives and allied health professionals from overseas, and why we are recruiting 250 support staff to help with acute primary care and mental health.

What I do not need from Alex Cole-Hamilton—I suspect that nobody needs it—is a tirade without any constructive solutions or suggestions. The Government will continue with our focus on solutions that will help our NHS over what will be the most challenging winter. My focus remains on that every day.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): As you might expect, there is a lot of interest in this item, so I would be grateful for short and concise questions and responses.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary acknowledge the importance of recruiting and investing in NHS staff in Scotland on the basis of their skills, training, ability and commitment to do the job, and will he join me in commending the wonderful NHS staff of all nationalities—in particular, in the light of Keir Starmer's troubling and short-sighted claims that the United Kingdom is recruiting too many foreigners into the NHS? [*Interruption.*]

Humza Yousaf: I could not agree more with Kaukab Stewart. Overseas workers in our NHS, whether they are doctors, nurses, admin staff, porters, caterers, domestic staff or anyone in between, are all part of our NHS family. Keir Starmer's remarks were inflammatory and have no place in our discourse in Scotland. I hope that decent members of Scottish Labour will speak up against those remarks—Labour members seem to be shouting from sedentary positions—but, so far, all we have heard is a deafening silence. Although Labour's concentration might well be on the front pages of certain right-wing newspapers, our focus is on the front line of our NHS.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Today, it was reported on the front page of *The Scotsman* that patients presenting at the acute assessment unit at the QEUH are not included in the A and E statistics, despite the unit's fulfilling that function. As many as 2,000 patients a month are being

missed from our A and E waiting times stats because of how data is collected.

The Scottish National Party often states that Scotland's emergency departments are outperforming England's on the targets for patients to be seen within four hours, but that has been challenged by senior medics. Statistics from Public Health Scotland refer to only 30 of the 91 A and E services in Scotland, yet the Scottish Government measures the performance of those units against 170 of England's type 1 major A and E services, which deal with the most severe situations, including shootings, stabbings and extreme road traffic accidents.

Will the Scottish Government admit that it is using statistics to cover up the true scale of the humanitarian crisis in our NHS?

Humza Yousaf: No—I do not agree with that at all. It is well recognised that, in respect of comparisons across the UK, when NHS England's agency NHS Digital compares A and E performances across the four nations, it uses the terms "core" for Scotland, "major" for Wales and "type 1" for England. All those services are consultant-led A and Es that offer 24-hour services with full resuscitation facilities and designated accommodation for A and E patients.

In my response to Alex Cole-Hamilton, I said that the figures for the week ending 30 October were nowhere near where I want them to be. I will not pretend otherwise. However, we are in a global pandemic, of course, which is affecting health services across the UK and—dare I say it?—right across the world.

I am pleased that, even with those challenges, Scotland continues to have the best-performing A and E service in the entire UK. It is 8.7 percentage points better than England and 8.1 percentage points better than Wales. In fact, analysis by Sky News has found that half of 1 per cent of Scottish patients waited longer than 12 hours in A and E. That is half of 1 per cent more than I would like it to be, but it compares with 3.1 per cent in England and 6.1 per cent in Wales.

The point of my raising that is not to say that our performance is where we want it to be—I am saying that it is not. It is to show the context of a global pandemic that is clearly affecting health services across the United Kingdom and the world.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is another record-breaking day for the cabinet secretary. We know that the situation in A and E is emblematic of the wider crisis that is engulfing our NHS. Delays to discharge are at their highest-ever levels, social care is in crisis and the Royal College of Nursing is balloting nurses on strike action for the first time in its 106-year history.

I have a constituent who has been waiting for nine months for a colposcopy after her smear test reported high-risk human papillomavirus and abnormal cells in her cervix. That is four months longer than is set out in national guidelines.

Excessive waits are the difference between good outcomes and bad outcomes. Once again, I ask: when will the cabinet secretary set out a clear and meaningful plan, ahead of winter, to deal with the shocking waiting times? If he cannot, or if he will not, will he resign?

Humza Yousaf: I am happy to look at the details of Paul O'Kane's constituency case. On the face of it, from what he has reported, that sounds like a long wait, indeed. If he wants to furnish me with the details, I will be happy to look at that.

We have a plan. I stood here and referenced our £600 million investment over the winter. What will that do? We will recruit 750 nurses, midwives and allied health professionals from overseas. We will recruit 250 support staff during this winter across acute care, primary care and mental health services. We will give £45 million to the Scottish Ambulance Service so that it continues with the recruitment of paramedics. We will invest in hospital at home, and we will allow health boards to introduce schemes in which employer contributions can be recycled. We are taking action.

In addition to that, I will convene a further meeting with local authorities and care providers tomorrow. We are investing in social care because the number 1 factor in A and E delays is social care. The responsibility for providing care packages remains at the local authority level, and we will work collaboratively with our local authorities.

In relation to all that Paul O'Kane has said, and in relation to all the questions from Labour so far, not a single constructive solution has been offered. That is symptomatic of why he is sitting there and why the SNP Government is in charge of the NHS in Scotland.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Long waits for A and E mean that more ambulances are clogged up with patients waiting to get into A and E. At the moment, the protocol is that doctors in emergency departments cannot treat patients in ambulances. If the cabinet secretary cannot solve the delays at A and E, will he look at allowing doctors to treat patients in ambulances, while they wait for the problem to be resolved?

Humza Yousaf: We will look at any suggestion that comes from the Opposition, so I will take a look at what Edward Mountain has proposed. However, the source of the problem is the issue of

delayed discharge and the solution is to deal with that issue. Social care is at the very source of that.

At tomorrow's ministerial assurance group meeting with local authorities and our colleagues from the care sector, we will see what more can be done to get those 1,800 people who are in our hospitals but who are clinically safe to be discharged home or as close to home as possible—for their benefit, let alone for the benefit of the NHS. That is where the source of the challenge lies, and that is where our energy and efforts will go. Notwithstanding that, I will, of course, look at Edward Mountain's suggestion.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Long waiting times are contributing to hundreds of avoidable deaths. That is not acceptable in any part of the country, whether that is in England, Wales or Scotland.

Lanarkshire remains in code black status. The cabinet secretary knows that colleagues in Lanarkshire have worked constructively on a cross-party basis. We appreciate the time that he gave in coming to a recent meeting with the NHS board. However, today, NHS Lanarkshire has recorded its worst-ever A and E performance times. Things continue to get worse, not better. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the situation in Lanarkshire? What more is the Government doing to address the dangerous and unsafe situation for staff and patients?

Humza Yousaf: Monica Lennon is absolutely right to make two important points. The first is about the need to put patients at the centre of this. We know that excessively long waits do patients harm; I will certainly not argue with that point. The Government is, of course, focused on trying to avoid excessively long waits, because any such wait is one too many. We know that there is a job to do. I will not rehearse everything that I have said in my previous answers.

On Monica Lennon's second point, which she made well, there has been very good cross-party consideration and challenge on the issue in Lanarkshire. She has challenged me quite frequently on it, and she is right to do so. I will be in Lanarkshire tomorrow and will, of course, raise the issue relating to the code black status and the continued challenges that NHS Lanarkshire faces. On the back of that, I will write to Monica Lennon with further details and an update.

Decision Time

17:15

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-06637, in the name of Keith Brown, on remembrance commemorations and support for the veterans and armed forces community, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the enduring importance of the Remembrance period to families and communities across Scotland and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms that people enjoy today; recognises the Armed Forces' and others' efforts in peace-keeping and peace-making across the world as ways of preventing war and the consequences of war; acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports the Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the Scottish Government's progress thus far in delivering the commitments it has made in the action plan, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with the UK Government and other devolved administrations, to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

Gene-editing Technology

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-05292, in the name of Stephen Kerr, entitled "A Potato With More Vitamin C Than a Lemon". The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that gene-editing technology is game-changing for food production; understands that there is a big difference between gene-modification and gene-editing; further understands that gene-editing makes small, specific changes to existing DNA, or removes a section altogether, speeding up a process that could occur through natural breeding; recognises that scientists at the James Hutton Institute in Dundee have reportedly predicted that gene-editing technology could result in potatoes with more vitamin C than lemons being grown, and considers that Scotland could be left behind England in food production due to Scottish legislation prohibiting the use of gene-editing in Scotland.

17:17

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, here is something that I never thought I would have to say in the Scottish Parliament: contrary to what the Parliament's Twitter account says, I can confirm that I am not a potato. [*Laughter.*] For those members who are not on Twitter or who have not seen the tweet, it is really funny.

The motion before us speaks to Scotland's history, in which we have always been at the forefront of innovation and development; to the Scotland of today, in which our citizens are well positioned to take full advantage of the latest scientific developments in this time of extraordinary and ever-quickenning change; and to the Scotland of tomorrow, in which we are at the cutting edge of a technological revolution that we can scarcely begin to imagine.

From James Watt's improvements to the steam engine to the construction of the Falkirk wheel, Scotland is at its best when its people are being their best creative, innovative and entrepreneurial selves, and when we embrace the modern world and play our full part in its design.

It is in that spirit that I address the motion before us. I strongly believe that Scotland should be at the forefront of gene-editing technology. We have one of the best-educated populations in the world, and we have the soils and the environment that are suitable for growing healthy and fertile crops. We have a farming sector that embraces—and wants to embrace—change in technology, and we

are free to pursue our own destiny without the burden of European Union regulation. Scotland can, and must, be at the forefront of that new technology.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The member talks about being free of the burden of EU regulation. Does that mean that he is giving up on Scotland selling seed potatoes to Europe?

Stephen Kerr: We are talking about tatties right now, but not the sort that Jim Fairlie wants to talk about. We are talking about the technology that Scotland wants to embrace and should be embracing.

The climate is changing; at the same time, the world is becoming a less secure and dangerous place. With Putin's aggression in Ukraine and climate-induced crop failures around the world, security of food production must be further up our agenda. We must be able to produce enough food to feed our people and people beyond our shores, and continuous temperature changes will inevitably change the way in which we farm.

We are lucky to have experienced relatively minor crop failures this year, but we do not fully understand the impact that continuous temperature rises will have on Scottish agriculture and food production. We must be prepared, and the best way to prepare is to embrace science. That is nothing new: we all know the stories of how selective breeding changed the way that food was produced to make crops more palatable and easier to grow in less fertile soils, or to deal with changes in temperature or rainfall. For example, we can look at how our farmers use science and data to ensure productive output of lamb; that is another area in which we need to adopt a new approach.

There is a scientific consensus that gene editing is safe and practical. In 2016, 107 Nobel laureates pleaded for the introduction of golden rice. In India and Australia, the development of heat-resistant and drought-resistant crops is at the forefront of farming development. Scotland should be harnessing that expertise and setting an example to other parts of the world.

As the title of the motion highlights, we can make our food not only more resilient or able to grow in less ideal conditions, but better for us. More nutritious food is better food, and the developers at the famed James Hutton Institute in Dundee have done significant work in that regard. They predict that gene-editing technology will result in the growing of—as in the motion's title—potatoes with more vitamin C than lemons.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): How would the member recommend that we capture the vitamin C from those vitamin-enriched

potatoes? Vitamin C is destroyed by heat and light and dissolves in water, so I am wondering how we would capture it. Would we need to drink a whole tattie-pot of water?

Stephen Kerr: I invite Emma Harper to join me on my forthcoming visit to the James Hutton Institute, where we can ask those questions of the people who know the answers.

Combining secure food production with more nutritious food will result in a healthier population and greater food security, in a world where food production is becoming increasingly unstable.

There is an economic imperative as well as a security imperative. The opportunity for Scottish business to be at the forefront of these developments is huge. A monopoly currently exists in the world, whereby the production of gene-edited crops is limited to a small number of large global companies. We can change that by creating the conditions for new innovative disruptor companies to develop, test and deploy those new products in the Scottish sphere.

If crops fail while other countries embrace that technology before we do, we risk losing a great deal, not only financially but in terms of our nation's self-reliance. We can secure Scotland's food and drink industry into the future.

The debate about gene-edited food has often attracted a great deal of scaremongering, with cries of "Frankenstein foods" and political opportunists spreading false information. All that is unhelpful. There are, however, legitimate concerns, and I will take such little time as I have left to address those.

First, there is the issue of cross-contamination. That is not unique to gene-edited crops—it is a problem throughout agriculture, and it is why there will need to be a robust and rigorous set of tests before approval is given to any new crops. The evidence from the scientific community is clear: high standards of testing will make gene editing safe.

Another concern is the cost to farmers. As I already outlined, Government needs to challenge monopolistic practices. Four companies own 70 per cent of all the gene-edited seeds, which allows them to set their prices high, so we need competition and innovation as well as better regulation.

The third concern that we should address is just how expensive research is in gene editing. It is a new industry and, as such, the development costs of new products will be high. They will become cheaper as research continues. We always build on that which has come before. More research means cheaper research, and there is a spin-off as lessons learned in agricultural gene editing will

likely advance into other areas, such as medicine. An example is the chimeric antigen receptor T-cell—CAR-T—therapy that is being developed for use in treating some forms of cancer.

Those concerns are legitimate but my biggest concern would be if we failed to grasp the great opportunity of gene editing for Scotland. As have seen what can be achieved with enough effort in the development of the Covid vaccines, is it not time for us to put our faith in scientific progress? As we accept the scientific consensus on man-made climate change, is it not time to embrace the consensus on gene editing?

Scotland's people are innovative. We embrace and accept change. We are cautious when we need to be cautious but brave when we need to be brave. As policy makers, members of the Parliament must send the signal that we are ready to be bold and seize the opportunities of being world leaders on the issue. Scots have always been at the forefront of every global technological revolution and we should let our people be free to be at the forefront of the gene-editing technological revolution. Let us be ambitious, build on our tradition and make Scotland's name heard globally in the fields of ethical and pragmatic gene editing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Harper. You have around four minutes, Ms Harper.

17:26

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Wow—I wish that I had more than four minutes for this speech.

We need to be more canny about how we proceed with the science and technology. I am passionate about evidence and about progress. Stephen Kerr is obviously passionate about what he speaks about as well. I welcome that.

The use of genetic technologies is a complex and emotive subject. It is abundantly clear that there are issues that need to be addressed if genetic modification, gene editing or clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats—CRISPR—are to be used in our food system.

The United Kingdom Government has introduced its controversial Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, which aims to enable the expansion of gene-edited crops and livestock across the UK. Although the bill might be intended as England-only legislation, the documentation is clear that it will have a significant impact on areas that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. It will allow gene-edited products into Scotland for sale, aided by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

The bill makes it clear that the UK Government is intent on diverging from the UK-wide GM regulatory regimes through the various relevant common frameworks. Any shared Government discussions of that nature should have taken place prior to the bill's introduction to enable consideration of potential policy divergence. However, that was not the case. Indeed, the UK Government invited the Scottish Government to join discussions on the bill only the day before—aye, the day before—it was introduced to the UK Parliament, despite numerous requests from the Minister for Environment and Land Reform and the Welsh Government to see a draft of the bill and discuss it.

We know the proposed benefits of gene-editing technology: increased crop yields, increased disease resistance, increased nutritional qualities and adapting to the increased temperature as climate change continues. The views of stakeholders in Scotland will be central to decision making on that devolved area of responsibility. They encompass views and evidence from the scientific community, views from across the spectrum of industry interests and, crucially, the views of consumers and the public as a whole.

Stephen Kerr: If the consensus is that we should go forward with the scientific and technological breakthrough that gene editing represents, will Emma Harper support it?

Emma Harper: I would support any ways in which we can innovate and move forward. We need a canny approach—we need to ensure that the research is evidence based. That is how we should take things forward.

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

Emma Harper: I will, in one wee second.

The UK Government's own impact assessment on the bill makes it clear that the market for precision-bred products

“ultimately depends on prevailing consumer attitudes to products which contain genetically engineered material”

and that the

“public's acceptance of GE and similar products remains an area of uncertainty.”

I will take a wee briefie intervention from Edward Mountain.

Edward Mountain: [*Inaudible.*]

Emma Harper: Oh dear.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mountain?

Edward Mountain: I apologise profusely, Presiding Officer.

This is an interesting conversation. Would the member consider allowing gene editing in order to cure human diseases, while not allowing it in order to ensure that humans can be properly fed?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you one more minute, Ms Harper, because you are almost up to your four minutes.

Emma Harper: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am really interested in the subject. As a type 1 diabetic, I feel that if a gene could be put into my body to allow my pancreas to produce insulin, that would be worth supporting. I reiterate, however, that it is about undertaking proper, measured research and then taking technology forward. We need to look at everything appropriately.

I am interested to hear the sentiments of many across the United Kingdom, including NFU Scotland and the NFU in England and Wales. The NFU has stated its opposition to the UK Government's preferred option of not requiring labelling for precision-bred products; the UK Government's approach would mean that consumers will have absolutely no way of knowing which products are genetically modified, and yet it remains on course to implement that change. Last week, I had a similar discussion with witnesses from Food Standards Scotland during a meeting of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. FSS is interested in looking at how the product will be labelled as all this goes forward.

I am conscious of time, Presiding Officer. We need to ensure that the Scottish Government, and stakeholders in Scotland, are involved. I am interested in the impact assessment that the UK Government has produced, but I do not have time to talk about it today. Gene editing is a really important and emotive issue. If it is pursued, it must be pursued properly, and the UK Government's Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill must not impact on devolution. We need to use the best science and evidence.

17:32

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I congratulate my good friend and colleague Stephen Kerr on securing this timely debate. I reassure him that he should be proud of his new social media tag of “Mr Potato”. My two children, Rowan and Leo, who are aged two and three, are currently obsessed with a cartoon character called Supertato, so perhaps that is the nickname that Mr Kerr should aspire to achieve.

Scotland is rightly proud of its position as a world leader in agriculture and biotechnical science, boasting internationally renowned centres of excellence such as the Roslin Institute, Moredun, Scotland's Rural College and the James

Hutton Institute, underpinned by a vibrant university sector. We punch well above our weight as a global centre for agricultural research and development. However, if Scotland is to maintain its reputation for scientific leadership, and if our farmers and growers are to have access to the tools that they need to deliver the productive, sustainable and climate-resilient farming systems of the future, the Scottish Government must urgently rethink its hostile and outdated policy towards the use of more precise genetic technologies such as gene editing.

Dr Joanne Russell, a lead researcher at the newly established International Barley Hub in Dundee, recently shared her personal views that her research would benefit enormously from greater access to genetic technologies such as gene editing. Dr Russell explained that there are more than 400,000 different barley accessions in gene banks around the world, and that the solutions to many of the biotic, abiotic and climate challenges for the barley crop lie somewhere in that genetic diversity. Access to technology such as genome sequencing and gene editing will potentially dramatically improve the chances of identifying and exploiting beneficial traits in the barley crop.

Against a background of war, climate change and rising food and energy costs, we must ensure that research in Scotland does not get left behind, but many fear that that might already be happening. In March this year, a simplified regime for experimental field trial research of gene-edited crops was introduced in England, and within months the system was already supporting more field trials than was the case under the previous genetic modification regime. Will the minister consider the introduction of such a scheme to ensure that research that is currently confined to the laboratory can progress to the field, in order to prevent our researchers from being left behind? I hope that she will address that question when summing up.

Scottish ministers have said that their preference is to remain aligned with the EU on the issue, and that they are monitoring EU developments closely, but I wonder how closely they monitored the conclusions of the EU farming ministers meeting in September in Prague, which the Czech Presidency summarised as follows:

“The Ministers agreed that the EU must react as quickly as possible to the development of modern trends and not hinder innovation. It is therefore important to change the outdated legislative framework by which the EU regulates the use of modern plant breeding methods. This framework not only restricts European farmers, but also leads to an outflow of top experts to countries outside the European Union”.

Perhaps Màiri McAllan has also followed the recent EU public consultation, which found that 80

per cent of participants consider existing GM organisms rules as not fit for purpose in regulating plant variety development using techniques such as gene editing. The European Commission has said that genomic techniques can also contribute to a more resilient and sustainable agrifood system by developing crop varieties that are more resistant to pests, disease and the effects of climate change. They require fewer natural resources, fertilisers and pesticides, can improve the nutrient content of food and feed and reduce harmful substances such as toxins and allergens.

In view of those positive statements from EU ministers, is it not the time for Scottish Government ministers to acknowledge the potential of those technologies, as EU ministers are doing, and move on from the tired rhetoric that gene editing threatens the clean, green image of Scotland’s food and drink industries?

Ministers often refer to needing a social licence to move forward, which is a classic kick-it-down-the-road strategy. Ministers should be aware that the Government’s own research has shown that consumers in Scotland are very open to technologies such as gene editing. Ms Harper might also be interested to hear that research published last month by Food Standards Scotland shows that around two in three people consistently say that they would eat a precision-bred product if it had health benefits, was better for the environment, improved animal welfare, was safer for people with allergies, tasted better, was cheaper and more resilient to climate change.

Surely the minister must agree that that is a remarkable thumbs up for a technology that has not yet reached the marketplace and is a good basis for the Scottish Government to embrace the potential of a technology that has so much promise for Scotland’s world-leading scientific, farming and food and drinks sectors.

17:37

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to discuss an issue of critical importance and considerable interest, which I suspect would not ordinarily be debated in the Parliament without an Opposition members’ business debate. Therefore, I thank Mr Kerr for lodging his motion. To be fair, the Scottish Parliament’s Twitter account describes him not just as a potato, but as one

“With More Vitamin C Than a Lemon”.

I am sure that he has been called an awful lot worse. However, Mr Kerr is to be congratulated on bringing forward a serious matter that deserves a serious debate.

When the issue has been raised in Parliament in the past, too often, in responses from ministers, the term “gene editing” has been interchanged with “genetic modification”. As the motion states, gene editing does not result in the introduction of DNA from other species, which is an important distinction. A debate on whether to decouple gene editing and genetic modification is one that we need to have. Labour is unashamedly pro-science and pro-innovation, so we have had a long-standing commitment to having that debate.

However, we also believe in good regulation. That is the key to public safety and the key to public, and indeed investor, confidence. We have heard members talk about the potential benefits that gene-edited crops could bring, including the creation of plants that are resistant to extreme weather conditions and disease. In turn, that could reduce the need for pesticides, create higher yields to address food insecurity driven by climate change and improve the nutritional quality of food. For example, farmers could have the tools to beat virus yellows without recourse to neonicotinoids. That would be a prize worth having.

We need to recognise that any new technology also carries risks: risks of unintended consequences, risks of technology being misused and risks of commercial pressure being exerted, which are not in the public interest. Those risks need to be recognised and addressed, because unless we have public and investor confidence, research will stall and those potential benefits will be lost.

Today’s debate is particularly relevant given that the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill is currently passing through the UK Parliament.

Jim Fairlie: Does the member share the Welsh Government’s concern that the UK Government has ridden the bill through without any consultation with the devolved Parliaments?

Colin Smyth: Labour is seeking to ensure that that bill goes through the Parliament with a more consistent approach between Scotland and the rest of the UK. At the very least, we want transparent information and clear labelling to be enshrined in the bill, given the implications for Scotland of any changes in England. I agree that better consultation would have been beneficial for the bill. Labour is also seeking to amend the bill because we do not believe that it goes far enough on regulation, safety and, crucially, animal welfare, on which we have particular concerns.

I am in no doubt that gene editing could have real gains for improving environmental sustainability and reducing food insecurity. I recognise that laws that were designed decades ago for genetically modified products do not reflect advances in understanding and technology. Many

countries are already considering whether gene editing should be treated differently from genetic modification in how they are regulated, which is a debate that Scotland needs to have. One lesson for this Parliament from the current debate in the UK Parliament is that although we need to have the debate, we cannot leave the issue to the market—Scotland’s reputation for high-quality food produce is far too important to do that. Any changes that we make will need a strong regulatory framework that puts safety and the confidence of investors, researchers and, most importantly, the public as its very heart.

17:41

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I congratulate Stephen Kerr on his members’ business debate and the good humour with which he has approached having been what I would call “memed”.

As has been said, gene-edited products currently fall within the definition of genetically modified organisms—GMOs—in the regulatory regimes across the UK and in European legislation. The debate has highlighted significant differences between the original GM techniques and a range of newer techniques, whether we call those “gene editing”, “precision breeding”—as the UK Government’s bill does—or “new genomic techniques”, as the European Commission has described them.

Stephen Kerr is right: technology advances, and I believe that it is right that we continually assess whether regulations are fit for purpose in the light of that. However, that requires meaningful engagement across all parts of society, which means recognising that science and technology—as important as they are—do not exist in a vacuum. They must be assessed for their appropriateness to our society, environment and, indeed, our place in the world, because, although Scotland is an island geographically, we are not an island when it comes to our values or our trade arrangements or aspirations. I believe that the UK Government’s bill fails to recognise that important point. In its haste to find ways to distance itself from the European Union, the UK Government has shown very little concern for the impact of introducing a different regulatory regime for England from those that are enforced across the UK. As my colleague Emma Harper alluded to, our colleagues in the Welsh Government have expressed similar concerns.

The UK Government is rushing through the bill, despite being aware of its impact on devolved decision making through avenues such as the UK-wide national listing process for seeds and plant varieties and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which this Parliament rejected and

which the Scottish Government remains wholly opposed to.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the minister for her response to my debate. Does she accept that the European Commission sees that there is positivity in gene editing and that gene editing crops, for example, might be a means to helping the EU to achieve its sustainability and food security goals?

Màiri McAllan: I have long held the position, which I have shared with Stephen Kerr in the past, that I am watching very closely the developments in the EU on the assessment of the decoupling of gene editing from genetic modification. I will continue to do that as the results of that work unfold.

However, back in the UK, in June, 32 groups including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Soil Association and Nourish Scotland jointly stated that the UK's Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill

“has huge implications for farming, food, animal welfare, the environment, the UK's internal market and its trading relationship with key global partners.”

They said that it is

“clear that, in its haste to deregulate, the Government has not adequately considered these implications”.

That is before we even consider that the UK Government's regulatory policy committee reviewed the bill's impact assessment twice and found it to be not fit for purpose.

Our concern about the UK Government's haste and failure to recognise devolved competence should not be mistaken for opposition to innovation and technology in the farming sectors. On the contrary, the Scottish Government enthusiastically supports innovation and technology, and we remain key partners with leading institutions such as the James Hutton Institute, which receives significant funding through our strategic research programmes. I am happy to assure Mr Carson—

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise to the minister—I appreciate that she is well under way in her speech—but Finlay Carson is trying to intervene through the new system, which does not seem to be working.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will check that very briefly, Mr Kerr.

We will give this a go. I call Finlay Carson, who was seeking to intervene on the minister. Ah, there you are, Mr Carson.

Finlay Carson: Thank you, Presiding Officer. My intervention comes slightly later than I would have liked it to have come, but I wonder whether Emma Harper, Jim Fairlie and the minister would,

for once, put constitutional grievance aside and concentrate on doing what is best for Scottish farmers, which is to allow the world-leading researchers in Scotland to accelerate the move towards gene-editing methods.

Màiri McAllan: I am happy to confirm to Finlay Carson that my focus, on a day-to-day basis, is on, among other things, supporting Scotland's farmers. That is evident from a great deal of the Government's work, not least from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands' statement earlier this afternoon.

Prior to Mr Carson's intervention, I was going to assure him, having mentioned the James Hutton Institute, that Scottish research institutions remain at the forefront of scientific development globally, and it is very important, in my view, that they continue to be so.

The progress that we make must also support trade. The EU, our biggest international trade partner, has consulted on changes to its regulations on gene editing and is expected to propose policy options in the spring. It is only right that I take those into account, because the EU is a beacon of environmental progress and the Scottish Government is committed to EU alignment, when appropriate, and because we want to ensure that our farmers, food producers and businesses can continue to trade with the EU without the risk of additional barriers beyond those that have already been imposed on us from the Tories' Brexit.

The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill is entering the House of Lords, but there remain many unanswered questions. A particularly important one relates to the views of the public, because, in addition to the practicalities, we must get the principles right. The use of genetic technologies is, as Emma Harper said, complex and emotive, and there are many issues to be addressed if they are to form part of our food system. I firmly believe that we need to take into account the perspective of the public and consumers, alongside that of academics, food producers, farmers and environmental groups. I know that Finlay Carson thinks that issues of public trust and taking the public with us are about kicking the can down the road, but I tend to disagree.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you please resume your seat for a second? I see that Mr Carson's name is appearing on my screen. I do not know whether that is a delayed prompt from his first intervention or whether he is seeking to make a second intervention. Could Mr Carson clarify, please?

Finlay Carson: I would like to make a second intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Go ahead.

Finlay Carson: Does the minister agree that Food Standards Scotland research shows that two in three people consistently say that they would eat precision-bred products? She appears to be ignoring that fact.

Màiri McAllan: I acknowledge the recent research by Food Standards Scotland. I also know that 78 per cent—I think that that is the figure—of respondents said that they would wish to know when they were consuming gene-edited products, which the bill does not account for. Forgive me, as Scotland's environment minister, for wanting to ensure that the detail of the bill is right and scrutinised.

I will briefly mention the ethics of gene editing animals. It is hugely important that we are cautious when the health and welfare of our animals are at stake. The Scottish Government shares concerns expressed by stakeholders on the ability of the bill to protect animals and their welfare from the use of genetic technologies, although I know from discussions with scientists that some uses could be targeted at improving animal health. I also note that EU has said that it considers that the necessary scientific knowledge for the application of new genomic techniques in animals is still limited or lacking, especially on safety aspects, and that is important to me.

Our concerns about the UK Government's approach to the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill and its rushing to change regulations without regard for devolved competence or the impact on food supply chains and consumer choice should never be mistaken for opposition to innovation and technology, particularly in the farming sector. Instead, I urge the UK Government to take the opportunity of ever-changing ministers to review the bill, do so more slowly and engage meaningfully across the UK—importantly, with the public.

For our part, the Scottish Government will continue to strive to make decisions for Scotland's environment in pursuit of the highest standards, taking the people of Scotland with us as we do.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

Correction

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, Keith Brown, has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

Keith Brown:

At col 47, paragraph 5—

Original text—

However, it might help him to know that we are providing funding of around £50,000 this year for the national education officer for children and young people of armed forces and veteran families, to support delivery of the Selous report recommendations, including those on the collection of the educational expenses of service and veterans' children at the current time.

Corrected text—

However, it might help him to know that we are providing funding of around £50,000 this year for the national education officer for children and young people of armed forces and veteran families, to support delivery of the Selous report recommendations, including those on the collection of the educational experiences of service and veterans' children at the current time.

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