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Tuesday 14 March 2023

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Tuesday 14 March 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Circularity Scotland.....	3
Free Bus Travel (Children and Young People)	6
Industrial Action (Impact on Children's Education).....	10
TRADE (AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND) BILL: UNITED KINGDOM LEGISLATION	13
<i>Motion moved—[Ivan McKee].</i>	
The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee)	13
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab).....	15
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	17
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	19
Ivan McKee.....	20
NET ZERO: LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CROSS-SECTORAL PARTNERS	23
<i>Motion moved—[Edward Mountain].</i>	
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	23
The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson)	26
Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con).....	29
Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab).....	32
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	35
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	38
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	41
Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)	43
Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)	46
Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)	48
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	51
Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)	53
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con).....	55
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	57
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	60
Michael Matheson.....	62
Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP)	66
BUSINESS MOTIONS	71
<i>Motions moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	74
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam].</i>	
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	74
The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam).....	74
DECISION TIME	75
INTERNATIONAL LONG COVID DAY	82
<i>Motion debated—[Jackie Baillie].</i>	
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	82
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP).....	85
Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)	87
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	88
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	90
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green).....	92
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	94
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	96
Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	97
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	98
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	100
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	101
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	103
The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd)	105

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 14 March 2023

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Father Gregory Umunna, parish priest at St Stephen's church, Blairgowrie.

The Rev Father Gregory Umunna (St Stephen's Church, Blairgowrie): Presiding Officer, the Rt Hon Alison Johnstone, and honourable members of the Scottish Parliament, many thanks for inviting me to share a reflection with you today.

As you gather here to discern, debate and find solutions to the countless issues of our time, permit me to share with you a principle of engagement that recommends as its maxim "doing good better". That principle makes clear that merely doing good is no longer enough. We should always aim to do good better.

I choose to ground that principle on three metaphors that Jesus used to refer to those called to be gatekeepers of the community that the evangelist Matthew addressed in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 13 to 16. He wrote:

"You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world ... You are that city built on a hilltop that cannot be hidden."

Permit me to use those metaphors to address you parliamentarians, because, for me, you are the gatekeepers of our society. You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world; you are that city built on a hilltop.

Essentially, salt purifies, seasons and preserves, to enhance the taste of precious valuables and to preserve flourishing human values for generations as yet unborn. Equally, light was the first thing that God created, when he separated it from darkness. We stumble and fall in the darkness, but we see our paths clearly in the light.

The hope is that the gatekeepers of our society will continue to bear the light, doing good better by reducing poverty, unemployment and homelessness here at home and by reducing tyranny and oppression abroad. Those shortcomings remind us that, whenever there is a lack of the right leadership, the people suffer.

Finally, honourable members, you are that city on the hilltop of life and in full view of public eyes. So, let your light and your flourishing human values continue shining forth from that hilltop.

I close my reflection by invoking the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, who served as the second secretary general of the United Nations, from 1953 to 1961, who once said:

"The longest journey is the journey inwards."

This man travelled worldwide but did not reach his journey's end. In his inward exploration, he said that the journey inward is a never-ending journey. That view typifies the mission of each member of this honourable chamber as you seek to grapple with the ever-changing, multifaceted and complex issues of our postmodern society.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Circularity Scotland

1. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Circularity Scotland expects to make £57 million a year by the public failing to return containers and that this is part of the company's business model. (S6T-01253)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): Circularity Scotland Ltd is a not-for-profit company, established by industry and made up of producers, retailers, hospitality, wholesalers and trade associations.

Everyone who pays a deposit on a drinks container will be able to reclaim the deposit in full. Any unredeemed deposits from Scotland's deposit return scheme will be reinvested into keeping the costs of running the scheme as low as possible for producers of all sizes across Scotland. The model is in line with best practice in other schemes around the world.

Under the DRS regulations, the scheme administrator is required to meet a minimum return rate of 80 per cent in the first year and 90 per cent in subsequent years. Failure to meet those targets would result in financial penalties, establishing a strong incentive for Circularity Scotland to ensure high return rates.

Brian Whittle: The Scottish Government's full business case for the scheme states explicitly that unredeemed deposits are anticipated to make up between 32 and 43 per cent of Circularity Scotland's revenue. It goes on to say that modelling assumes that the

"90% capture rate of containers is achieved by year 3 of the scheme's operating and that it is maintained for the remainder of the 25 years."

That seems pretty clear: the higher the capture rate, the lower the revenue for Circularity Scotland. The minister surely accepts that that creates a perverse incentive for Circularity Scotland to avoid increasing the capture rate.

Lorna Slater: Brian Whittle is a little bit out of date in what he has said. When the dates for the launch of the scheme were moved forward, the dates for the recycling target were not changed. The recycling target is 80 per cent in the first year and 90 per cent in subsequent years of the scheme.

Successful deposit return schemes around the world are based on the principle of producer responsibility, and they are funded in three ways.

One is through producer fees, another is through the value of the materials that are gathered by the scheme and the third is from unredeemed deposits. That is true for the deposit return scheme that the United Kingdom Government intends to introduce in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The UK Government's response to its consultation on the scheme, which was published in January, says:

"Where a container is not returned, the value of the deposit on that container will be held by the DMO",

which is the UK Government's term for the scheme's administrator. It goes on to say:

"This is an unredeemed deposit and is a potentially significant value stream for the DMO, helping to fund the operation of the scheme. This is a common funding stream found in many international DRSs."

Brian Whittle: Even if Circularity Scotland were to increase the capture rate, we do not know how such a loss of revenue might affect it, because the Scottish Government has—in a seemingly endless quest to muddy the waters around the scheme—shrouded Scotland's DRS administrator in secrecy, creating a private company that is immune from freedom of information legislation. Despite it being producer led, as the minister is so fond of saying, it is utterly unwilling to tell producers that sign up to the scheme what potential liabilities they are accepting responsibility for, including the terms of the contract with Biffa.

Will the minister see sense and pause this opaque, badly designed and potentially disastrous mess of a deposit return scheme now, or does she remain determined to leave us guessing about whether it will even be launched, given that that will be dependent on who wins the Scottish National Party leadership election? How is business supposed to plan a way ahead in this environment of uncertainty?

Lorna Slater: The Deposit and Return Scheme for Scotland Regulations 2020, as passed by this Parliament, call for the scheme to be industry led, and Circularity Scotland is the not-for-profit company that has been established by industry.

I have here a list of the members of CSL. It includes trade associations such as the Society of Independent Brewers, the British Soft Drinks Association, the Wine and Spirit Trade Association and many more, such as Diageo, Coca-Cola, Heineken, Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer, Lidl and so on. They have created CSL, and they are responsible for ensuring that it works for them.

CSL is a private, not-for-profit company whose responsibility it is to help businesses in Scotland to comply with the 2020 regulations, as passed by this Parliament, and it has reassured me that it is

working towards a go-live date of 16 August, as agreed by this Parliament.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): As members would expect, there is much interest in this entire session, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Much, if not most, of the £57 million that will be lost in non-redeemed, non-claimed deposits will be paid out—and lost—by those who cannot, or cannot readily, return bulky and heavy items, bottles, tins and cans. They will predominantly include the poorest, those without a car, the elderly, the mobility impaired and rural and island dwellers who cannot access a return point. Their money will go towards the—non-disclosed, but probably telephone-number—salaries of the bosses of Circularity Scotland. Is that transfer of money from the poorest to the richest not simply immoral?

Lorna Slater: The member mischaracterises the scheme entirely. Every person in Scotland will pay the 20p deposit when they buy a drink in Scotland in the containers that are scheme articles, and they will get their 20p when they return those articles—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Lorna Slater: The accessibility of the scheme is critical, and we are working hard with Circularity Scotland and Biffa to ensure that every person in Scotland will be able to access the scheme and to get their deposits back.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Accessibility is important. The Government recently took a decision to exempt small retailers from the online takeback scheme. Can the minister explain how people who are housebound or disabled, for example, will have their bottles taken back if they have bought them online from a small retailer? There is a real accessibility challenge for those people.

Lorna Slater: There are two points there. Nobody will be required to take the scheme article back to the exact store that they bought it from. Even if they buy it online from a small retailer, they can return it anywhere.

The member makes a good point about people who are not physically able to get to a return point. With the proposed change to the regulations whereby we are phasing in the online takeback, it is important that everybody in Scotland is able to access the scheme, including those who have accessibility or mobility issues. Work is under way to understand how many people that is and how we may best ensure that they can fully access the scheme.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Even the Conservatives at Westminster understand that unredeemed deposits should be used to help to cover the cost of the scheme and thus reduce costs for all, as is normal for equivalent schemes across the continent.

Perhaps the real reason that the Scottish Tories and their colleague Fergus Ewing seem so desperate to bring the DRS into disrepute is that they object to the fundamental principle of the scheme: that the polluter pays, instead of the taxpayer.

Can the minister share with Parliament the cost to local councils every year of the litter that is caused by drinks containers and therefore how much the scheme will save the taxpayer in that respect alone?

Lorna Slater: Absolutely. Every year, £46 million of public money is spent on removing litter and fly-tipping from the Scottish environment. The deposit return scheme will mean that local authorities will have less waste to handle, as well as reducing litter and associated clean-up costs. That is good for residents and for council budgets.

Kat Jones, who is the director of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, supports removing those costs from the taxpayer. She says:

“For too long, the costs of single-use cans and bottles have been met by local taxpayers, communities and our environment. It is high time that industry took responsibility for the waste they create, just as they do around the world.”

Free Bus Travel (Children and Young People)

2. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government how many children and young people it estimates have not taken up the free bus pass. (S6T-01262)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): At the end of February, there were more than 590,000 card holders in the young persons free bus travel scheme, which equates to 63.5 per cent of the estimated eligible population of 930,000. That means that approximately 340,000 children and young people have not yet joined the scheme. However, uptake of the scheme is as high as 73 per cent among 12 to 15-year-olds and 75 per cent among 16 to 21-year-olds, who can use it more independently. Those who are already accessing the scheme continue to make good use of free bus travel, and more than 50 million journeys have been made since the scheme launched, in January last year.

Beatrice Wishart: Answers by the transport minister to parliamentary questions show that, despite more than £1 million having been spent on a public relations campaign, hundreds of thousands of young people are still missing out on their free bus pass entitlement. Not only is getting

a free under-22s bus pass needlessly complicated, but many of Scotland's rural areas lack reliable and frequent bus services.

Bus passes save young people money, with free journeys to education and work, but the Scottish National Party-Green Government cannot give them away in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Why has the campaign not been more effective? What lessons have been learned from it? Does the minister think that the situation is anything to do with cuts to bus services by networks across the country?

Jenny Gilruth: First, I remind Beatrice Wishart that, when I was appointed, in January last year, we were still dealing with the impact of the omicron variant of Covid. That delayed the roll-out of the marketing campaign. She will understand that, at that time, people's usual travel behaviour was inhibited. That was the right decision.

Secondly, at the start of last year, there were a number of challenges with the processing of applications, as she has outlined. I worked with the Improvement Service, which ministers tasked with the delivery of the scheme, to improve the application process to make it easier for young people to apply. That was fundamentally important.

The member made reference to the marketing campaign that came into effect later in the year. Actually, the campaign was really effective. It managed to reach more than 97 per cent of the adult population in Scotland—who saw or heard the campaign at least three times—and more than 94 per cent of 13 to 18-year-olds. The campaign also had a positive impact on action: 79 per cent of people who had seen or heard the campaign claimed that they had taken action as a result.

Overall, therefore, the evaluation shows that the impact of the marketing campaign on the under-22s was successful. I hope that the member will support the continued successful roll-out of the scheme to her constituents.

Beatrice Wishart: Young people can travel home from university—or anywhere—on the Scottish mainland free of charge, using their pass on any bus. Why, then, can the passes not be used by our young people who travel home via ferry or on inter-island ferries, which are used like buses? If passes are going unused, why can the provision not be extended to ferries and to those young people who are crying out for such a change?

Jenny Gilruth: Beatrice Wishart has repeatedly raised that point with me, and I am sympathetic to it. I remind her that, when the under-22s scheme came into effect, we carried out an island communities impact assessment, which concluded that ferry travel should not be included in the

scheme but that the issues that related to ferry fares should be considered as part of the islands connectivity plan and our wider fair fares review.

I am sympathetic to the point that Beatrice Wishart has made. In our previous meeting, earlier this year, I alluded to the fact that it would be included in the Government's fair fares review, which we will publish later this year. I very much recognise the dependency of her constituents on ferry services as opposed to bus services, given her constituency.

The Presiding Officer: Many members wish to ask questions, so I would be grateful if we could pick up the pace.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I commend Glasgow Life for recognising the application registration card—the ARC—to address the barriers that are faced by refugees and asylum seekers who are under 22 and who have struggled to provide age identification evidence in order to secure a national entitlement card for free bus travel.

However, the Red Cross has informed me that some local authorities do not accept the ARC and that it is not listed in national or local guidance. Will the minister look at that matter, to ensure that guidance is updated and best practice is shared across Scotland? More widely, will she also look at the lengthy waits, often of several months, for paper applications to be processed?

Jenny Gilruth: The Home Office has issued guidance for local councils, advising them on the proof that is specific to asylum seekers and refugees for the ARC, to which Bob Doris has alluded. That can be used to apply for the NEC in person, of course, or in conjunction with other information or evidence that might be available to a council, a school or a dedicated staff member within a council.

The ARC is not accepted for online applications as part of the United Kingdom proof of age standards scheme—PASS. It cannot be used as evidence of identification online, and there is no online equivalent to support applications, as it were.

My officials in Transport Scotland are not aware of any delays in application processing, but, if the member is able to provide evidence of that, I would be more than happy to raise the issue directly with Glasgow Life.

It is also worth pointing out that the Government is supporting a short-term pilot, led by the Refugee Survival Trust and third sector partners, which commenced at the end of January.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We absolutely must have quicker—shorter, I should say—questions and responses.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

Local councils have had to cut subsidies for bus travel because of the SNP Scottish Government's woeful local government settlement. The fact of the matter is that, outside the major cities, public transport is unreliable and infrequent, particularly across the central region. Will the minister explain how the policy can be deemed a success, given the lack of bus services for our young people to enjoy?

Jenny Gilruth: It is worth pointing out that, as a Government, we invest more than £300 million annually to deliver free bus travel for all children and young people under 22, as well as for eligible disabled people and everyone aged 60 or over. That means, of course, that Scotland has the most generous concessionary fares scheme in the United Kingdom, with more than 2 million people eligible for free bus travel, encouraging more people to take the bus and move away from taking the car, which is hugely important in relation to reaching our net zero targets. Additionally, we have been able to award more than £25 million of funding in relation to the bus partnership fund. I would have thought that Meghan Gallacher might have welcomed that additionality in terms of the funding provided by this Government.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Government statistics that were released today show that the number of buses in service in Scotland has plummeted under the Scottish National Party from 5,400 in 2007 to just 3,700. Passenger journey numbers have halved over the same period. Young people are asking the same question that older people have been asking: what is the point of a free bus pass if there is no bus to use it on? With even more service cuts set to happen in the next few weeks, what is the minister going to do to fix Scotland's broken bus market?

Jenny Gilruth: The member needs to reflect, as a Labour MSP, that the bus sector continues to face a number of challenges presented by Brexit in relation to staffing challenges and staffing shortages, and also in relation to fuel costs. *[Interruption.]* Many of those matters, as he will know, are reserved to the UK Government. I discussed them at length with the bus task force, which I convened just a couple of weeks ago, and the sector is hugely challenged by the challenges presented by those issues.

Neil Bibby: Will you take them on?

Jenny Gilruth: Well, Brexit—I hear the member mumbling from a sedentary position.

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister. Can I just ask that there be no interruptions when ministers are responding and when members are asking questions? I am sure that we would each wish to be treated courteously and respectfully.

Jenny Gilruth: I continue to hear the member chuntering away from a sedentary position, Presiding Officer, but I will continue.

It is important to highlight the additional support that this Government provides for the widest concessionary travel scheme in the UK. More than 2 million people in Scotland can travel free of charge, and the importance of that cannot be underlined enough, given that, yesterday, we managed to hit the 50 million target for the number of journeys that have been taken through the under-22s scheme.

In relation to tackling poverty—another point that I would have thought a Labour member might have been interested in—the Child Poverty Action Group has now managed to assess that children and young people in Scotland are saving, on average, £3,000 over a lifetime compared with their counterparts elsewhere in the UK because of the investment that this Government is putting into concessionary travel.

Industrial Action (Impact on Children's Education)

3. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the Educational Institute of Scotland's vote to accept the latest pay offer, what assessment is being undertaken to understand any impact of days lost as a result of industrial action on children's education and the school environment. (S6T-01247)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The modifications to courses that are already in place this year will help to mitigate some of the impact of the industrial action. In addition, prior to the industrial action, the Scottish Qualifications Agency confirmed that a sensitive and evidence-based approach to grading is planned for this year.

A wide range of study support is available through the national e-learning offer, including live interactive Easter study support webinars for the senior phase that will run from 3-14 April. Local authorities and schools will continue to monitor the impact that industrial action has had on learners and whether any additional action is needed at a local level.

Alex Rowley: Teachers, parents and children are absolutely delighted that we have eventually got a resolution of the dispute. That is welcome. Over the past months, I have talked to many teachers on picket lines and in arranged meetings, and I have become quite alarmed at the concerns that teachers are raising around the decline in discipline and behaviour in schools—and, indeed, the level of violence, which is increasing. Teachers

say that, post-Covid, that issue has become greater and greater. Does the cabinet secretary recognise those concerns? If so, what is the Government doing to support teachers and front-line school staff?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Rowley raises a very important point. During my biannual discussions with unions, last week and this week, that area has been on the agenda. I recently had another discussion with the teachers panel about what we can do on the issue. One example of that is the review of the national guidance on the issue, to see where national Government can make changes to support teachers and support staff. It is an issue that the Government takes very seriously. That is why that review is being undertaken, why research is currently being undertaken and why Education Scotland has also just completed a thematic review of the reporting of incidents of bullying in our schools.

Alex Rowley: I welcome what the cabinet secretary has said. However, I wrote to the director of education in Fife last week, raising my concerns. She replied by saying that an increase in mental health problems is being experienced across Scotland and that poverty, trauma and the pandemic are having an impact on schools. She went on to say:

“A model of having a social worker based in a secondary school is about to be piloted in 4 of our secondary schools.”

She also said that police now play a front-line role in six schools.

We can see, from the actions that Fife Council has taken, that there is massive pressure on our schools and on education. There needs to be some kind of co-ordinated support, and resources are needed for those types of actions. Does the cabinet secretary agree? Will she continue to talk to education authorities about that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome the work that is being undertaken by Fife Council and every council that is looking carefully at the issue.

The solution will be different in different schools and local authorities, but the member quite rightly points to what we can do at a national level to support them. I would point to, for example, the presence of counsellors in our secondary schools, which we work with local government to fund. I would point also to the increased investment in child and adolescent mental health services. Social workers and community development workers and so on are examples of the wide variety of uses of pupil equity funding. We try to give support where there is a challenge around attainment or attendance at school, as well as where there are issues with behaviour.

I very much welcome the work that Fife Council has undertaken, and I am keen to continue my dialogue with the council.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): If I might quote a teacher:

“Behaviour is arguably the most concerning issue for classroom teachers in 2023. The rise in violent, aggressive and criminal behaviour, along with the relentless spread of low-level behaviours, is undoubtedly the most mentally taxing and serious issues in education.”

As teachers return to the classroom after the pay dispute, that is not untypical of how they view the classroom environment. We have all heard that from teachers. In no other public-facing line of work is vicious abuse tolerated. Why should teaching be any different? How long will it be before we see more industrial action as the Government fails to act? This is serious, and it requires a serious response from the cabinet secretary. Who, in the Scottish Government, is speaking to front-line teachers? Is the cabinet secretary speaking to and listening to front-line teachers? When will there be practical help?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am not sure whether Mr Kerr was listening to the answer that I gave earlier. I just said that I spoke to the teachers panel, which is made up of front-line teachers. Last week, I met unions that represent front-line teachers, and I will continue those meetings this week, when we will be discussing this very issue.

Something that the teachers panel was keen to feed back to me was that violent incidents are exceptionally rare. One is one too many, but they are exceptionally rare. Violence, bullying and intimidation of staff or pupils is not tolerated in our schools, either by this Government or by any local authority.

We are taking the issue very seriously. In response to Mr Rowley, I went into further detail about some of what we are doing because I recognise that this is a concern among teachers, pupils and parents. We will continue to work with and support front-line teachers.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time.

Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill: United Kingdom Legislation

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08205, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate would press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:29

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): It is with no small amount of regret and frustration that we find ourselves today considering this motion. Yet again, it appears that the UK Government is willing to play fast and loose with devolution and to pay little heed to the democratic role of this Parliament in scrutinising law made in devolved areas.

The Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill would provide UK ministers with a delegated power to legislate directly on devolved matters in Scotland, bypassing the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish ministers entirely. The one thing for which we can be grateful is that, despite its grand-sounding title, the bill has a relatively narrow focus.

Our views on the trade deals that the UK Government has agreed with Australia and with New Zealand are well known. The Scottish Government had no direct role in negotiating the deals and we are concerned about the impact of both agreements, particularly with regard to agri-food. However, that is not today's focus. The bill is solely about the implementation of the Government procurement chapters of those agreements.

As a result of the agreements, amendments are needed to procurement legislation to extend duties of equal treatment to bidders from Australia and New Zealand and make some minor amendments to procedural rules.

Procurement is, of course, a devolved matter. The UK Government has opted in the bill to confer a power to make those amendments by secondary legislation. That power is drafted too broadly and, of greater concern, would be exercisable concurrently by both UK and Scottish ministers, which means that UK ministers would be able to exercise it in devolved areas without securing the consent of the Scottish ministers.

The bill also allows for the implementation of future amendments to the Australia and New Zealand agreements. That is a curious provision to include when the agreements have only just been

reached. The power is expected to be repealed by the UK Government's Procurement Bill in the coming months.

The Scottish Government's legislative consent memorandum did not recommend consent to that, and the subsequent report by the Economy and Fair Work Committee, which I thank for its efforts, concluded that there should be a means for the Scottish Parliament to scrutinise regulations laid by the UK Government that fall within devolved competence.

Officials and I have engaged with counterparts in the UK Government over many months in an effort to address those concerns. I met the UK Minister for International Trade in early December and have written to him twice since then. I also met the relevant UK Government minister earlier today.

We have suggested three different ways in which the bill could be appropriately amended. The first option would be to make the provision that is necessary to implement the agreements in the bill, which would allow the Scottish Parliament to consider precisely what it might be consenting to. The second option would be to amend the power so that it is conferred solely on the Scottish ministers in relation to devolved matters. The third option would be to introduce a statutory requirement for UK ministers to secure the consent of the Scottish ministers before exercising the power in relation to devolved matters. Those are entirely reasonable and practical suggestions, which the UK Government has rejected out of hand.

The UK Government's view, which I do not accept, is that it must maintain a power by secondary legislation to implement international obligations to ensure that they are complied with. However, such a view implies that, of the two Governments, it is the Scottish Government that has difficulty with the rule of international law. I do not think that that is a conclusion that many observers would draw right now. Indeed, the Scottish Government has successfully implemented our international obligations in relation to procurement separately from, and sometimes differently to, the rest of the UK for almost 20 years. At no point has any question mark ever been raised over our compliance with international obligations.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I agree with the frustrations that the minister has set out. What attempts has he made to have dialogue with the UK Government and UK ministers to discuss the issues and find a way through?

Ivan McKee: As I indicated, I have written twice to UK Government ministers. I met the relevant

UK Government minister in the Commons previously and, today, I met Lord Johnson, the relevant UK Government minister in the Lords, to discuss the issues. In addition, officials have had extensive interaction on all the issues over some time.

The UK Government approached us with what it described as a compromise proposal. That is something that we have discussed with it through the dialogue that I mentioned. If we were willing to recommend consent to the bill, it would be willing to amend the bill so that the power would become exercisable by UK ministers in relation to devolved matters only if the Scottish ministers asked the UK ministers to legislate on their behalf, which would clearly be acceptable to us, or if, following a request from UK ministers, the Scottish ministers had failed to legislate within 15 days.

Although we might have been able to secure an improvement on the idea that the Scottish ministers would have only 15 days from the arbitrary date of any such request in which to consider, draft and make any legislation—a ludicrous proposal, of course—the UK Government was clear that it would not budge on the issue of consent. It is a significant matter of principle, so I was unable to agree to the UK Government's proposal.

We have not ended up in this situation due to a lack of effort on our part. However, as long as the bill contains provisions to allow UK ministers to legislate in a devolved area without first seeking the consent of Scottish ministers, I cannot recommend that the Scottish Parliament give its consent to the bill. I believe it is worth noting that the Welsh Senedd has withheld its consent to the bill, as it falls under its legislative competence.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the legislative consent memorandum lodged by the Scottish Government on 13 June 2022; agrees not to give consent to the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, and calls on the UK Government to amend the Bill to confer the power in clause 1 solely on the Scottish Ministers in relation to devolved matters, or to otherwise make it a requirement for it to secure the consent of the Scottish Ministers when making provision within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, in order to properly respect devolved responsibilities.

14:35

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Before I say anything, it is important to set out that, our issues with the Australia and New Zealand trade deals notwithstanding, trade is undoubtedly a good thing. Regardless of the current circumstances, we should encourage trade and look for opportunities to trade, especially with places in the world such as Australia and New

Zealand, with which we share interests and a common history. However, we need to remember that the Australia and New Zealand deal was deeply flawed and that, in the absence of an oven-ready deal, it was rather snatched and grabbed at by a UK Government that was desperately seeking upsides to the flawed Brexit that it sought to deliver.

We have much sympathy with the arguments that the Scottish Government sets out. It is important that there is a role for devolved Administrations and Parliaments in approving and devising trade deals. Those arguments have been made by Nick Thomas-Symonds and other colleagues in the House of Commons. We sought to make several amendments to the bill as it went through. I note that in many other jurisdictions—such as in Belgium—devolved Administrations and legislatures have formal roles in the approval of trade deals. The ability of the UK Government to make amendments without consultation is of particular concern if there is to be a refresh of the trade agreement. It essentially gives ministers carte blanche.

Notwithstanding all that, the Government's motion raises concerns. Although we agree that there should be consultation with people in Scotland, it is no more acceptable for Scottish ministers to make decisions behind closed doors—decisions that could have a significant bearing on farmers and fruit producers—than it is for UK ministers to do so. If it is a matter of concern to the people of Scotland, it is Parliament that should be consulted on such decisions. It is not so difficult for the Scottish Parliament to pass secondary legislation or legislative consent motions. We can do so relatively easily, and it gives us that level of oversight.

People might not want to know about the details of something that is relatively obscure and not relevant to their everyday life, but, ultimately, it is important. People in Scotland are growing weary of two Governments that constantly seek to make constitutional rancour and disagreement the fundamental basis of their politics, rather than getting on in order to make progress. We want to see two Governments working together for the collective good. Regardless of one's views on the constitutional arrangements, the Administrations in Edinburgh and London—whoever they may be—need to work together in the collective interests of the people who live in these islands. That is not what is happening now.

I move amendment S6M-08205.1, to leave out from “confer” to end and insert:

“ensure the referral of the use of powers in clause 1 to the Scottish Ministers when making provisions within the Scottish Parliament's devolved legislative competence, or to otherwise make it a requirement for UK ministers, when

making provision within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, to be subject to the scrutiny and approval of the Scottish Parliament, in order to properly respect devolved responsibilities.”

14:38

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests; I am a partner in a farming business in Orkney and a member of NFU Scotland. I am also a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee, which considered the LCM. I thank the committee clerks for all their efforts in drafting our report.

The debate is largely a matter of process, as has been discussed. I would like to start with the bill itself. The two free trade agreements are the first from-scratch deals that the UK has negotiated since we left the EU. They are historic and reflect the deep social, familial and economic bonds between our three countries. They will strengthen our trade with Australia and New Zealand and will deepen our ability to access their markets. They could pave the way for the UK to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

The Australia deal will see tariffs removed on all UK exports and will be a real boost for Scottish products, including those from the iconic whisky sector and from our fashion sector. The animal welfare charter, with its non-regression clause, will prevent any roll-back on welfare standards. The deal will make it easier for people to operate in each other’s economies. It will also remove visas, allowing young people from Scotland to travel and work in Australia for up to three years at a time.

The New Zealand deal will also see tariffs dropped on all products and red tape slashed for the nearly 6,000 UK small and medium-sized enterprises that export goods to the country—businesses that employ nearly 250,000 people across the UK. Scottish exporters will now have an advantage over international rivals in a market that is expected to grow by 30 per cent by the end of the decade.

The UK Government estimates that the free trade agreement with Australia could increase trade between the two countries by 53 per cent, with an increase in gross value added of almost £120 million. The UK-New Zealand deal could increase trade by 59 per cent. Business across the UK and Scotland will benefit.

The bill implements the procurement chapters of the two deals into UK domestic law, ensuring that the UK is not in breach of its obligations as the agreements come into force. Although the UK Government’s intention is that, in the future, a power in the Procurement Bill will allow

procurement provisions in international agreements to be implemented, legislation is needed now in relation to these two agreements, because they must be implemented before the Procurement Bill is likely to come into force.

As the Economy and Fair Work Committee’s report on the LCM states, there was agreement from members on a number of issues around scrutiny of the bill and an acceptance of the need for both Governments to engage constructively. However, my colleague Graham Simpson and I could not agree with the committee’s recommendation that the powers be conferred solely on Scottish ministers or that UK ministers should be required to obtain consent from Scottish ministers.

The UK Government has made commitments to the devolved Administrations to not normally legislate within devolved areas, and when it has to, not to do so without consultation. However, it is important that, as international relations is a reserved matter, the UK Government is able to legislate to meet international obligations. If consent was put into statute, which I know some members want, it could discourage more consensual intergovernmental working and risk disagreements being decided in more lengthy and expensive court action.

There is also a risk that consent may be withheld for political reasons, or that the Scottish Government might seek to create arguments for purely political gain. I know that that suggestion may come as a shock to many members in the chamber. During our membership of the European Union, the Scottish Government was content for many of the powers that it now disputes to be held in Brussels, and presumably, given its position on EU membership, it would be happy to have them invested in Brussels again.

Does the Scottish Government have a genuine concern over these powers, or is it less about concerns about the bill and more about stoking constitutional grievance? Is it that, as the sun sets on this First Minister’s time in office, the last act of this Administration will be to leave us one last hurrah of divisive grievance politics?

Is it that the Scottish National Party does not like trade deals? The SNP has never supported a trade deal negotiated by the UK or the EU. It did not support the deals with Canada, Japan, Ukraine, South Africa, Singapore or South Korea. It even voted against the trade deal between the UK and the EU, and it was content for us to leave the EU with a no-deal Brexit.

The UK Government has negotiated important deals with the Governments of Australia and New Zealand. As I have outlined, they will benefit people and businesses across the UK and across

Scotland. They include important protections for key sectors and in areas such as animal welfare. The Scottish Conservatives support these agreements, and we will do so by opposing the SNP's grandstanding attempts to block them today.

14:43

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Jamie Halcro Johnston deserves a medal for his contribution and for drawing some great credit from the two trade deals with New Zealand and Australia. They are the only tangible so-called benefit that we have had from Brexit in six and a half years. Not even George Eustice has recognised the benefit of the trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand. In fact, he criticised them even though he was the minister who, in part, negotiated the deals.

I would have hoped that Jamie Halcro Johnston could have perhaps acknowledged that this is a pathetic set of trade deals. Of course we support free trade, and of course the opportunity to export across the world benefits Scottish and UK producers, but to hold the bill up as a great success is not realistic, and I think that Jamie Halcro Johnston truly knows that.

We will support the motion at decision time. There should be greater scrutiny by and involvement from the Parliament, and there should be greater partnership between the Scottish and UK Governments on trade deals, so it is disappointing that we are here again with the same old song.

We support Labour's amendment. We think that it is appropriate for the Parliament, not just the ministers, to have the power. In fact, the Scottish Government has criticised UK ministers for holding on to powers when there should be scrutiny by the Parliament.

However, it is depressing—utterly depressing—that, once again, we have two Governments that seem to be incapable of agreeing between themselves on an important area. Perhaps that is an area of process, but it is nevertheless important for people's livelihoods. For the wit of man, we should be able to get the two Governments to work together to work up an arrangement for scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government of any international trade deals. As Daniel Johnson has highlighted, other countries manage to do that, so why can we not do that as well?

It is perhaps the fact that, over the past 15 years, the Government has taken every single—often cheap—opportunity to attack whoever is in power at Westminster. Perhaps that has led to this day. The relationship has broken so badly that

both sides are incapable of agreeing. That is why we need reform of the United Kingdom and a change of Governments both north and south of the border.

We need free trade and co-operation between the two Governments for the sake of the businesses that produce excellent-quality products. They deserve to be able to export those products across the world. However, they also deserve to have politicians in the Parliament scrutinising trade deals, applying our expertise to them, and ensuring that they are fit for purpose. However, once again, we have two Governments that have let us down and that have been incapable of reaching agreement. I hope that, one day, we will manage to get some co-operation, although I suspect that that day may be some time away.

14:46

Ivan McKee: What an interesting debate. I agree with Daniel Johnson that trade is a good thing. If he has read our "A Trading Nation—a plan for growing Scotland's exports", he will be well aware that that is stated right up front and centre. He will be well aware of the trade missions that I relentlessly undertake on behalf of Scottish businesses—I am off on another one next week, to Poland with Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce. If he is paying attention, he will be aware that, as part of those trade missions, I engage with the UK Government Department of Business and Trade—it is no longer the Department for International Trade—UK ambassadors and UK trade commissioners. We work together closely, where that makes sense, to support Scottish business.

Daniel Johnson talks about the benefit of trade. He will be aware that Brexit has, of course, done the biggest harm to trade. His party still supports that policy, and it has, for some bizarre reason, been unable to bring itself to recognise the faults of Brexit as it seeks to become the next UK Government.

A formal process exists in other subnational Governments, of course. We have proposed such a process to the UK Government from the outset of Brexit in 2016, with policies that we have put forward. We have relentlessly attempted to engage with the UK Government on a more structured mechanism, but it has refused to engage on that.

On accountability, the Scottish ministers are, of course, accountable to the Scottish Parliament. As Daniel Johnson knows, the process is that the Scottish Government would take forward proposals, but it would bring them to the Parliament or a committee as appropriate, and Parliament would, of course, have the ability to

scrutinise decisions. The point is that, despite what Willie Rennie says, it is not through our lack of trying that trade deals are not coming here to be scrutinised by the Parliament; that is because of what the UK Government has decided to do.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: Despite the fact that Jamie Halcro Johnston powered through and did not take any interventions, I shall, in the interests of open debate, take Brian Whittle's intervention.

Brian Whittle: If the minister and his Government are so positive towards trade, why have they voted against every single trade deal that has been put in front of them?

Ivan McKee: If Brian Whittle has been paying attention, he should be well aware that the Australia and New Zealand deals were very bad for Scottish agribusiness. If we look at the Brexit deal, we see that we should be back as part of the European Union and having free trade as a consequence of that. We are very much in favour of that.

We will take each trade deal on its merits. Trade deals, as Brian Whittle should know, are a balance of the offensive and defensive. If we think that Scottish business is being harmed by the UK Government rushing headlong into random trade deals, we will vote for Scottish interests.

Willie Rennie and Daniel Johnson make the point that we should engage with the UK Government, and I have made it very clear that we have done so. In fact, this afternoon, we had a constructive conversation with Daniel Johnson's namesake, Lord Johnson, about our working together to secure an investment, but that does not take away from the fact that the UK Government has dug its heels in on the point and is denying the playing out of the devolution settlement through the powers of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish ministers. If Willie Rennie needed any more examples of the Conservative Party's unwillingness to engage on the process, the fact that Jamie Halcro Johnston would not take a single intervention from anybody in the chamber speaks to that.

To reflect on a point that Jamie Halcro Johnston made, it is not about Brussels. When we were in the European Union, those powers were not held in Brussels in the way that they are being held at Westminster at the moment. EU procurement directives were implemented by Scottish ministers and not by the European Union. That is the difference. When we were part of the European Union, the powers were here; now that we are not in the European Union, the UK Government has taken those powers back and it is therefore

encroaching on devolved areas, such as procurement.

In conclusion, we are not happy that we are in this situation, but I hope that everyone on this side of the chamber will agree that devolution must be protected and that it is important that we protect it when there is an attack from the UK Government. This is one of the unfortunately increasing number of examples where that is the case.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Net Zero: Local Government and Cross-sectoral Partners

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item is a debate on motion S6M-08209, in the name of Edward Mountain, on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, on the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland.

14:52

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I am pleased to open the debate on the committee's inquiry. I thank the many people who contributed to the inquiry, especially the councils and their local partners from business and the voluntary sector who hosted the committee on its four visits, to Stirling, Dundee, Aberdeen and Orkney.

I also thank my committee colleagues for their marathon efforts on the inquiry, which lasted for more than a year. Not only did the committee take a lot of evidence, it covered a lot of bases. It looked at everything from the intricacies of multimillion-pound green finance deals to whether tree preservation orders are fit for purpose. It was truly a multipolar inquiry, informed by expert opinion from a variety of disciplines.

By the time that I joined the committee as convener in September last year, the bulk of the evidence had been collected. I therefore saw my main role as ensuring that we kept on top of the mountain of evidence that we had accumulated and came up with a report that was less a compendium and more a succinct call to action—to separate the wood from the tree preservation orders, as it were.

I hope that we succeeded. I think that it is a truly excellent report with a small number of clear general messages, interspersed with some more granular recommendations. I know that the report has been welcomed by local government, which I expect will be keen to hear what the cabinet secretary says in response today.

On that note, it is perhaps a little disappointing that the Scottish Government was not able to reply to our report before today's debate. If it had done so, we might have been able to push the discussion on a little further today. However, I look forward to hearing what the cabinet secretary has to say. The committee embarked on the report while recognising the importance of local government as a layer of democracy closest to and most rooted in our communities, and the heft that that gives when it comes to preparing for net

zero, for instance, in taking place-based planning decisions that truly reflect local needs.

Another strength of councils is their unique convening power—the power to get different interests round the table and to be a catalyst for positive change in climate change and, indeed, all other areas. On that note, it is important to stress that our report is as much about those partnerships as it is about local government itself.

The committee agreed the report unanimously, in the spirit of consensus, which is important. I hope that that constructive spirit can be sustained in today's debate, with a pragmatic focus on the question: where do we go from here? I propose that against the backdrop of our headline finding that we are unlikely to make Scotland net zero by 2045 unless we have a more empowered local government sector that has better access to skills and capital. The sector will need to play a full role in this energy revolution, and it must have a clear understanding of the specific role that the Scottish Government wants it to play in some of the key delivery areas.

This is not a counsel of woe; good progress has been made in many areas. The committee was inspired by the work that many councils are carrying out with their local partners in the business and voluntary sectors in areas such as electric vehicle charging, reuse, recycling and renewable energy. The report has case studies on those.

However, overall, councils feel underpowered and they are struggling to deal with the pace of change that the net zero transition requires. To paraphrase the evidence of one council leader, it is hard work for councils to think strategically about their carbon footprint when they are wondering how they will fill potholes and keep schools open. That is a real problem.

This is not simply the debate that we are all used to having about council funding, hugely important though that is. In the report, we call on the Scottish Government to provide additional support to councils in future budget cycles, to help them to contribute to national net zero targets.

There is also a knowledge and skills gap, as councils themselves recognise. The net zero transition means that unprecedented and often highly technical demands are being made on local government's resources and skill sets.

Where do we go from here? I will set the scene by mentioning four key recommendations, knowing that other committee members might want to expand on those or other ideas in their speeches this afternoon.

First, the Scottish Government needs to provide a comprehensive road map for delivery of net zero

in key areas that also gives councils more certainty than they have right now about the roles that they will have to play and the leadership that they must provide. That applies in several areas, but I single out heat in buildings as one area in which progress most needs to be made and where councils are least sure of their role and least certain that they have the right tools and resources for that role, whatever that turns out to be.

Secondly, and complementary to that first recommendation, the Scottish Government needs to create a local government-facing climate intelligence unit to provide help to councils in areas where in-depth specialist knowledge is lacking. One aspect in which such assistance is most needed is in securing help with green finance deals from institutional investors. Just about everyone agrees that that will be necessary if we are to have any hope of meeting the 2045 target. That is specialised and high-value work. The rewards are potentially great, but the level of financial risk is equally high. We also want the Scottish National Investment Bank to be more active at the interface between local government and private finance.

Thirdly, we call for a review of the Scottish Government's challenge funding streams for net zero-related projects. We want there to be larger, fewer and more flexible funds, to avoid the needless bureaucracy and perverse incentives that we heard can bedevil the current system.

Fourthly, we call on the Scottish Government to address churn and delay in the planning system, which has a chilling effect on investment in all areas, including renewables. We also need a strategy to address long-term decline in the number of people who are employed in council planning departments.

In some areas, councils could do more to help themselves. An Accounts Commission report from last September found inconsistency among councils in the level and depth of strategic planning for net zero. It also found that, in general, councils were not thinking enough about mitigating measures and addressing residual carbon. That was largely corroborated by evidence from our inquiry.

Many councils need to do more to show their working and demonstrate how they propose to reach their targets. Councils will find that work easier if they can tap into the enthusiasm of their residents. That was underlined by the evidence from the Freiburg council in Germany, which is a global leader in municipal-level net zero planning. The witness was clear that the city's success was largely due to the engaged and politically literate local population, who constantly kept the council on its toes. To put it differently, the net zero project should not be centralised but should be something

that people and groups can shape, lead and deliver.

That would have been well understood by Patrick Geddes, the father of modern town planning, much of whose work was done not far from this building. Long before the modern environmental movement was born, he understood intuitively that the best and most sustainable solutions are usually low-impact ones that are decided locally, not imposed from far away. "Think globally, act locally" is a mantra of the modern environmental movement, but that message was at the core of his philosophy and is at the core of the committee's report.

I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's 1st Report, 2023 (Session 6), *The role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland* (SP Paper 302).

15:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I take this opportunity to thank the committee for its time and effort in undertaking its inquiry and producing its very detailed report. I also put on the record my thanks to the organisations and individuals who presented written and oral evidence to the committee during the inquiry.

As the convener rightly said, the report is wide ranging. That speaks to the vast complexities and challenges in delivering net zero. The report is also unquestionably timely.

Our national climate change targets, which were passed almost unanimously by the Parliament, are our collective responsibility. Both national and local government have vital roles to play and have a shared responsibility in leadership and delivery. That shared role is evident across the range of climate change policies that are highlighted in the report.

Despite the positive progress that has been made to date, I fully accept that we need to do more, not least in the light of recent analysis on Scotland's progress from the Climate Change Committee. For that reason, we welcome the inquiry and the report. There is much for us to agree on in relation to the recommendations. It is key that we explore the scope for greater partnership between all levels of government, not least in how we use our funding together more powerfully.

An example of where we are looking to pool our efforts is the proposal for a climate intelligence service, which was one of the key

recommendations from the inquiry. The service would provide all 32 local authorities with the data-informed evidence, insights and intelligence that they need to make continuous improvement to their climate change plans. It would also help with the development of skills and knowledge to equip local authorities to take more climate-informed decisions. I am pleased to inform members that we are in advanced discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on setting up the service. I very much hope that it will be in place soon.

I agree with the committee on the vital role for communities in our just transition to net zero, and I accept the need to promote models of community engagement and to take a place-based approach to that. That is already happening through participatory budgeting, through which local communities decide democratically where funding should be invested. For example, Dundee City Council has launched a £750,000 fund to support climate action, with local people determining which projects to fund. In the north-east, as part of our just transition fund, we have allocated at least £1 million of funding in every year over the life of the fund to support participatory budgeting projects that are aimed at addressing a just transition to net zero.

The report rightly focuses on how local action can be co-ordinated and galvanised to support our shared net zero agenda, and on what the Scottish Government and local government can do to support that. Climate action hubs have been at the heart of our approach.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I listened carefully to what the cabinet secretary said. He described the place-based approach as being about participatory budgeting in local geographical areas. However, the report recommends that the place-based approach should not just be about public funding; it should be about co-ordination of all the partners.

Michael Matheson: I very much agree with that. One action that we have been taking, as I mentioned, is through climate action hubs, which are about helping to lever in public and private finance and to co-ordinate and bring together communities to direct support and assistance in local areas.

To date, we have supported two pathfinder hubs to do exactly that. Both hubs are community-led organisations that were launched back in September 2021—one covers Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, and the other covers Highland, Orkney and Shetland. The hubs have provided a strategic approach to enabling community-led climate action. They have focused on building awareness of the climate emergency and building community capacity through training and events.

The hubs have widened participation, with an impressive 40 per cent of the groups that have engaged in the Highlands being new to climate action.

The hubs have directly supported community organisations in developing projects, including on community energy, retrofitting, reducing flooding risks and green skills, while helping to secure funding from public and private investments. The hubs offer an opportunity to build on existing support and ensure co-ordinated action. I have been encouraged by the positive feedback from a number of local authority colleagues who are looking to support the programme.

I want to build on that progress and the interest that local authorities have expressed in that work. That is why I am delighted to announce that we will expand the programme to provide a national network of hubs. The Scottish Government will commit £4.3 million in the 2023-24 budget to support the expansion. On the basis of conversations with communities to date, we anticipate that in the region of 20 hubs will be developed. A national network will drive a place-based approach, putting communities very much at the heart of the transition to net zero.

The inquiry specifically highlighted the need to promote community engagement on local heat and energy efficiency strategies.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I appreciate what the cabinet secretary says about community engagement, as that is a vital subject on which I think we can all agree. However, the report states clearly—this issue resonates with me, because I asked the First Minister about it last year sometime—that the Scottish Government needs to give clear guidance to local authorities. There is an important sentence in the report's executive summary and in the conclusions about the importance of councils receiving additional resources in the run-up to 2045 because, otherwise, the net zero objective will not be attainable.

I ask the cabinet secretary to comment on those two principal aspects of the report: the need for clear guidance from the Scottish Government and the need for additional resources.

Michael Matheson: On the point about guidance, yes, there needs to be guidance, but that needs to be developed in partnership with local government, and not be top-down guidance from Government—the member gave the impression that he was asking for the latter. That is very much the approach that we want to take. Of course, the intelligence unit is one of the routes by which we can achieve the guidance that local authority colleagues need.

On additional funding, I would like to be able to give local government more funding to support it in this area of work, but we work within a limited budget and we have to recognise that, in a fixed budget settlement, if we are to put more money into local government, it has to come from somewhere else. Of course, where we can—such as through the community hubs that I mentioned—we are putting in additional investment in order to support the expansion of community-based approaches.

I mentioned the local heat and energy efficiency strategies, which are at the heart of what I believe is a place-based, locally led and tailored approach to the heat transition. The strategies will set out the long-term plan for decarbonising heat in buildings and improving energy efficiency across entire local authority areas. They will support local planning, co-ordination and delivery of heat transition across communities, helping to target investment where it can make the greatest impact.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Matheson: I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer. Do I have to conclude?

The Presiding Officer: You do indeed.

Michael Matheson: I therefore offer my apologies to the member.

We are also continuing to work closely with local government through our recently established heat network support unit. That has been designed to address a key issue that some of our local authority colleagues face in developing local heat networks, which is carrying out some of the pre-capital stage development work. That is absolutely critical.

To return to a couple of the points that I made in my opening comments, I hope that members can be assured of my firm commitment that we will build on our existing partnership with local government to support the development of a new deal to achieve better outcomes for people and communities, especially on national priorities such as climate change.

I very much look forward to hearing and engaging with the debate today and to making sure that we deliver on our shared objective of creating a new deal for climate change with local government.

15:12

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the clerks to the committee and my fellow committee members for what is a very good report—I agree with the convener about that. It is a considerable piece of work. We spent all of 12

months on it, took written evidence from 63 stakeholders and went on four council visits.

We heard that local government and its cross-sectoral partners will play a fundamental role in Scotland's transition to net zero. Indeed, they are doing that already. For example, on our visits, we saw the Aberdeen hydrogen hub, which is a partnership between Aberdeen Council and BP, and Aberdeen Community Energy, with residents of a local housing development pioneering an urban hydro power scheme—I declare my interest as a shareholder. We also saw Dundee Council's partnership with business to provide EV charging points that are sustainably powered by solar panels and batteries, and Orkney Council's fabric first approach in affordable new-build housing. Just yesterday, Jackie Dunbar and I visited the NESS energy-from-waste plant, which is being funded and progressed innovatively by Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray Councils.

That innovation and further development require the Scottish Government to step up. To that end, the committee made various recommendations, and perhaps the key, overarching one is to offer strategic plans and clarity of direction of travel, which councils have been crying out for. Indeed, in its response, Aberdeenshire Council told us:

“A major barrier is understanding what various paths to net zero would look like in practice”.

That is why the committee was absolutely right to call on the Scottish Government to produce a comprehensive and detailed road map for the delivery of net zero—a call that has been echoed today in a submission by COSLA. That road map should give councils certainty about their role and the additional resources and powers that are required to deliver what the Government asks them to deliver. It should also allow them to assess the cost and operational implications of options and what ultimately represents the most sustainable, optimal strategy or course of action. With such a road map, councils will be able to assess the expertise and experience that are required to carry out the strategic planning and data gathering, and to source the leadership that is needed to promote and embed best practice in order to mainstream net zero planning into council decision making, which the committee also recommended.

That strategic planning is not easy. Stirling Council said:

“we need help with strategic planning so that we can understand our priorities. Then we need help to develop the resource and skills to be able to deliver programmes.”

The road map would allow strategic hires and planning. However, the Scottish Government should also carry out another committee recommendation: the creation of a local

government-facing climate intelligence unit to provide specialist help where a local authority might not retain that itself or be able to afford it. I was very pleased to hear the cabinet secretary's remarks about that and to hear that there are advanced discussions with COSLA.

The road map would also have a positive impact on skills. With clarity about the work available and the timescales involved, businesses would have the confidence to invest in the new skills and training that are required to meet Scotland's targets, and colleges would know which courses to scale and would be better able to work with business to support apprenticeships or assist in transitions.

All of that must be financed, and a much more informed and strategic approach to financing must be taken. For example, we were originally told that the Scottish Government's heat in buildings strategy would cost £33 billion to deliver. When I asked the minister, Patrick Harvie, what the figure was—adjusted for things such as inflation—18 months later, he was unable to tell me. He will not have a revised estimate until after the consultation on the planned heat in buildings bill. Given the tight timescales that we are working to, that is ridiculous.

Although all of that money cannot come from public funds, an element must come from the Scottish Government. WWF Scotland suggests that

“Capital investment by the Scottish Government would need to increase to between £2bn and £3bn per year from 2025 to 2030”.

That is worrying, as we know that this Government promised only £1.8 billion over this session of Parliament, and that, by January this year, it had spent only £155 million, which is less than 10 per cent of what was promised.

The committee has asked the Scottish Government to be smarter with funding. COSLA's Gail Macgregor said:

“To empower local government, councils need not just increased funding, but also larger, fewer and more flexible funding streams”.

In that regard, it is notable the UK Energy Research Centre found that a £1 million investment in each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland to provide technical assistance for energy efficiency and renewable energy investments could produce investment finance, on affordable terms, of around £1.2 billion.

The Scottish Government also needs to get better at leveraging private finance. The University of Strathclyde told us that there is

“a reluctance to engage private funding bodies on leveraging the appropriate scale of private sector finance to supplement available public funds.”

That looks set to continue, with the Scottish National Investment Bank saying the right things about working with local councils to support the transition to net zero, yet telling the committee that

“The Bank has been established to invest on commercial terms, and it is unlikely to be suitable for the needs and requirements of local authorities funding”.

That is why the comments of the likes of the Association of British Insurers are so interesting. It told us that the insurance and pensions sector wants to invest in net zero initiatives and has the capital to do so, but needs consistency in how those opportunities are structured and a long-term business case. In short, the sector needs the very road map and proper expert resourcing to give investors confidence that the committee called for as its key recommendation and that I highlighted at the start of my speech.

The committee found that a lot of good work is going on at local authority level, despite the serious challenges that we will no doubt hear about as the debate develops. By taking extensive evidence, the committee has been able to set out some really practical steps that the Scottish Government could take now to help local authorities and communities to deliver on our net zero ambitions. That is why it is so disappointing that the Government has failed to respond to the report, despite the urgency of the subject matter, the report's publication on 23 January and all the representations that have been made to us since.

The committee has done its job in looking at the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland. I hope that, in response to the report, the Scottish Government will do the same.

15:19

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the members of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for carrying out the inquiry, the many organisations and individuals who gave evidence and the committee clerks and researchers for their work in distilling the evidence into the committee's excellent report, which makes an important contribution to the debate on how we get Scotland on track to meet our climate commitments.

As the report stresses, our local authorities are crucial to the journey to net zero. As the biggest employers and service providers in Scotland, and as major owners of land and buildings, councils will have to lead by example in cutting their own carbon footprint. Many of the services that our councils provide—from transport to housing and

from recycling to care of our open spaces—will be key in supporting communities to play their part in tackling the climate and nature crises.

Our councils are more than the sum of the services that they provide. They are the bodies that we look to for leadership in our communities to build the local partnerships that will help to enable us all—households and businesses—to cut our carbon emissions and meet our common goal of a transition to net zero and, crucially, to make sure that it is a just transition. However, councils can only do that if we properly empower and resource them, which we are failing to do.

In budget after budget, the Scottish National Party and the Greens have hollowed out local government, stripping £6 billion from council budgets in the past decade. As the Scottish Trades Union Congress said in its evidence to the committee,

“The most recent Scottish Budget has further entrenched cuts to Local Government. This needs to be reversed.”

The NZET Committee was clear in its report. Our councils need additional financial support in their core funding and a more strategic approach to dedicated net zero funding, ending the fragmented, short-term, time-consuming bidding wars that we see from challenge funding.

Although the Government has not yet bothered to respond to the committee’s report, COSLA’s response made the point that

“Local government does not have the core, flexible resources it needs to develop local net zero programmes and climate resilience ... we need to urgently simplify funding of national programmes so that there are fewer challenge funds, and more larger, multi annual funds.”

Stephen Kerr: Will Colin Smyth take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I certainly will.

Will I get extra time for Stephen Kerr putting his card in?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is some time in hand, Mr Smyth—do not worry. Are we there, Mr Kerr?

Stephen Kerr: We all do that at some point, and I have just done it.

Does Colin Smyth agree with the report, which says that the

“clear message of this inquiry is that no amount of additional government funding is realistically likely to bridge the gap between the current reality and our national net zero ambitions.”

It then calls for things that must be done to access private investment. In short, does Colin Smyth agree with what Liam Kerr said about the need for a clear route map that unlocks private investment?

Colin Smyth: The point was well worth waiting for, and it is a point that COSLA made in its recent response to the committee’s report. It said that the Government has no overall costed and coherent road map to net zero by 2040 or to the arguably more demanding target of a 75 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030.

That was also the conclusion of the Climate Change Committee in its recent report card on the Government’s performance. The chairman of the Committee, Lord Deben, said:

“One year ago, I called for more clarity and transparency on Scottish climate policy and delivery. That plea remains unanswered.”

The Climate Change Committee report was damning. It said that seven out of 11 of our “increasingly at risk” legal targets have been missed and that those targets are

“in danger of becoming meaningless”.

It also said that progress on cutting emissions has “largely stalled”. On the three big emitters—transport, heat in buildings and land use—the report card was a clear fail, fail and fail, and that view was largely echoed by the NZET Committee report.

Transport is our largest source of greenhouse gases and is responsible for a third of our emissions, with levels that are barely below those of 1990. The Government’s response has been to axe 90,000 train services a year and to propose just 2,000 more public electric vehicle charging points when we need 30,000 by 2030. Its response has also been to cut 120 million bus passenger journeys since 2007 as it dismantles our bus network route by route, with more cuts likely when it ends the network support grant plus at the end of the month.

Brian Whittle: Does Colin Smyth agree that that hits rural areas disproportionately harder than urban areas?

Colin Smyth: There is no question but that the cuts in support for bus companies will hit rural areas harder, as those are the more heavily subsidised parts of our network scheme.

What frustrates me is that, nearly four years after the Parliament passed the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, the Government is still dragging its heels on giving councils the powers secured in that act and, more importantly, the resources that they need to deliver publicly owned local bus services in order to start to put passengers, not profits, first.

If we want to see evidence of this Government’s lack of commitment to a just transition, we need only look at the way in which it and Glasgow City Council treated Glasgow’s taxi drivers when introducing the low-emission zone. They have

failed to support drivers adequately to make that transition, which will force many out of business or into unmanageable debt.

If we want a just transition with regard to our buildings, which are the second biggest emitter of greenhouse gases and account for a quarter of emissions, we will not get that by cutting the energy efficiency budget by £133 million. Instead, we should be tackling the issue of why poorly designed schemes—including the area-based schemes that are administered by local authorities—are not being utilised, given the shocking levels of fuel poverty in Scotland and the knowledge that insulating our homes properly cuts not only fuel bills but fuel use and therefore emissions.

We need more clarity and certainty for our councils, home owners, landowners and—crucially—supply chains through the early publication of future regulations for heating and energy efficiency. That regulatory framework needs to sit alongside an effective enabling framework, learning from effective retrofit examples from across Europe. For example, in Europe, one-stop shops are emerging that provide end-to-end management of the retrofit and installation process for the home owner, from access to information on options to getting quotes and engaging in contracts.

Even in areas such as energy production, where we have made good progress in cutting emissions, not only have we not seen a just transition, with many of the supply chain opportunities going overseas, but we see that that progress is now under threat because of the long-term decline in the number of council-employed planners. In my region of Dumfries and Galloway, eight of the latest 11 wind farm projects that were taken to the Scottish Government's planning and environmental appeals division resulted from a failure to decide the application locally within the required four-month timescale, primarily due to a lack of planning staff.

The clock is ticking towards our net zero targets, but the Government lacks a clear plan for the urgent actions that are needed to meet those targets to ensure that we play our part in stopping the climate crisis from becoming a climate catastrophe. Our councils are key to meeting those targets, but we need to start to give them the powers, the support, the resources and the respect that they need to help us to deliver that greener, fairer Scotland that we all want to see.

15:27

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank Edward Mountain and his committee for producing a very substantial report. I think that it will—unlike

some committee reports, I have to say—actually help in the longer term. I hope that it will also bring some clarity to a very difficult situation, because change is hard. We would not be here discussing those world-leading climate change targets that were set in 2009 if it was not hard, so I accept that these are challenging circumstances. This is probably the biggest change since the industrial revolution. If we are going to get it right and get a just transition, we need to ensure that there is a proper plan that works effectively.

The Climate Change Committee was severe in its criticism, as I am sure the minister would accept. It said that the climate change targets that have been set by the Government

“are in danger of becoming meaningless”.

Those targets have gone from being world-leading climate change targets to being potentially “meaningless”.

That should worry us all, which is why the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report is helpful and will, I hope, bring some clarity to the situation so that we can have the road map that has been mentioned frequently today.

There are a number of strong, competing priorities that have been set by Government, and some of those issues are difficult to resolve. We might take homes, for instance. As we all know, there are people in our constituencies who are absolutely desperate for a house. Their homes are overcrowded or they are staying with relatives, or they are in a house that is just too small for their needs or is very hard to heat. Those people are desperate for a home, and I am desperate to get houses built. The challenge concerns how efficient we make those houses. Sometimes, the more efficient we make a house, the higher the up-front costs. Of course, it will be of longer-term benefit and it will keep the fuel bills lower for the longer term, but the up-front cost is higher—it will cost us more to do it.

Such challenges are faced by council officials and councillors every day. They are in danger in that, if the requirements that they put on developers are too great, those developers might put their money into building houses somewhere else, in the area of another council that is perhaps not as strict. Meeting their housing requirements at the same time as meeting their climate change objectives of having energy-efficient homes in the right place, with 20-minute neighbourhoods, at the right time, and finding the right land—all of that—is challenging.

The same applies to energy schemes. We have big challenges on biodiversity and on where we get the stock from, at a low cost, while dealing with the climate. Transport has the same challenges of finance, immediate needs, long-term climate and

biodiversity needs and through-life costs. All of those are massive challenges that we must resolve.

Brian Whittle: Does Willie Rennie agree that, as a Parliament, we need to start looking further than a parliamentary term and to start making long-term strategies that are more likely to deliver net zero?

Willie Rennie: I wish that we could do that. However, the nature of politics is that we want answers now. We want to get results immediately. Of course, people are desperate for urgent action but, too often, action is too short.

I will give a slightly old example from four or five years ago. There was a proposal to build 1,400 homes on the north side of Cupar. It has been debated for a long time. Housing development in north-east Fife has stalled, partly as a result of that scheme's having been caught in a quagmire.

The Sustainable Cupar Town Development Group was desperate for a district heating system to be attached to those 1,400 homes, so we spoke to the developers, who said, "It is experimental; it is too expensive; it involves long-term obligations; we want to build houses and be out; and we are not required to do it. We do not have to do it, so we are not going to do it." We went to the council and said, "You've got the power to make them do it." The council people said, "We don't really know much about district heating systems. It's a bit risky and perhaps a bit expensive, and we want the houses to be built, so we don't want to scare the developers away." So, we went to the Scottish Government, which said, "Naw. We've got funding schemes and pilots, but it is up to councils to resolve this."

I hope that the situation has improved since then, because that buck passing means that we do not have a district heating system for Cupar. In fact, we do not really have the answer as to whether a district heating system would be the right scheme for Cupar North.

That leads to the point of having the right advice, having the right laws in place—the right compulsion—and empowering local councils to bring all of that together to make it work, so that we can progress.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am aware of the discussions on a heat network in Cupar, but that was happening largely before the heat networks legislation was brought into place. Does Willie Rennie accept that there is now greater legislative certainty around heating frameworks and that propositions for developers to introduce such networks are now better and more investable?

Willie Rennie: Having plans is fine, but how do we deal with the risk? Who takes that risk? Do they have the money? Do they have the incentive? Are they addressing competing priorities? Of course, they want to get the houses built as quickly as possible. If developers say, "No, it's too much of a responsibility. We're not going to build those houses; we're going to build somewhere else," that is a challenge that I am not sure we have resolved.

I hope that that has changed, because the quagmire that Cupar got stuck in is astonishing, given that, just down the road, as Mark Ruskell will know, because it is in his region, there was a proposal to connect up the district heating system—the biomass plant for St Andrews, which was built by the University of St Andrews—with a new Persimmon development 100 yards away. The university and the developer had a discussion about connecting it up, but the developer said, "We don't have to do it; there is no requirement; so we are not going to connect up," and it put gas boilers into those houses instead. We are supposed to be moving away from gas, but there are gas boilers in those brand new houses, right next door to a district heating system. We could have connected them up, but there was no requirement. That was post the new frameworks that Mark Ruskell talked about.

I should probably conclude.

When it comes to solar panels, businesses were required to pay extra business rates for solar schemes of above 50 kilowatts on their roofs. They were also required to get planning permission. In England, that was not the case. The minister who is responsible has just changed that, but why has it taken so long to get some of those really simple things in place so that we can provide the right incentives?

We need the people, we need the expertise, we need the road map and we need councils to be able to do more than their statutory duties, in order to make those big changes and make sure that we meet our climate change obligations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I advise members that, at this point, we have some time in hand, so members may wish to make and/or take interventions.

15:35

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in my first committee debate as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee—I think that this is the first time since I joined the committee that we have had a debate in the chamber. I thank the clerks, my committee colleagues and all those who

participated in the committee's inquiry. Without their input, the inquiry and our recommendations would not have been possible.

All the challenges that have been highlighted during the NZET Committee's inquiry are made even more acute during the present cost crisis. For example, the evidence that we took shows that there is no doubt—I know this as a former local councillor—that the increasing inflationary pressures that are being experienced by local authorities will have an impact on their ability to deliver on the important net zero ambitions.

Indeed, successive Scottish budgets have demonstrated this Government's commitment to the centrality of a just transition to a net zero and climate resilient Scotland. The 2023-24 budget prioritises a just transition to a net zero climate resilient and biodiverse Scotland with more than £2.2 billion of investment in 2023-24, and this year the Scottish Government has allocated £194 million to help to reduce energy bills and climate emissions through the warmer homes Scotland area-based schemes and Home Energy Scotland.

Scotland's ambitious climate change legislation sets a target date for net zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045. Progress has been made and Scotland is more than half way to net zero, but it still has much to do. Our inquiry heard how we are now entering the most challenging part of the journey to date, with a need to halve our emissions again by 2030. It is not going to be easy.

The next full climate change plan will show the emissions reductions of the economy-wide policies in the plan, as well as detailing other benefits such as job creation and the costs of the policies. The transition to net zero will require a truly national effort from all sectors of the economy, including significant private sector investment in net zero and climate resilience to ensure the long-term strength and competitiveness of our economy. Central to that—members will not be surprised to hear me say this—is a just transition for the north-east of Scotland, including my Aberdeen Donside constituency.

However, our evidence shows that, in order to fully make that transition work, the UK Government must also take action to secure a just transition. The UK Government's green jobs task force recommended that the Government should set out how it will match the support that is available through the European Union's just transition fund. Unfortunately, that has still not been acted on. The UK Government has still to match the Scottish Government's £50 million just transition fund.

Liam Kerr: When the member calls for the UK Government to match the just transition fund, does

she think that the £16 billion North Sea transition deal goes any way towards that, since it is 32 times the size of the Scottish Government's fund, to meeting that criterion?

Jackie Dunbar: Well, the UK Government has taken £300 billion from the north-east of Scotland through the Treasury since the 1970s, if you are going to start matching funds, Mr Kerr.

I call on the UK Government to play its role in ensuring that we achieve a just transition and to match the support that is available through the EU scheme. It is vital that we all take responsibility and do our bit.

One of the areas that I have an interest in and that the committee's inquiry covered is green skills and getting young folk into green jobs. Tackling climate change is not just about Government policies or investment, and there is a significant role for the whole of Scottish society in supporting transformational change. We heard how Scotland's skills response to climate change needs to be a national endeavour. An agile, aligned and responsive skills system will be vital to the delivery of a green recovery. The scale and pace of change needed across all sectors will demand a significant realignment of our investment in education, training and work-based learning, towards green jobs.

Scotland already has many of the skills required to facilitate the transition to a low carbon economy. Those skills exist across many of our established sectors, including energy, engineering, construction and chemical science. However, the Scottish Government must take a range of actions to support the development of green skills. The climate emergency skills action plan is central to creating a future workforce that can support our transition to a net zero economy and ensure that workers are equipped with the skills that employers will need in that green economy. Our inquiry shows that the green jobs workforce academy is an important step in achieving that and will help folk of all ages to assess their skills, identify skills gaps and access upskilling or retraining courses. Alongside the just transition plans, the Scottish Government is developing a pilot of a skills guarantee, offering folk in high-carbon jobs support in moving into good green jobs.

One example of the role that local government and its cross-sectoral partners are playing in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland is the joint working of Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and Moray Council, which are working collectively to finance and deliver a new energy and waste plant. Just yesterday, as Liam Kerr mentioned, we visited the energy-from-waste plant in Aberdeen—a plant for unrecyclable waste, so that there is no longer a reliance on

landfill. I was involved in the project from the beginning, when I was a councillor, so it was great to see the project coming along and nearing completion. Once completed, it will hook up with the local district heating network and help to reduce fuel poverty in the local community.

Again, I welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the climate emergency, while being aware that there is still a way to go. I look forward to hearing other members' contributions.

15:42

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con)): I am delighted to contribute to the debate, which highlights the vital role that local government can and must play in the journey to net zero. As the level of government that is the closest to our communities, councils are best placed to deliver the local flexibility that will be required in order to achieve the Scottish Government's net zero targets. We know that many councils are aware of the challenges that face them in this area, and COSLA has set out clearly that local government is committed to meeting the 2030 and 2045 climate targets.

However, COSLA is also clear that, despite that commitment, local government's ability to contribute towards those targets will be seriously limited without increased investment in our councils. As we have heard, the issue of funding comes up time and again when it comes to local government's climate responsibilities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee states that the issue of local government finances was one of the main issues raised in its inquiry. Numerous individual councils that responded to the inquiry made it clear that insufficient funding is one of the biggest challenges that they face in this area.

Although the debate should not be entirely focused on local government funding, it is clear that progress on net zero is yet another area of local government performance that is being compromised by underinvestment. The committee's report reveals that councils' planning departments have shrunk, with more than a third of planning staff having been cut since 2009. The Royal Town Planning Institute has highlighted that planning authorities are now struggling to recruit staff at the same rate as they are retiring. To that end, the report is right to support the creation of an apprenticeship scheme for planners. The Scottish Government should continue to work with the RTPi on such a scheme.

However, the skills challenges that our councils face go far beyond the planning departments. Indeed, skills are one of the biggest hurdles that

we face in retrofitting buildings for net zero, including switching to low-emission or zero-emission heating systems such as heat pumps. One of the biggest issues is that the efforts in that area must be maintained.

There are areas in Scotland that are trying to achieve that. Stirling Council has worked with Scottish Water Horizons to create a district heat network that powers much of the Forthside area of Stirling. That is an example of exactly the type of collaboration between local government and external partners that we need if we are to achieve our targets.

However, it is clear that the retrofitting journey faces significant skills challenges—so much so that numerous stakeholders, including Homes for Scotland and Scottish Renewables, have suggested that the 2030 and 2045 targets are not realistic.

The clean heat and energy efficiency workforce assessment produced by ClimateXChange sets out the scale of the challenges that we face. The report estimates that, to meet the 2030 target, Scotland will require at least 4,500 thermal insulation installers, up to 12,700 heat pump installers and up to 4,000 heat network installers. Those are massive numbers.

The Construction Industry Training Board has highlighted the point that the Scottish Government's heat in buildings strategy has not provided a "clear pipeline of work" for the construction industry. That means that the industry still lacks the confidence that it requires to ensure that the workforce is ready and willing.

Given the amount of housing stock for which local government is responsible, it is vital that councils be able to access contractors. The skills challenges must be met and we must ensure that jobs are tied back. I hope that, in summing up, the cabinet secretary will at least acknowledge that that is one of the big issues that require to be addressed.

There are real ambitions for what we want to do in the sector, but they can be realised only if local and central Government take responsibility and it is possible for them to work together. Together, we must address the challenge, ensure that there is real development and ensure that the skills delivery review comes forward with many strategies about where we go from here.

Scotland's Government must do more to achieve its net zero targets. It will be unable to achieve them unless local government is able to play its part in the journey. Councils must be empowered to invest fully in their own climate initiatives. That means giving them investment and ensuring that they can access the skills and workforce that they require to move forward. It

also means supporting them to deliver local strategies towards net zero as much as is humanly possible.

Unless there is a step change in how local government participates in the journey to net zero, the 2045 target cannot be achieved. The onus is now on the Government to act and empower local government before it is too late. I hope that the cabinet secretary and the Government take heed of the warnings that we have given today.

15:48

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in the debate. I thank the committee for its report. It is an excellent summary of what we need to do, and I commend the committee for it.

Scotland will not meet its ambitious target of being net zero by 2045 without a strong partnership with local government. Local authorities can lead on skills; that they will need access to capital in order to play a full role is a point that I will touch on later. It is clear that the Scottish Government and local authorities need to understand their roles in key delivery areas.

In the report that it has launched, the committee recognises the crucial role that councils will have to play if we are to become a net zero nation. I say that with 15 years' experience as a councillor. With local knowledge of workplace, supply side and skills base, councils are in a good position to engage with local and national stakeholders as part of what will have to be a collective national effort to reach net zero. The report is as much about those partnerships as it is about local government itself.

Only yesterday, I discussed the subject extensively with the chief executive of my local authority. One of the first key tasks is to establish a pipeline for what each local authority needs to do. In East Lothian, I set up an energy forum that has now met four times to look at planning, financial, skills and supply-side issues. That extensive stakeholder engagement brings together skills agencies, supply-side agencies, developers and the council.

Local heat and energy efficiency strategies and area-based approaches need to be published by the end of December 2023. An implementation plan should address how LHEES will be used to help to implement the area-based approach that will be necessary if real progress is to be made on the issue. The role of councils in relation to district heating systems is also key and needs to be clarified.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, of which I am a member, took

evidence on retrofitting and held a debate on the issue last year. There was clear evidence from the supply sector that it needed to see a clear pipeline prior to substantial investment. The quicker local authorities arrive at that point, the better. In order to do so, councils need to set out strategic planning objectives and targets in that area. The committee calls on the Scottish Government to work with COSLA to audit the effectiveness of councils' net zero-related strategic planning and data gathering—which is a really important process that many local authorities are going through at the moment—and to promote and embed best practice in mainstreaming net zero planning in council decision making. We are not quite at that point yet.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee also spoke to the Accounts Commission on that issue. The commission has a role to play in ensuring that councils' strategic planning and major budgetary decisions are consistent with net zero goals and promoting climate change budgeting, and I am sure that it will publish more detail on that later this year.

There are key areas in such strategic planning: funding, skills, powers and direction. The committee calls on the Scottish Government to heed the Climate Change Committee's call for a comprehensive and detailed road map for the delivery of net zero in key areas, such as heat in buildings and transport.

The Scottish Government is currently discussing a new deal with COSLA. Any such deal, and associated reforms, must comprehensively address how councils are to be supported in delivering net zero.

We also need to develop investment streams. The challenge of attracting private investment needs to be approached by adopting area-based approaches that offer the potential to scale up investment opportunities. Liam Kerr mentioned the figure of £33 billion. I know that the Scottish Government is looking to put aside £2 billion, but the gap needs to be filled by institutional funding. I spoke to a professor from the London School of Economics who highlighted that there are billions of pounds available out there, but the real challenge is to develop investable projects for scaling up. That is a challenge for local government and the Scottish Government. As has been mentioned, scaling up, risk management and co-ordination are key.

The cabinet secretary also mentioned flexibility in funding. The UK Government and the Scottish Government need to have grown-up discussions about allowing the Scottish Government to have targeted additional borrowing powers to help it in that area.

On skills, the inquiry identified planning, procurement, building standards and environmental assessment as being among the areas where assistance is likely to be most needed. East Lothian Council, which is one of the smallest local authorities, will need help in scaling up its activity in that regard. COSLA and the Scottish Government need to work on securing specialist advice and assistance for local government in its engagement with institutional investors on major capital funding. The role of the Scottish National Investment Bank and the Scottish Futures Trust in relation to area-based decarbonisation schemes was discussed in the report and needs to be explored further.

On procurement, local supply chains need to be developed. That ties in with establishing a pipeline at an early stage at a local level, which I mentioned earlier. The energy forum is already engaging with local supply-side developers to see what they need to do to grow their businesses in East Lothian. Local authorities need to lead on developing the supply-side growth that is required, and they can do that now.

The committee was concerned about delays in planning applications for renewables. That is a valid point at this stage.

On NPF4, the committee asked the Scottish Government to consider setting up a short-life working group on renewable energy within the planning system, which would include representatives of local government, the planning profession and industry, to speed up the process. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee will be undertaking more work on that and will be monitoring progress. We have been having discussions with the RTPi, which has also been talking to the minister about the need for an additional 700 to 800 planners across the planning authorities. That needs to be monitored, and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee will be doing that. If we are to achieve net zero, we need a fully resourced planning system to meet the growth in demand.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee also raises the issue of grid capacity keeping in touch with planning applications for renewable projects so that they are not placed at risk. Discussions on increasing grid capacity need to be advanced much more quickly with the UK Government.

Transport and active travel are other policy areas that we could talk about at length.

The report sets out what we need to do: establish strong partnership principles between local government and the Scottish Government; establish a pipeline at the earliest opportunity; establish local energy skills partnerships; establish

a resource planning system; and create investment streams that match up with projects of scale. We need to achieve net zero by 2045—of that there is no doubt. In doing so, we can empower our local communities to deliver not only for the local climate, but for the local economy.

15:55

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): As a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I am pleased to take part in the debate.

As the convener set out in his remarks, the inquiry has been significant and substantial, spanning 17 evidence sessions, over which we heard from more than 50 organisations. It is right that we got out of Parliament and visited a number of the communities who are at the heart of delivering on Scotland's net zero targets and ambitions. I was part of the delegations to Aberdeen and Orkney, and I was pleased to get out of Central Scotland for a couple of days. Those visits were really worth while, and I am grateful to everyone who made them possible.

I was pleased to hear Willie Rennie and other colleagues acknowledge the importance of the report. We would not have been able to produce the report and the key recommendations without Peter McGrath and the committee clerking team, the Scottish Parliament information centre and everyone else who played a part.

It has been good to follow my committee colleagues in the debate. Planning has been mentioned, but if members will indulge me, as a former planner, I will focus on planning, because it is absolutely key to the place-based approach about which our deputy convener Fiona Hyslop is so passionate, and to the place-making agenda.

I am pleased that colleagues have read the briefing that we received from the Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland. We have seen a significant decline not just in the number of planners—members have heard some of those statistics in the debate—but in the capacity to deliver at a time when demand is increasing. As a Parliament, members have all bought into national planning framework 4, and we have had planning reform, so the demands are really high. We need to create opportunities, retain good planners and create a pipeline for new talent.

While we were taking evidence in the inquiry, we were a dynamic committee—I am looking at the deputy convener—because we did not just wait to get to the end and do the report. We used parliamentary questions and other devices to ask the Government questions, as things progressed. I was pleased that the planning minister Tom Arthur was very optimistic and positive about the

opportunity that a planning apprenticeship model could bring. The model exists in England, so we can see how it is going there. Given that we have lost a number of planning schools over the years—planning schools have become an endangered species in Scotland—we have to create new routes, and the planning apprenticeship would be an exciting way to do that. I am glad that other colleagues have championed that idea in the debate; it looks like something good will come from that.

Another key area for local government is procurement. Procurement is not yet fully aligned with sustainability, and net zero is not fully or firmly embedded across all council directorates and budgets. The Sustainable Scotland Network acknowledged that more work is needed to align council procurement with net zero, but it said that the problem may lie upstream of procurement, including at the specification stage. The network is keen to do more to provide training and build capacity. That is another key area for the Government to consider.

I will jump across to transport. As we heard from the convener, we are trying to find local and national solutions to a global crisis—we are living through a climate and nature emergency. The cabinet secretary and his ministerial colleagues have heard me talk about this before, but the X1 bus, which used to serve communities in Hamilton and get to Glasgow City Centre quickly and efficiently, was lost during the pandemic.

I want our young people, who now have free bus passes, to have such services again. We know, not just from our report but from the Climate Change Committee's strong words, that we need to do more to decarbonise transport and properly invest in active travel. Where we know that there is demand for community bus services, let us bring those services back.

When we took evidence on transport, it was worrying that, despite there being legislation and powers that councils can use, there was no evidence that councils were going to hit the button and start to run council bus services, because they did not have the resources. I know that work is happening in Government, but we need to see real and significant improvement in that area.

We know that decarbonising transport and buildings is the key area. We heard evidence from the vice-convener of Unison Scotland, Stephen Smellie, on what we need to do on retrofitting buildings. He gave a striking example from South Lanarkshire. The cost of retrofitting all non-domestic buildings in South Lanarkshire would amount to half a billion pounds. We know that the council does not have that money and that a partnership approach is needed. Again, we need answers to those really big questions.

I give a shout-out to community wealth building. The Government is committed to that approach, but North Ayrshire Council has been pioneering it. We need it if we are going to spearhead a community and worker-led just transition. There are really good examples in that regard, involving solar energy and a lot more.

I know that there has been time in hand, but I am quickly running out of seconds.

It is really important that the report is not given warm words today and then filed away without us talking about it again. We will have a new First Minister, and there might be a new Cabinet and a new approach in Government. The report will help the Government and Scotland. We have to keep looking back at it and the work of other committees in the Parliament, because it is the people of Scotland—the experts and communities in Scotland—who have informed that work. We have fantastic recommendations.

As Willie Rennie said, this is hard. Of course it is hard, but we have to do it. When we talk about net zero, there is a lot to be critical of and a lot to get gloomy about, but we need to give our communities hope that net zero is possible.

On what keeps me motivated, I visit schools as often as I can on my eco tour, and they know what is possible. They know what needs to be done, and they want to be part of the solution. They want us to invest in them so that people in them can be the planners, engineers and architects of the future.

I hope that that is a positive note to end on. I thank everyone who has taken the time to read the report, and I ask them not to file it away and forget about it.

16:02

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): I welcome the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report.

Many of us in the chamber agree that climate change is by far the biggest threat to our future. It is crucial that, across the Parliament, we work constructively together to identify ways in which we can deliver net zero in Scotland.

As a previous member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I really enjoyed my time spent on the inquiry, listening to such a wide variety of witnesses give evidence and reading feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. I was sad to miss the final stages and I keenly looked out for the release of the report. I am delighted to be taking part in this debate.

Local authorities are, and will continue to be, absolutely crucial in the delivery of net zero, not

only because they are at the forefront of delivering many of the policies but because they know their areas and communities best. Recommendation 22 in the report is that

“the Scottish Government and COSLA promote models of community engagement on climate change and net zero, building on the good work some councils are doing ... The effective engagement of communities and community groups, drawing on their local knowledge, is vital to embed a place-based approach to climate change and net zero at local level.”

Some of my colleagues have already touched on that. I believe—and the evidence taken during the inquiry reaffirms—that collaboration between local authorities and local communities is key. I want to focus on the potential that that joint working can have.

Some great examples of joint working were highlighted during the evidence sessions, and I want to use an example from my own constituency. Renfrewshire Council is leading the way in working with the community and getting community buy-in. The team up to clean up campaign, which was launched in 2018, has been massively successful and has involved the community and the council taking a joint approach to the scourge of litter. The campaign kicked off by asking people to take pride in their area, in an attempt to change behaviours and change attitudes towards littering. The idea was that, if a person sees people in their community actively picking up litter, that might make them think twice about dropping it in the first place.

The campaign began with just a handful of people in each community, who took time out of their day every day to pick up some litter. However, it has grown into so much more than that and has taken on a life of its own. Not a day goes by in Renfrewshire without someone picking litter or clearing something out, and we have seen people really taking it to the limits—for example, through riverside clear-outs, which are not for the faint-hearted.

With that idea of changing attitudes in mind, Renfrewshire Council worked with Renfrew author Ross MacKenzie to create “The Clumps’ Big Mess”, a lovely wee story about a dad who dropped litter, much to his children’s dismay, and who then had to deal with some tricky consequences until he changed his behaviour. That is the kind of initiative we need if we are to change attitudes.

I know that the climate crisis will not be solved by our dealing with litter alone, but the campaign was about so much more than just litter picking. More than 4,000 people are now interacting and communicating through the online group, which has become a hub that is not only opening people’s eyes to so many more environmental

issues, but allowing discussions to take place about how to solve those issues. Different ideas on issues from biodiversity to up-cycling and reducing plastic are being shared, promoted and discussed. What is even more exciting is that people are sharing best practice. The campaign is enabling people from different communities to explore ways that would work for their own locality. We cannot forget that what works for one town might not work for the town or village next door—every community is unique.

The campaign could not have worked without buy-in from the community, and it deserves great recognition for its hard work, as does the council for enabling all of that to happen. As we go forward, we need to be aware of best practice in local authorities and ensure that it is supported and promoted, where applicable.

I was pleased with the report’s recommendations on transport and active travel. It is clear that changes in transport patterns and behaviours will be pivotal in achieving net zero goals, so the recommendations to create a more joined-up and strategic approach to public transport and active travel at regional level, which reflects actual travel and commuting patterns, are welcome. I am thinking of the declining bus services in my constituency, which also has limited rail travel, but there is such decline in local authorities across Scotland. The public has fallen out with public transport in many areas, because of the decline in and unreliability of local services. Councils are best placed to understand the needs of their communities, and we need to work to incentivise and encourage people back on to public transport. I am therefore genuinely excited to see the aims of the Scottish Government’s national transport strategy, which include supporting local authorities to look at different ways of delivering more localised services.

Another issue that was raised during the committee evidence sessions was 20-minute neighbourhoods, which align well with transport. The aim is to ensure that people within a community can gain access to the services and facilities that they need within 20 minutes, which will also be key in transforming our travel habits. However, such neighbourhoods will be achieved only through a joined-up approach to public transport and active travel, and we need to ensure that they are built around the needs of the whole community.

I am running out of time, so I will close. I believe that this mammoth enquiry has been useful and provides real food for thought on our delivery of net zero goals and the creation of the greener Scotland that we all want to see.

16:08

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I warmly welcome the report by the NZET Committee. I enjoyed taking part in the inquiry, which is certainly the longest inquiry that I have ever been part of. I hope that it will provide food for thought across the Government about how we change, adapt to threats and realise opportunities as we tackle the climate and nature emergencies. I agree with Monica Lennon that the report has a lot of hope in it. There is the hope that we can tackle climate change by working hard in our communities and realising the opportunities and energy for change that they contain.

We heard about some really inspiring examples of climate ambition and leadership from around Scotland, but, at the same time, we heard about the inconsistency between councils, especially when it comes to setting and planning for climate targets. The latest Climate Change Committee report on Scotland's progress emphasised three words: delivery, delivery and delivery. That means that we need to see action on the ground in communities everywhere, not just good examples.

It is simply not enough for councils to focus solely on their own buildings, land and vehicle fleets. Those bodies must be responsible for overseeing the delivery of area-wide climate targets, not just corporate plans for internal carbon reduction.

However, through the inquiry, we found that only 53 per cent of councils have set area-wide emission targets. We heard from the council in Freiburg, in Germany, which has shown exactly the type of climate leadership that we need councils across Scotland to adopt. From acts of citizens and cross-sectoral participation in decision making to a dedicated climate neutrality unit embedded in the organisation, the council in Freiburg has led the way internationally. We need to support councils in Scotland to get into that same space, which I think Freiburg managed to get into well over a decade ago.

Introducing a formal duty for local authorities to report progress and planning action on the ground will be critical if we are to make that step change. However, that additional responsibility on councils must come with the tools to deliver, including wholesale reform of local taxation powers to raise income and to drive behavioural change through road user charging or even carbon land taxes, for example.

We must also recognise the need to rebalance the conversation between national and local government, and I will be seeking to get the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill reconsidered in this Parliament at the earliest opportunity.

A number of committee members have mentioned our visits. The visits were inspiring, particularly the one to Dundee, where we saw the progress that has been made in taking forward climate initiatives over many years. Councils should be applauded for recognising that long-term funding for the voluntary sector is absolutely needed.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government has also recognised the need for long-term investment in the third sector. I am particularly delighted by the cabinet secretary's earlier announcement that another 20 climate hubs are to be funded.

I will talk about one of the hubs that I hope will be funded. Greener Kirkcaldy is an amazing example of how we can put justice at the heart of climate action. Its Cosy Kingdom project is tackling poverty and disadvantage by getting energy advice to people who need it the most. As a result, Fife now has highest number of referrals to Home Energy Scotland of any other council area. What it has achieved is quite remarkable.

The investment through climate hubs will need to continue to drive change and to expand and scale up the work of Greener Kirkcaldy and a range of other organisations. I really look forward to seeing the results of that.

Councils that are working in collaboration with communities are well placed to drive real change when it comes to transport, which remains one of the biggest carbon emitters in Scotland. The national transport strategy and the record investment in active travel are charting an ambitious course towards the 20 per cent reduction in car kilometres. Throughout the inquiry, we also saw brilliant examples of how councils are shaping national policies to fit the communities that they serve, including the councils in Dundee and Stirling investing in on-street EV charging.

However, we too often see antiquated local transport strategies that no longer reflect what communities want or need, or that do not reflect our new priorities in the national transport strategy. There is a real opportunity for councils to change that through, for example, making use of the franchising powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and the newly launched community bus fund to transform local bus networks in ways that really start to serve local communities.

Of course, the climate emergency cannot be separated from the nature emergency. We have seen record investment through the nature restoration fund. I would like to highlight some investment that has been taking place in Fife. An additional £3.3 million of funding has been granted to nature restoration projects—from community co-design work for new active travel routes along

the River Leven, which benefits active travel and biodiversity, to restoring urban meadows across the kingdom. We can invest in both the nature and climate emergencies together, working with communities.

The scale of the challenge in meeting the 2045 target will require a step change in the relationship between local government and private investors to deliver more co-financed decarbonisation projects. Throughout the inquiry, we have been inspired by Aberdeen City Council's initiative to issue municipal bonds, as well as by a number of other initiatives.

There is much to read and reflect on in the report, which we do not really have enough time to do this afternoon. However, we will continue to come back to the report in the months to come. We must keep building on these achievements and commitments, and I really look forward to continuing that work as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

16:14

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for undertaking the comprehensive range of work that informed its excellent report on the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland.

The contributions to today's debate have been helpful in analysing many of the key areas that the committee feels need to be addressed so that the Scottish Government supports greater empowerment of, and provides meaningful support for, councils, given that they will play a pivotal role in delivering net zero. That is, of course, against a backdrop of, as the committee puts it,

"unprecedented ... demands being made on ... resources and skill-sets against"

an extremely

"challenging financial backdrop."

The committee's recommendations focus on a wide range of issues and themes, but my contribution will focus on three areas: funding, private investment and planning.

First, we need to improve the way that local funding is configured so that larger, fewer and more flexible funding streams offer a more holistic and place-based response to climate change.

Secondly, there is the need for private investment at scale and the development of an investment strategy that will increase investor appetite and lead to deals being agreed. I note the call for an expanded role for the Scottish National

Investment Bank. I am attracted to the proposal for it to

"act as an interface between local government and investors"

and, essentially, to support contemporary models of co-financing.

In its briefing that was submitted ahead of today's debate, COSLA calls for the simplification of national funding for net zero programmes and more core funding for local government to help to deliver local and regional net zero projects and programmes.

As a north-east constituency MSP, I have spoken to a number of businesses that are ready and waiting to invest in renewables projects. In many cases, they would bring their vast experience in the oil and gas sector into the renewables sector, but the current funding arrangements—particularly the yearly funding distribution—are challenging for them and create potential disincentives. Therefore, I ask the Scottish Government to consider how funding can be better accessed through more effective co-funding models and to further explore the proposition that the Scottish National Investment Bank should act as a more effective interface between local government and investors.

Thirdly, I note the committee's concern about the "churn, repetition and delay" in the planning process. That is having an impact on major renewables projects and other projects. The committee also highlights the urgent need to reverse the decline in the number of local authority planners.

The complex nature of planning law and the associated lengthy timescales are pressing issues, which are further compounded by the consenting timescales for new projects. Although consenting is a separate process and was not directly considered by the committee in its report, I nonetheless consider it to be important to acknowledge the unintended but significant challenges that both processes create for businesses. Indeed, I have raised the issue of consenting with the Scottish Government on behalf of businesses in the north-east that are eager to invest in projects but for which planning and consenting timescales are a major challenge, particularly in relation to offshore wind projects.

I note the comments that were made by COSLA and Scottish Renewables about the need to disentangle aspects of planning law so that we can increase our onshore wind capacity from 8GW to 20GW in order to meet our 2030 target.

I am aware that the committee raised the issue of staffing reductions in planning departments over the years with the Scottish Government in its letter

on the draft NPF4. It commented that, unless the trend is reversed,

“there is a risk of NPF4 being more of a wish-list than a blueprint for truly transformational change that is urgently needed”.

In addressing that issue, I am drawn to the specific proposal that planning could be placed within the tertiary education landscape, as one of the STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—subjects.

In that regard, I highlight the work that Aberdeen City Council is undertaking to develop its senior phase curriculum and align it to the anticipated demand for the skills required by offshore energy production; to broaden the pathways that are available to young people to maximise the use of vocational courses and alternative routes into further and higher education; and, importantly, to develop digital and computing skills and a broader range of computer technology pathways. I commend the passion and commitment of Eleanor Sheppard, director of education at Aberdeen City Council, who has been pivotal in driving forward that work.

Members have highlighted many examples of the work that is under way in the north-east involving council-business partnerships. Some of those are in my constituency, including the energy-from-waste facility and the Aberdeen hydrogen hub. I hope that the report that we are debating today will offer an important opportunity to ensure that future work is secure, deliverable and successful.

16:21

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)
(Con): I thank the committee and the clerks for this excellent report. Its sentiment is summed up in the opening paragraph, which states:

“Scotland will not meet its ambitious target of being net zero by 2045 without a more empowered local government sector, with better access to the skills and capital it will need to play a full role in this energy revolution”.

The message that runs through the entire report is that local government is key to us all in meeting our ambition and targets when it comes to our environmental responsibility. However, to date, the devolved Government has abjectly failed in meeting those targets, and my colleagues Maurice Golden and Brian Whittle shine a light on those failures on a weekly basis. Targets have been missed, funding has been lost and local government has been excluded from the process on schemes such as the deposit return scheme.

Such schemes will have a detrimental effect on council budgets. In December last year, Falkirk Council announced that it will cease its kerbside glass collection, as it would cost £234,000 in lost

revenue once the DRS starts. That has huge implications for people who cannot get to a deposit return location.

It is not just the DRS that is causing councils concern. The report highlights the concerns of rural communities, such as those in the north-east, and calls for the Scottish Government to set out what specific assistance will be available to councils that have a large component of rural housing and to our island communities, where there are additional challenges. Given the greater demands in relation to transport and car travel in rural communities, we need answers from the Government on how it will support local authorities to achieve the targets that have been set.

I am proud that, when I was the leader of Aberdeen City Council, we signed a partnership agreement with BP, which became a planning and technical adviser, helping to shape solutions for the city’s net zero path. Working in partnership, BP and Aberdeen City Council explored opportunities such as accelerating the adoption of electric and hydrogen-powered city vehicles, energy efficiency programmes for buildings and the circular economy. The task of the partnership is to connect the dots between experts in the council and those across BP to create the very best and most sustainable decarbonisation solutions for the city.

The partnership was strengthened when both organisations signed a joint venture agreement to develop the city’s hydrogen hub. That is exactly the type of agreement that we require if we are to succeed in meeting our targets. It involves private and public organisations working together, sharing knowledge and expertise and, of course, attracting investment. It is the attracting investment piece that is so vital.

We all know that council funding and resources are being stretched ever further, which will make it even more difficult for local authorities to play their part in becoming net zero. Capital spending for local authorities is an issue, and there is often a conflict between cost and becoming net zero, as Willie Rennie highlighted.

In the Borders, the new high school in Jedburgh is the first plastic-free school to have been built, with all its furniture and fittings coming from sustainable sources. However, that comes at a price, and it will be harder for local authorities to make the right choice. With inflationary costs on building, it is now almost impossible for local authorities to make the initial capital outlay required to ensure the highest environmental standards for new buildings.

Councils have many responsibilities that link in with the net zero agenda: transport, housing, economic planning and support, spatial planning and place making, the built environment, and

waste management and recycling. Councils are vital, but, without giving additional support to local councils, the Scottish Government will not achieve its net zero targets. Councils are central to ensuring that the targets are met.

Twelve per cent of Scotland's housing stock is in the hands of local authorities and the retrofitting of those buildings to meet the targets is a mammoth task. There is no way that our local authority partners can hope to achieve those ambitious targets without additional support from the Scottish Government.

I have already touched on waste and recycling, in relation to the deposit return scheme, which we know is one of the biggest responsibilities of our colleagues in local government. So many of our councils are now moving to longer and longer periods between refuse collections due to funding cuts. That cannot be good for our environmental ambitions, and we have seen an increase in fly-tipping right across Scotland—a topic that my colleague Murdo Fraser is seeking to address in his proposed member's bill. More support has to be forthcoming for our councils to ensure that they—and therefore all of us—are meeting those important net zero targets.

We are all aware that resources—not only our financial resources, but the resources of our planet—are finite. We have to invest now to protect our future. Governments are good at planning for the short term but often fall short when it comes to planning for the long term—that came through strongly in COSLA's evidence to the committee. We need to be much better at providing long-term funding solutions to our partners to enable them to take long-term policy decisions in relation to our environment. Councils need our support and a fair funding settlement that allows them to take the innovative and forward-thinking approach to net zero that we need. We need action rather than just warm words from this devolved Government, and I would encourage the cabinet secretary to accept the committee's recommendations and move urgently to implement them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:27

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): As colleagues across the chamber have said, the report is hugely welcome and it acknowledges local government as being at the heart of meeting our climate goals. It also sets out a series of warnings. I welcome the headline response, which has been quoted by a number of speakers, that councils need more help and that targets will not be met without a more empowered local

government, with better access to skills and capital and a better understanding of its role.

Fundamentally, the report accepts that decisions by this Government, including relentless cuts to council budgets and a failure to tackle our wider skills shortages, are very real blockages to success. It emphasises that a partnership approach between local and national Government, which currently exists in name only, is vital for success.

The warnings that the report gives are absolutely nothing new, so it is telling that the Government has failed to respond to it.

When it comes to the decarbonisation of heat in our buildings, the committee acknowledged that local government is still awaiting clarity on its role in relation to private and business properties. That sentiment is felt right across supply chains, and the Existing Homes Alliance said that it needs to be addressed urgently. Householders, alongside builders and tradespeople, are crying out for certainty about what they should do and how and when they should invest, or assurances that they are installing the right technology, that that is not going to be overtaken by events and that Government will not come in and say, "No, you need to rip that out and install something else."

That needs to be done properly, because decisions made by Government without adequate planning and support for local communities are contributing to failure right now.

I recently visited Stornoway and learned how badly wrong this Government's approach can be. It is affecting vital work to tackle fuel poverty in that island community, having a huge knock-on effect on the skills and work pipeline and decimating investment in local communities that should be progressing towards net zero.

Many in the chamber will know that the rate of fuel poverty in the Western Isles was due to hit 80 per cent this winter, but it was the short-sighted actions of Government that contributed to the collapse of the area-based scheme on the islands. In March last year, the council's delivery partner, Tighean Innse Gall, announced the closure of its insulation installation department, with the loss of 14 jobs. TIG cited an onslaught of changes to regulations brought in by the UK and the Scottish Governments, and said that the Scottish Government's wholesale adoption of Westminster standards was the key reason for the failure of the scheme. TIG said that the lack of rural proofing in the PAS 2035 retrofit standards, and a failure by the Scottish Government to flex those standards to ensure that they work for Scottish housing stock—

Michael Matheson: The member is making particular allegations that the Scottish Government adopted wholesale the UK Government's

approach to that particular scheme. Is he aware that the Scottish Government made repeated representations to the UK Government, asking it to amend the scheme so that we could operate on a Scotland-specific basis that would have allowed us to take those aspects into account, but the UK Government rejected that? We therefore had no option other than to operate its scheme. Despite repeated attempts to resolve the issue, the UK Government refused to move on it.

Mark Griffin: I appreciate that the scheme was designed and devised in Westminster. However, I have received advice that the Government was under no obligation to simply replicate and use that scheme in Scotland. In fact, the experts who have been involved in installing insulation in the Western Isles for many years said that that was exactly the reason why they had to bring their services to an end, which absolutely devastated the capacity of that community to deliver for the islands.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Mark Griffin: I will take the member's intervention in a moment, because this directly affects his constituency.

All that has meant that there has not been a single installation of insulation in the member's constituency since July 2021, which has seriously undermined the local supply chain.

Alasdair Allan: I partly agree with the member. He refers to the lack of insulation being carried out under the area-based scheme. Does he acknowledge that the council, which did not run the previous scheme, and the national Government are now working together to try to recreate the scheme? I have said many times that this is a bad situation, and one that has been created by UK Government regulations. However, everyone must now work together to recreate a scheme that will work in the Western Isles.

Mark Griffin: I absolutely accept that, but the contention by the experts that I visited in the member's constituency is that the Scottish Government did not have to replicate that scheme in Scotland. It could have adapted the scheme to respond to the environmental situation here.

Those experts have also said that there has been an absolute failure by Government to provide adequate training so that their staff will know what the new scheme will look like. When I have asked questions of ministers, they have simply passed the buck to colleges and have said that it is for further education institutions to set up training schemes. They have not taken responsibility for supporting organisations in the member's constituency which, as I said, have not been able to deliver a single insulation installation since July

2021. That is absolutely shocking. It has choked off work for local suppliers, which is something that should be urgently addressed.

To return to my original point, the report emphasises that local government must be a key partner. When making its recent budget bid, COSLA said that it would need £1 billion just to stand still and maintain current services. It emphasised how vital councils are in the preventative work that keeps people away from a strained NHS and continues investment in local communities. The journey to net zero will be even harder when budgets are cut and the consequences of not reaching those targets leave us in a worrying position.

16:34

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Like other members, I express my gratitude to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for its report, which is comprehensive and really balanced—that cannot always be said of committee reports—and for giving us the opportunity to discuss such an important topic as delivering a net zero Scotland. It has been a significant debate because it has given this Parliament an opportunity to review how the Scottish Government is doing against its net zero targets, which will have to be met if we are to do our bit to keep 1.5°C alive.

What we have heard in evidence from the committee today and in the recently published review from the Climate Change Committee is that the Scottish Government is big on targets but not big on the required planning and route map to achieve those targets. The opening paragraph of the NZET Committee's report says it all:

“Scotland will not meet its ambitious target of being net zero by 2045 without a more empowered local government sector, with better access to the skills and capital it will need to play a full role in this energy revolution, and a clearer understanding of the specific role the Scottish Government wants it to play in some key delivery areas.”

That is backed up by the Climate Change Committee's recent report, which says:

“There are still important gaps at a local authority level, which might cause detrimental delays in rolling out the sufficient policy across the nation. A lack of coordination from the Scottish Government, as well as barriers to properly implementing climate policy that are ingrained in the policy cycle, have left local authorities to their own devices to do the best they can. The resulting risk is Net Zero policy being rolled out at different speeds depending on the local area.”

It goes on to say that

“the combination of an absence of a direction from the Scottish Government and a dearth of strategic design and financial support on a local level means that, when there is

action, it is often uncoordinated across geographic and policy areas.”

Local authorities are taking the initiative to drive action where possible, but that should be accompanied by strong direction from the national Government, along with the necessary powers at a local level.

I will turn to contributions from members. Liam Kerr highlighted the lack of direction from the Scottish Government—its setting of major deadlines and targets but with an unacceptably slow delivery of guidance and supports to achieve those targets. He talked about the lack of resource and the cuts to date. Colin Smyth also talked about the cuts to councils, with no insight into the provision of resources in the longer term.

It is not often that I am disappointed by Willie Rennie, but, when I asked him a question about the need for a strategy that is longer term than a parliamentary session, he said that he did not think that this Parliament would be able to achieve that. We must change that, because that needs to happen.

Willie Rennie: I did not mean to disappoint Mr Whittle. I was just trying to be realistic about what politics is like. I would love the approach to be longer term—I strive for longer term—but we must understand that we have quite a short cycle.

Brian Whittle: I agree that we have a short cycle, but, if we are to hit our net zero targets, which we must do, this Parliament will have to work in a different way, and we will have to start looking to the longer term.

The lack of skills planning was highlighted by Liam Kerr and Alexander Stewart. We need suitably qualified staff to carry out everything from home retrofit to the development of energy-efficient strategies. There is already a shortage of staff in key areas such as planning, which is leading to delays in applications for wind farms and other renewables projects that are key to net zero. Alexander Stewart highlighted the skills shortage that is now being cited by Homes for Scotland and Scottish Renewables as a major threat to meeting the 2030 and 2045 targets.

I agree with my colleague Jackie Dunbar—I am glad that she is sitting down, because that does not happen all that often—that the green economy has to be woven into our education system for children at the earliest age, to ensure that we have a workforce that can deliver net zero. There is no evidence of that having even been thought of by the Scottish Government, let alone planned for.

Douglas Lumsden used his extensive knowledge of local government to talk about the impact that Scottish Government policies have already had on councils. For example, the deposit

return scheme, which is continually being raised in the chamber, has led to Falkirk Council abandoning kerbside glass collection. He highlighted the particular challenges faced by councils with a substantial rural area, where the wider geographical spread of housing and more limited infrastructure can create additional challenges and costs.

According to the Climate Change Committee,

“Scotland has failed to achieve seven out of eleven of its targets to date. The trend of failure will continue without urgent and strong action to deliver emissions reductions”.

That has to start now. The CCC goes on to say:

“The Scottish Government urgently needs to provide a quantified plan for how its polices will combine to achieve the emissions reduction required to meet the challenging 2030 target. The plan must detail how each of Scotland’s ambitious milestones will be achieved.”

That is the crux of the matter. I am totally supportive of targets and stretch targets, and ambition should be applauded and supported. However, without a route map, and without working back from the targets to produce a plan starting from now, those targets are worthless.

We know why we have to hit the targets, but the Scottish Government now must produce the how. As the NZET Committee’s report details, councils will be among the main deliverers of our net zero policy, but they are working in a Scottish Government fog of uncertainty. We need our councils to be driving the net zero agenda.

The Scottish Government needs more than targets and high-level objectives; it needs to ensure that there is adequate funding for these policies. Time is running increasingly short, and it is time for the Scottish Government to get serious on its targets.

16:42

Michael Matheson: I have listened with interest to contributions from members on all sides of the chamber to this debate on what is, as I said in my opening remarks, a helpful and timely report. The report highlights a number of key actions and measures that need to be taken forward to support our colleagues in local government to tackle climate change. In particular, it recognises—as some members, particularly Fiona Hyslop in her intervention during my own contribution, have recognised today—the importance of empowering local authorities and taking a place-based approach to finding the solutions that are right for individual communities.

I challenge some of the contributors to the debate on the idea that the Scottish Government simply needs to do X, Y and Z in order to magically improve things for local authorities in

tackling these issues and ensure a consistent approach across the country. In fact, that would be the wrong thing to do. We need to empower local authorities to make decisions that are right for their communities, and to empower communities within local authority areas to be able to influence that process collectively together.

Brian Whittle: Will the member give way?

Michael Matheson: I will make some progress first and then give way to Mr Whittle.

I want to ensure that we empower communities and allow them to make decisions that are right for their needs regarding how they meet the challenges that go with tackling climate change.

A couple of key themes have come up during the debate. Issues around resources and aspects of planning were raised by Colin Smyth, Willie Rennie, Alexander Stewart, Audrey Nicoll, Monica Lennon and a number of others. Members will recognise the significant progress that is now being made through NPF4 to ensure that climate and nature are front and centre in our planning and decision-making process. Those in our renewable energy sector and in many of the areas that are committed to tackling the nature crisis that we are facing have warmly welcomed the way in which NPF4 fundamentally turns the dial towards tackling climate change and biodiversity loss.

That is why, in putting that in place, we have given a commitment to take forward work, as we are currently doing, with Heads of Planning Scotland, the RTP1 and the planning schools on implementation of the “Future Planners Project Report”, which includes the provision of an apprenticeship scheme to address that specific issue. That is not just about supporting the ability to tackle local planning issues but about some of the big strategic infrastructure investments that will be necessary in order to unlock our renewables potential. Consideration of significant planning aspects will be required alongside that.

Colin Smyth: Does the cabinet secretary accept that, since 2009, there has been a reduction of 38 per cent in budgets for planning departments and of a quarter of planning department staff? The big fear is that if, for example, we cannot get it right for onshore wind projects—I gave the example of those that have been delayed in Dumfries and Galloway—we could have an even bigger challenge when it comes to the scale of offshore wind projects, because we do not have the staff—

Michael Matheson: I recognise that challenge. It is important that we also make sure that local authorities provide the resources that are necessary to meet those needs. I was interested in the stats that were published today. Just last year, the headcount of local authority employees

increased—even in the present financial environment. We need to make sure that the necessary resources are going from local authorities to the areas that are a priority for them as well. Clearly, planning is one of those. I have mentioned the work that we are undertaking on that.

There is also work on a national level between Heads of Planning, the energy sector and the Scottish Government on how we can ensure the efficiency of the planning process when big strategic planning aspects for infrastructure investments come forward.

A number of members have raised issues to do with heat in buildings, which is key. I take issue with Mark Griffin about the Western Isles. The area-based scheme is a UK Government scheme. Repeatedly, for more than a year, we asked it to allow us to bring forward regulations that would adapt the scheme specifically to address Scotland’s needs. I was involved in some of that correspondence. Despite repeated attempts to achieve that, we were unable to get it, and the UK Government left things right to the very last minute, which left us with no space or option to do anything other than to adopt its scheme.

The consequence of the UK Government’s intransigence was felt in the Western Isles. That failure to respond to us for what felt like almost a year led to the crisis in the Western Isles. That is why we are working with the local authority to recover that situation. To suggest that we did not really bother ourselves to deal with that issue effectively is simply wrong. The correspondence and the repeated attempts to do so will demonstrate that.

Willie Rennie raised an important issue on heat in buildings, in highlighting the type of challenge that can be experienced at local authority level. That feeds into an issue that I want to come back to: skills. For example, Willie Rennie mentioned his experience in Cupar in Fife over the possibility of developing a district heating system—a heat network that could have been alongside a new development—and said that, to some degree, the local authority had been indifferent. I do not know what year that was, but we now have in place district heating legislation, which creates the legislative framework to give clarity to that.

In addition, through the LHEES programme, local authorities need to have strategic heat decarbonisation plans in place by 31 December this year. That is a five-year programme to address the issue that Alexander Stewart raised: skills. It gives a clear pathway so that the industry knows where the work is coming from, so that it can invest in skills and knows where the opportunities will be. That will address the type of unacceptable issue that Willie Rennie raised.

To add to that, we are taking forward specific work with the Scottish Futures Trust in order to prevent such circumstances, because we believe that heat networks will play an important part in the decarbonisation of domestic premises. We want to avoid reinventing the wheel 32 times and have a framework approach in which local authorities can turn directly to the Scottish Futures Trust for some expertise and support in rolling forward programmes on areas such as district heating systems and heat networks. Again, that will help to support them.

Edward Mountain rose—

Michael Matheson: I am not sure how much time I have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A brief intervention and a brief response would probably be in order.

Michael Matheson: I will give way.

Edward Mountain: I am grateful. I realise that the cabinet secretary is coming to the end of his speech. My question is a very simple one. Will he give the committee some indication as to when he will respond to the report?

Michael Matheson: I hope to be able to respond in the next couple of weeks, once we have finalised our approach. The reason why that has taken longer than I would have wanted is that we are taking a cross-Government approach to it, because of its wide-ranging nature, which has meant that we have had to draw on information and responses from a range of different directorates. That is the principal reason for that, and I can assure the member that we will provide a full response to the committee's report, as I would always seek to do, given the nature of the important work that the committee undertakes.

I recognise the challenge in the report and in other reports from the CCC around the work and the actions that the Scottish Government must take forward in tackling climate change. I also recognise the role that local authorities and communities have to play in supporting that.

We collectively—almost unanimously—supported our climate change targets of 75 per cent net zero by 2030 and net zero by 2045, but we also have a responsibility to have a mature and considered debate on how we go about making that transition. It is very easy just to say that the Government should do X, Y and Z whenever it thinks that it should; it is much more difficult to put policy into action.

I hear colleagues across the chamber saying that we need to give more powers to local authorities and assistance for it to be able to do these things, but when we gave them the simple power to introduce a workplace parking charge,

we got opposition from a range of parties in the chamber, which said that local authorities should not have that power—that they should not be empowered to make that decision, if it is the right thing for them to do in tackling climate change in their area.

In welcoming and acknowledging the importance of this report and its well-considered recommendations, everyone in the chamber also needs to recognise that we must take collective action and show collective responsibility and that difficult decisions will have to be made in meeting our climate change targets. That requires a maturity of debate and a recognition that we all have to play our part in achieving that target when it counts, rather than simply descending into political opposition. I believe that, if we can get that level of maturity, we can support our colleagues in local government and our local communities, and we can achieve our net zero targets by 2030 and 2045.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Fiona Hyslop to wind up the debate on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. You have up to nine minutes, Ms Hyslop.

16:51

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Climate change and our collective role of delivering net zero and elimination of carbon emissions is a global imperative, but to deliver that we need action at every level of government. This has been a good debate. It has raised so many issues and has challenged us, but it has also given us some hope and confidence.

I, too, thank all those who sent in submissions and gave evidence—from financiers such as the Association of British Insurers to community groups; from city councils to environmental groups; and from planners to transport and housing private companies.

I also thank our clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre, who provided excellent assistance to steer us through almost a year of evidence and inquiry. Despite joining our committee at the end of the inquiry, our convener Edward Mountain steered us well to its conclusion.

The power of the report is its breadth of approach but compact output, and the brief and sharp focus of the recommendations to help government. Targets matter, but it is delivery that will make the difference. The Climate Change Committee's last report was crystal clear about the Scotland's need for a step change in setting out delivery plans, as Mark Ruskell emphasised.

It is worth repeating the top line of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report, which states:

"Scotland will not meet its ambitious target of being net zero by 2045 without a more empowered local government sector, with better access to the skills and capital it will need to play a full role in this energy revolution, and a clearer understanding of the specific role the Scottish Government wants it to play in some key delivery areas."

Some lazy thinking and reporting and, indeed, the initial response from the Government and from some members in the debate, assumed that "access to ... capital" meant that it all had to be public capital, which is far off the mark. We make it clear in the report that access to private capital will be key, but the financial skills—product development for market investment—are far from mature, and we need co-ordination and the sharing of financial skill sets in order to access the billions of pounds of institutional finance that is available.

Brian Whittle: Would the summary be that it is, going forward, the Government's responsibility to set the targets, the framework and a strategy that will give confidence for that investment to be made towards net zero targets?

Fiona Hyslop: That is the very point of the recommendation that there should be a road map, which, I think, we are all agreed on.

The response from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities was that our report is a watershed moment in terms of understanding and appreciating local government's role and potential in delivering net zero. There is no shortage of willingness or of good examples of best practice in, drive for and understanding of what needs to be done, as I saw when I visited Stirling, but they are far from comprehensive all over Scotland. To get where we need to be, we need examples of the best being delivered at scale all over Scotland.

Councils are major employers and have significant ownership of buildings and land. As such, like any other public or voluntary organisation, they need to act in-house and to realise net zero with their own assets, but that cannot and must not be the limit of their role. As Colin Smyth set out, councils are uniquely placed to lead, co-ordinate and deliver all the different players and services in their geographical locality in a deep and comprehensive way. They have unique convening power, so we strongly advise the Government that that needs to be harnessed and co-ordinated, with co-production, in a way that the Government has just not done, to date.

We also call on the Scottish Government to ensure that all councils set area-based targets, rather than targets only for their own direct

emissions. Only 53 per cent of councils currently do that.

Yes—local government is independent, but councils themselves are strongly of the view that the Scottish Government should take on a far bigger role in a team Scotland delivery model. We need to shift from piecemeal projects to a strategic delivery model, with changes in incentives and style, and a timeframe for funding and decision making to make that happen. Paul McLennan spoke well on that in relation to heat in buildings and what that will mean for our proposed new deal for local government. Audrey Nicoll spoke of the style and form of funding and co-financing.

Our main recommendations are as follows. We would like the Scottish Government to provide

"a comprehensive roadmap for delivery of net zero in key areas; one that also gives Councils far more certainty than they have at present about the roles they are to play".

We recommend that the Scottish Government set up

"a local government-facing 'climate change intelligence unit'"

to provide specialist help. I am pleased that Michael Matheson has accepted that.

We would like

"a system of larger, fewer and more flexible funding streams for net zero-related projects".

Such funding streams would be larger in form but perhaps more strategic, to help with the place-based response.

We also ask the Scottish Government to address the "churn, repetition and delay" in the planning process that are holding up major renewables and other projects that would help to meet net zero goals, and which we say has a "chilling effect" on investment. I agree with the cabinet secretary that NPF4 will make a big change in that direction.

We also recommend in the report that

"The long-term decline in numbers of Council-employed planners must be reversed in order to meet the ambitions of the new National Planning Framework",

and we would like the Scottish Government

"to clarify the role Councils will play in an area-based approach to heat decarbonisation and to set out the additional support they will be offered in preparation and delivery of their Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies."

There are plenty of other recommendations, but, if the Scottish Government is to deliver only those ones, that would make a big difference to how, and therefore when, we deliver net zero.

I want to respond on a few areas that have been mentioned by members. On finance, the green

finance task force needs to provide practical and deliverable assistance.

On skills, people are at a premium, and we face the perverse situation in which private businesses need council planners to deliver approvals at a pace that will make a difference, yet councils often lose planners to better-paying private practice. The 38 per cent reduction in town planning budgets since 2010 is of concern. It was mentioned by Alexander Stewart, and Monica Lennon brought to bear her professional expertise on that. The Government and SDS need to accept the RTPI's detailed case for a chartered town planner apprenticeship scheme.

Advice is available from the Improvement Service, the Scottish Futures Trust and the Scottish National Investment Bank, but they can do more. It is not just about advice: it is also about secondment of experienced staff to deliver the projects that are needed.

Liam Kerr talked about the need for plans and certainty, so that private businesses have confidence to deliver private skills investment.

Regional transport partnerships need to do more across council boundaries for public transport—in particular, buses—for commuters, as was raised by Natalie Don.

On community, I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement today of £4.3 million for 20 new climate change hubs for community-led work.

On housing, Willie Rennie set out the very real choice of up-front costs for energy-efficient houses versus volume of new housing, and he asked who bears the risk. He said that "change is hard", and he is right.

Monica Lennon spoke about aligning procurement and net zero, and Douglas Lumsden addressed procurement and the real choices and dilemmas that are faced by councils. On recycling and waste, Jackie Dunbar referenced the council-led Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire energy-from-waste plant.

We MSPs are sent to Parliament to serve our constituents and our country. I add that we are also here to serve our planet and the people of this nation and others so that we have a sustainable future.

The window on the world that we know is closing, and a world that we do not fully know or understand—one of constant adverse weather, flooding, rising sea levels on our and other shores, and millions of climate migrants escaping from drought—is coming fast. That world is not abstract but is of now, so the imperative for climate change mitigation and adaptation, and for carbon reduction is also of now. Delivery needs to be now

and we need to mobilise all our talents across the land to do it.

As Willie Rennie said, "change is hard". It demands that we work together. In that spirit, I commend the report and the debate to the Parliament. If, as is the challenge for members across the chamber, we work not only for the next four years or the four years after that but for the long term, although the challenge might be hard, the Parliament can rise to it and work with its partners in local government to deliver.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland.

Business Motions

17:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-08228, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business. I call George Adam to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 16 March 2023—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice, Housing and Local
Government

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice, Housing and Local
Government

followed by Ministerial Statement: Ferguson Marine
Update

after

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Bail and Release from
Custody (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Financial Resolution: Bail and Release
from Custody (Scotland) Bill—[*George
Adam.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-08229, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 21 March 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Improving Care
for People with Co-occurring Mental
Health and Substance Use Conditions

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Expansion
of Vocational and Technical
Qualifications in Scotland's Secondary
Schools

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 22 March 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Constitution, External Affairs and
Culture;
Justice and Veterans

followed by First Minister's Statement: Historical
Adoption Practices

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Transition
to a Wellbeing Economy

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.20 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 23 March 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Statement by the First Minister

followed by Response to the First Minister's
Statement

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Employment Support for Veterans and
their Families

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 28 March 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 29 March 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 30 March 2023	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
2.45 pm	Portfolio Questions: Covid-19 Recovery and Parliamentary Business; Finance and the Economy; Net Zero, Energy and Transport
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 20 March 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-08230, on the suspension of standing orders.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 15.2.1 of Standing Orders be suspended on 15 March 2023.—[George Adam]

17:02

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I oppose the suspension of rule 15.2.1 of standing orders, which would close the public gallery tomorrow, Wednesday, 15 March 2023.

This is the second time that such a motion has been put to the chamber in a matter of weeks as a result of our parliamentary staff lawfully withdrawing their labour. It was wrong previously to shut the public gallery and it is wrong now. As I have said before, in excluding the public from the Parliament's meetings, we are in direct contradiction of not only the Parliament's founding principles but the Scotland Act 1998. Therefore, we should reject the motion. We should not casually cast aside the principles of openness and accountability whenever they are inconvenient, especially when there are viable alternatives, as our colleagues in the Welsh Senedd have shown.

Regardless of our views on the industrial action, as parliamentarians and democrats who are accountable to the people of Scotland, we should surely all agree that to close the public gallery is wrong. We are now further down a slippery slope where it is deemed convenient to shut the people out of the Parliament. Therefore, I ask members to oppose the motion.

17:03

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): The Scottish Parliament is sitting tomorrow, and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has recommended that the public gallery should close due to staffing levels. I accept that recommendation from the SPCB.

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

Decision Time

17:04

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-08205.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08205, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:04

Meeting suspended.

17:06

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-08205.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 26, Against 92, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-08205, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the UK Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 88, Against 30, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the legislative consent memorandum lodged by the Scottish Government on 13 June 2022; agrees not to give consent to the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill, and calls on the UK Government to amend the Bill to confer the power in clause 1 solely on the Scottish Ministers in relation to devolved matters, or to otherwise make it a requirement for it to secure the consent of the Scottish Ministers when making provision within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, in order to properly respect devolved responsibilities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-08209, in the name of Edward Mountain, on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, on the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's 1st Report, 2023 (Session 6), *The role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland* (SP Paper 302).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08230, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the suspension of standing orders, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-08230, in the name of George Adam, is: For 90, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 15.2.1 of Standing Orders be suspended on 15 March 2023.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

International Long Covid Day

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07996, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on international long Covid day. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that 15 March 2023 is International Long Covid Day; understands that, in Scotland, it is estimated that 187,000 people have long COVID; further understands that there is currently no simple cure and that long COVID can affect people of any age and background, including children, regardless of the severity of their original COVID-19 symptoms; considers, with regret, that the funding available for treatment, support and clinical research, remains too low; is concerned at reports that there is an increasing postcode lottery for specialist NHS services in Scotland for the diagnosis and treatment of the condition, potentially leading to inequalities in patient outcomes; notes the belief that key workers with occupational long COVID should receive compensation and pension entitlements; further notes the view that more should be done in respect of improving air quality through CO₂ monitoring and HEPA filtration in schools and public buildings, and notes the view that more work is needed to understand and treat what it sees as an often debilitating illness.

17:14

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Tomorrow—Wednesday 15 March—is international long Covid day. According to the Office for National Statistics, more than 175,000 people in Scotland have long Covid. Three years on from the first wave of the virus in Scotland, people who are living with the condition feel let down by the Scottish Government. In the words of Anna, formerly from Dumbarton, who has long Covid,

“The current government and its institutions have failed us. It is as if long covid doesn't exist.”

In its briefing that was provided prior to the debate, Long Covid Scotland outlined the steps that the Scottish Government must take—they cover everything from data and research to specialist long Covid treatment hubs. I commend Long Covid Scotland's briefing to whoever is the incoming health secretary and ask that they sit down with Long Covid Scotland and Long Covid Kids Scotland, as the voices of those with lived experience, and come up with a plan for full implementation of their recommendations.

The first area that I will touch on is funding. When £3 million of funding for long Covid was first announced, 74,000 people were reported as having the condition. That number has almost trebled, but the amount of money has remained the same. The services that will help with long Covid also apply to people with ME and chronic fatigue syndrome. Many of the symptoms are

similar, so this could be a real opportunity to create tangible change for all those who are living with energy-limiting and fluctuating chronic illnesses in Scotland. I hope that the Government will seize that opportunity.

The £3 million for long Covid treatment was shared among each of the health boards but, to be frank, it was not enough. The response from a freedom of information request that I submitted last year showed that not one health board was awarded all the funding that it believed it needed to treat the condition. Uncertainty around funding levels has created a significant barrier to implementing treatment plans, and the length of time that it took for the Scottish Government to release funds led to delays of over a year for people to access services.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Does Jackie Baillie agree that the glacial progress in getting money to health boards, along with the small quantum of funding, is keeping us back? Health boards in England and Wales are much further on in providing care pathways for sufferers of this terrible condition.

Jackie Baillie: I absolutely agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton's contention, but he should have added that there is no consistency in provision. The services that are provided very much depend on where someone lives—a classic postcode lottery. I will take up his point further. As of May 2022, NHS England had allocated £224 million to support the assessment and treatment of long Covid, with £90 million of that funding allocated in 2022-23. Applying the Barnett formula to the figures would produce funding of £21.7 million in Scotland, but the Scottish National Party Government has provided only a fraction of that amount. Where are the missing millions?

The Scottish Government should also collect better data on the number of people who are living with long Covid, including children and young people. Health boards that have responded to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's long Covid inquiry have stated that one of the biggest barriers to service provision has been a lack of public health data on the condition. Health boards cannot accurately treat the condition if they do not know the scale of the problem. There is absolutely no excuse for not collecting the data. Covid is still with us and so, too, is long Covid.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The additional challenge with the lack of data is that young people's education is being affected because schools are unable to identify people with long Covid and put in place recognised strategies that will help with their education.

Jackie Baillie: I very much agree. That reminds me of the Scottish Government's suggestion at the

time that we should cut off the bottom or the top of doors to increase ventilation. We need to be serious about how we treat Covid in classrooms.

Long Covid can be utterly debilitating, so I very much welcome the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's inquiry into the condition. One respondent to the committee's call for evidence said:

"I cannot stand in the shower. I often can't get dressed or wash. I can't stand for longer than 10 minutes without pain and symptoms. Memory issues have resulted in me forgetting to turn off the oven or blow out candles. I am unfit for work."

Previously healthy children are now confined to wheelchairs. Doctors and other front-line healthcare workers have lost their jobs because they have been exposed to long Covid. While people with long Covid remain untreated, their ability to work diminishes each and every day.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Jackie Baillie's point about the evidence that the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has heard on long Covid, does she share my concern about the evidence that many people's general practitioners do not have a proper understanding of long Covid, which has left too many having to go private and pay for treatment that they should get for free under the national health service?

Jackie Baillie: The member raises an important point. My understanding is that one in five people with long Covid has sought private medical treatment, because they are not getting tests or treatment from their GP or from acute services.

I want to develop the point about people in work. In a survey that was carried out by the key worker petition UK team, 57 per cent of key worker respondents said that they can no longer work, and 68 per cent said that they are struggling financially. Those are NHS staff who caught Covid at work due to a lack of personal protective equipment and who now face losing their jobs because of their illness. The Scottish Government clapped for them during the pandemic, but it now fails to offer decent funding for treatment and stands by while their employment and source of income look set to be removed.

The Scottish Government should treat long Covid as an industrial injury. I commend Mark Griffin's member's bill on creating a statutory employment injuries council, which should include long Covid. Guidance needs to be put in place for employers on supporting people effectively and ensuring that they meet the legal rights of disabled workers. The Government must ensure that it places those with lived experience at the heart of all decision making, nationally and locally, and that they are involved in the design, development, delivery, review and evaluation of services.

I will finish with the words of a nurse from Edinburgh, Cass MacDonald. Cass said:

“Keyworkers with occupational long Covid have literally been left to rot. We are losing pay and our careers are in jeopardy. I’m losing my home because I can’t work and I don’t know if I’ll ever get back to my job. Covid and long Covid are taking everything from me. Career, home, savings—everything. I don’t mind being disabled but this is a shadow of a life.

I am not well enough to renew my nursing registration this year. My career is over. I often feel like I’m being punished by government and healthcare, for neither dying nor getting better. This is a horrible limbo to exist in.

We keep being told there’s all this support, all this money being put into healthcare, but where? There’s nothing in my area. We need action from the Scottish Government, not warm words.”

People with long Covid are not just going to go away. They absolutely deserve support from the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a lot of interest in speaking in the debate. I am keen to take everybody who has pressed their request-to-speak button, but I ask for some co-operation and for members to stick to their allotted time.

17:23

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing this debate to the chamber.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee, of which I am a member, has been looking at long Covid, and it has heard from a number of sufferers and their families about the extremely challenging time that they have been facing. Our thoughts are with them all today. It is appropriate that we are having this debate, as tomorrow is international long Covid day.

Awareness of long Covid is gradually increasing but, clearly, it is still the case that, among the public as a whole and among GPs and others, some are much more familiar with it than others. I know that those who are directly affected find the rate of progress frustrating, but I think that we are moving in the right direction.

Research is on-going. Last week, the committee heard about the nine on-going Scotland-led studies. I was particularly impressed by the work of Professor Chris Robertson. He and his team at the University of Strathclyde have been studying more than 5 million health records in Scotland, which I had not even realised was possible. Even if a GP has not diagnosed long Covid and coded it as such, the team has been able to trawl through the free text and pick up symptoms and queries in the GP’s notes. Professor Robertson recently published a paper in *The Lancet* that showed that

they found that more cases of long Covid have come from the alpha and delta variants, while fewer are from omicron.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to know that Scotland has a world-class amount and quality of data. However, I accept that we have further to go on sharing that data.

On the wording of the motion, I very much agree that we want more treatments to be available and that there should be more support and clinical research, but I do not agree with Jackie Baillie’s attack on localisation and on making services fit the needs of the local population. She claims that there is a lottery, as though health boards were pulling solutions out of a hat at random. That is insulting to health boards and professionals. Labour has a history of taking a top-down, centralised approach. We need to strongly oppose that. Just because something works in Dumbarton does not mean that it is the right answer in Dundee, Dumfries or Durness.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am delighted to hear about John Mason’s conversion to localism. Perhaps he will now join my party in opposing the power grab and the asset stripping of local communities in the shape of the national care service.

John Mason: I think that Alex Cole-Hamilton is in the wrong debate.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee has not reached any conclusions, and we are due to hear from the cabinet secretary next week, but the subject of long Covid clinics is certainly on our agenda. A number of people feel that the grass is greener across the border and that we should be copying what is being done in England, but the jury is still out on such specialised clinics.

The disadvantages of such an approach could include a shortage of specialist staff and the danger of diverting staff away from other critical parts of the health service. There is also the high cost per patient of those clinics and the risk of conditions other than long Covid being missed. On the other hand, it seems eminently sensible to give patients a single point of contact so that they have one specific person whom they can go to with problems. Evidence from England suggested that those with long Covid still had to go through their GP in the first instance before accessing a long Covid clinic, whereas Wales has a self-referral model, which appears to do well.

I will finish with what I hope we can all agree on. We must continue to focus on long Covid, even as other medical issues come along. ME has been with us for a very long time, and we have not made the progress in understanding it or dealing with it that many of us feel that we should have made. There might not be one magic wand to deal

with long Covid or to answer the needs of those who are suffering from it, but we must do all that we can to research it and to support and treat those who are affected by it.

17:27

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I thank my long Covid cross-party group co-convenor for bringing the debate to the chamber.

On 1 March 2020, Scotland confirmed its first case of Covid-19 and I wish to pay my respects to the friends and families of the 17,000 Scots who died after contracting this horrible virus, and also to our heroic front-line staff who have treated and looked after patients throughout the pandemic.

Tomorrow is international long Covid day, and we are focused on the rapidly growing number of Scots who survived Covid but are yet to make a recovery. If we cast our minds back to the summer of 2020, just a few months after our first lockdown, it was clear then that we were dealing with a new long-term, chronic and debilitating condition. Month in and month out at my GP surgery, more and more patients were presenting with fatigue, dizziness, brain fog, pain in their joints and poor mental health. The alarm bells were ringing, but the Scottish Government paid scant attention. In the chamber, I underscored the urgent need for action to support long Covid patients. I also proposed a tried and tested solution to establish multispecialty long Covid clinics based on the successful Hertfordshire model.

All that our patients got was a mediocre response from the SNP-Green Government and its current health secretary. In the same month that the Scottish Government produced its long Covid response plan, 79,000 people were suffering from long Covid but, after eight months of dither and delay by the Scottish Government, that figure had risen to 150,000. That is what you get with a continuity candidate—the “First Activist”, if you will—announcements and inertia but very little in the way of delivery.

Today, an estimated 175,000 Scots are struggling with long Covid. The cabinet secretary provided me with a list of initiatives that he is funding this year, to the tune of £3 million, across Scotland’s health boards. That includes the provision of £20,000 for public health intelligence gathering in the Western Isles, £120,000 for self-management resources and peer support in the Highlands, and £178,000 to develop a long Covid rehabilitation pathway in Fife.

However, there is a lack of consistency with that approach. It is not streamlined, and there is a danger of exacerbating the postcode lottery in long Covid support. The Government’s approach is not, as John Mason suggested that it was, one of

localism. Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is calling for a national approach to ensure that all health boards are able to provide multidisciplinary care and integrated referrals to the third sector. No one should be told that they have no access to support, as is happening in some of our communities today.

I appeal to whoever is the new health secretary come the end of the month to listen to the terrific long Covid patient advocates that we have, such as Long Covid Scotland. They know what they are talking about.

Long Covid Scotland is essentially calling for what I proposed in September 2021: the establishment of a network of specialist long Covid treatment hubs. There should be published clear referral pathways. Meaningful, holistic treatment must be available. Diagnostic tests and biomedical investigations should be the norm. There should be better guidance for employers so that they can support their employees effectively. People with lived experience must be at the heart of all decision making, nationally and locally, and they must be involved in the design, development, delivery, review and evaluation of services.

NHS staff are going above and beyond, but they cannot provide the service that patients deserve, because the SNP-Green Government has failed to tackle long Covid head on. Tackling long Covid effectively and with consistency is of vital importance in order for the whole of Scotland to speed its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

I declare my interest as a practising NHS doctor who struggles to get his patients into long Covid clinics.

17:31

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the debate, which marks international long Covid day, and recognise the tireless campaigning work that Jackie Baillie has done for people who are suffering with long Covid.

Long Covid is a devastating disabling disease. We should also be absolutely clear about the fact that, for many thousands of people, it is an industrial disease. Lives and livelihoods have been consumed by the relentless, horrifically common symptoms, which include brain fog, breathlessness, extreme fatigue, constant dizziness and joint pain. Therefore, I welcome the motion and agree that people who are suffering from long Covid should be compensated.

As members might know, the starting point for my proposed member’s bill, which would establish a Scottish advisory council to make sure that we have an employment injuries system that is fit for purpose in 21st century Scotland, was back in

2020, when I asked key workers, academics, unions and ministers whether long Covid should be classified as an industrial disease. The answer back then was an overwhelming yes, and the evidence that we now have means that that case is absolutely undeniable.

Many people caught Covid at work when they were simply doing the job while we were safely isolating at home. The condition has virtually destroyed their ability to return to work. Last week, many of us will have read on the front page of the *Daily Record* that long Covid has left nurse Brenda Eadie penniless, as she has had to give up her job in Low Moss prison. Brenda's harrowing story was echoed by that of another nurse, who highlighted that, without a "financial miracle", she would be unlikely to make it through the year. Front-line workers who put their health and wellbeing on the line for all of us during the pandemic are now suffering devastating circumstances in financial hardship.

You would not know it, but the issue of employment injuries is fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament. A Scottish advisory council could recommend long Covid becoming an industrial disease, but such a council does not yet exist, and we do not know when the relevant benefit will launch.

Although I plan to lodge my member's bill in a matter of weeks, I am saddened that that will not be soon enough to help the countless workers who are suffering right now. In recent weeks, I have learned of care workers who simply cannot do their jobs any more because they do not have the strength to lift people or to cope with a full day's work. They are being retired or, worse still, dismissed from their jobs on ill-health grounds for something that they caught at their work.

The fact is that too many people have been ignored by their employers, all while the Government is offering little more than warm words. The Government's actions have been dismal, and it certainly does not match its rhetoric on supporting disabled people and seeking to give them the dignity, fairness and respect that they deserve. The Government recently told me that it started tracking its own staff absences due to long Covid only in July 2022, which demonstrates that there has been a failure to track people who are suffering from long Covid, as has been raised by other speakers in the debate.

When I first asked the then Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People whether the Government would use its powers to recognise workers with long Covid in its planned employment injuries benefit, the response was appalling. Rather than using the devolved powers that Scotland has, the cabinet secretary said that those people should make a personal independence

payment claim to the Department for Work and Pensions. The idea that someone with long Covid should apply to the DWP for PIP, forcing them into a traumatic, cruel process at the hands of an organisation that systematically discounts their illness, is horrifying.

Nearly 200,000 people are suffering from the disease, so it is devastating that only 422 people had made a successful claim by October last year. To make matters worse for the new Scottish benefit, the Scottish Government simply cannot see who with long Covid is getting support under the adult disability payment because, again, it does not track the statistics of people who have the condition. It should not take a member's bill, but if that is one of the ways in which we can give people with long Covid the dignity, fairness and respect that they deserve, so be it. I look forward to engaging in the debate when I launch my proposed bill.

17:36

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): I welcome the sufferers of long Covid who I know are watching the debate online and in the gallery. Many are too ill to leave their homes; we speak in their name. I thank my friend Jackie Baillie for securing the debate and remind the chamber that it is only the second time that the Parliament has debated this debilitating condition. The first was during a debate in my name more than a year ago. I hope very much that the next time we debate it, it will be as normal business in Government time, which would be a signal to everybody who is suffering from long Covid that the Government is finally taking the issue seriously.

I arrive at the debate with a deep sense of anger, which I feel on behalf of the many thousands of people in my constituency and others who are suffering with long Covid. As of today, as we have heard, 175,000 people and more are suffering from it, making it the largest mass disabling event since the end of the first world war. If you listen to their stories, you cannot help but join me in feeling that anger.

At the age of 45, my constituent Will was at the height of a busy and successful career when he caught Covid in March 2020—he is a long hauler. He thought that he had got off lightly but, sadly, he was wrong. Over the three gruelling years since, long Covid has incrementally destroyed both his health and his life. He has been forced to stop work and describes his long list of symptoms as

"a desperate rotation of misery."

He wrestles daily with cognitive problems, gastrointestinal issues, visual problems, breathing difficulties, crushing fatigue and chest pain. He

says that it is a challenge even to eat a bowl of soup as his hands still shake so violently. The Government promised him help and clinical support, but it has not delivered that.

When I ask the Government what it is doing to support people such as Will, it points to primary care. However, he is one of many people who sought help via primary care. He tried numerous GPs, and every time he was told that there was just no clinical pathway for him. That is immeasurably cruel. It would seem that the principal strategy of the Government for sufferers of long Covid is to gaslight them and pretend that help or pathways are available, only for them to find that there is nothing. Thousands of long Covid patients have the same story to tell.

During the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's long Covid inquiry last week, Dr Janet Scott was asked how she thought Scotland was doing in terms of getting people into a correct treatment pathway. She describes the current situation as being "pretty dreadful". Good work is being done, and we have heard about some of that from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. However, its helpline is still undersubscribed and NHS referrals are low.

Will has now given up waiting for help. He has even paid thousands of pounds for private medical care and knows others who have done the same. However, many cannot afford to access private medical care. So desperate are they to make any sort of progress towards health that people are trying everything. That is a damning indictment of the Government's failure to help those who are suffering.

There is also insufficient understanding of the paediatric component of long Covid. Some health boards were not even aware of long Covid in children until this year, three years into the pandemic. That is astonishing. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has said that there is no specific service aimed at children and young people in Scotland. There are tens of thousands of such children and young people. I have met children who went from winning ski competitions to being bound to a wheelchair because of the condition.

The lack even of basic awareness of those young people, not to mention proper treatment, is appalling. The Scottish National Party-Green Government is spending just £17 per head to tackle long Covid in Scotland. That is the price of a takeaway and it is less than a fifth of the money that is available in England and Wales. Sufferers here would be better off moving south. One of the reasons why health boards are reticent about publishing any sort of treatment pathway is that they know that the severe lack of funding means that they do not have the ability to meet the huge need and demand for capacity across the country.

How on earth are we here? Three years on from the start of the pandemic and this is where we find ourselves.

The situation is having an impact on our economy as well. Labour market statistics that were released today show that the number of working-age people who are economically inactive due to ill health is the only metric going up. We can bet that a lot of them have long Covid. I support Mark Griffin's proposal to make it an industrial injury.

People have had enough of the empty platitudes. The Government must immediately increase funding and create and publicise clear treatment pathways. It must ensure that we provide meaningful diagnostics and holistic treatment that is informed by the lived experience of sufferers of long Covid and available to everyone with the condition, no matter who or where they are.

The severe lack of leadership by Humza Yousaf means that it is being left to people with long Covid themselves to fight the battle alone. They are being abandoned and their recovery is being harmed.

17:42

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): As many others have done, I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Long Covid occurs after a mild, severe or asymptomatic Covid-19 infection and can cause a wide range of symptoms across the body. It can be a multisystem illness and cause organ damage and cognitive dysfunction, as well as gastrointestinal, respiratory, cardiac, nervous and musculoskeletal problems. It can affect anyone of any age, including children, irrespective of their previous health.

As we mark the first international long Covid awareness day, there are an estimated 175,000 people in Scotland living with the condition. As long as Covid is with us, the potential for more people to develop long Covid is a real and present danger. We should always take opportunities such as this debate to encourage everyone to take the basic infection control measures that can help keep everyone safe. We should continue to make sure that we wash our hands thoroughly and, if somebody is ill, they should try to stay at home.

As we have reopened after lockdowns, many people have gone back to normal. I am sure that many members who are in the chamber and people who are watching the proceedings have witnessed visibly ill people out and about. We know that, for many people, staying home when they are ill is not a reality, especially during the

cost of living crisis, and we need to challenge employment practices that are inflexible and potentially put staff in harm's way. Anything that we can do to reduce transmission will ultimately mean that fewer people will develop long Covid.

I thank all the long Covid groups that have been in touch with briefings ahead of the debate. Every person involved should be proud of the effect that they are having on the direction of long Covid care. I will focus on a few asks of the groups.

Long Covid care and knowledge are likely to develop for many years to come. We need to ensure that we accurately capture data on long Covid. Because many people who contracted long Covid during the first wave of the pandemic lack the positive test, they might not immediately get a diagnosis of long Covid. We need to ensure that the clinical guidance is robust, so that people in those circumstances are given the appropriate diagnosis and that lack of a positive test when they could not have had a test is not a barrier to that diagnosis.

We need to make sure that we know how many people there are and where they live so that services can be planned to support them. Many of those suffering are children and will likely need support for many years. Services need to be able to keep up with that demand.

Because of the high numbers, we might always have struggled to upscale services quickly enough to meet the demand for the number of people who are now experiencing long Covid, but ensuring that those who are experiencing symptoms are able to voice their experience and access the support that they feel they need is imperative.

We also need to ensure that scientific studies are representative of all those who are living with long Covid to ensure that treatments are appropriate for all. Too often in the past, studies have not been representative of, for example, women, ethnic minority groups and those with disabilities or health conditions that may have put them at greater risk of Covid in the first place.

We also need to ensure that general practitioners and other professionals have protected time to update their knowledge as knowledge on Covid updates. There are many conditions, undoubtedly including long Covid, that would benefit from that approach, and a move to electronic prescribing, for example, might free up some time to accommodate it, although there will be many competing priorities for any freed-up time, so some more creative solutions might need to be found.

Campaigners are also asking for proper diagnostic testing and not just rehab. Due to the multisystem nature of Covid, it is possible to have damage to more than one organ or process within

the body. Although general rehab may work for some, it makes sense for there to be appropriate diagnostic testing, such as scans, to ensure that the damage is known and is appropriately supported. That could be especially important because we know so little. We have no idea whether symptoms may resolve for some and get worse for others, and if we do not have people's baseline correctly documented, we cannot hope to make projections or offer advice for anyone who may come after.

I realise that I am out of time, so I would once again like to thank Jackie Baillie for the debate.

17:46

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing this debate.

Last month, I was invited to the long Covid peer support group in Inverclyde. That group meets every Wednesday at Your Voice in Greenock between 1 pm and 3 pm. Anyone who is suffering with the effects of long Covid is welcome to attend a meeting and seek support from others who are dealing with that horrible condition.

What I heard that day will live with me for many years to come. I was genuinely taken aback by the number of symptoms that individuals informed me that they had. Each attendee wrote down their symptoms and provided me with a copy. They were all different. Some experienced a few symptoms and some experienced a lot of symptoms. There were people there who had lost their jobs, and some were struggling to maintain their employment. That relates to the point about guidance. Whether guidance does or does not come, surely, in addition to complying with employment law, every employer has a duty of care to their staff and must try to assist them and keep them in employment.

One of the ladies who lost her job has given me permission to speak about her situation. She was admitted to Inverclyde royal hospital in January 2021. She was initially put on a continuous positive airway pressure machine, but that did not provide the level of intervention that was required, and she was transferred to Glasgow to be put on a ventilator. The same outcome happened in Glasgow, so she was transferred to Aberdeen to be put on an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation machine.

The lady has no recollection of the period from when she went into the IRH in January until she was transferred back to Inverclyde in March 2021. During that time, her mother passed away from Covid. Due to the restrictions, she watched her mother's funeral on a live stream on her own in a hospital room.

Due to the lasting effects of Covid on that lady's body, she now struggles daily. She is married with three children, and she worked in a local school. Her family have had to endure the loss of a loved one and the prospect on a number of occasions of losing her. She can no longer work, and her ability to do day-to-day tasks has severely diminished. She is truly suffering physically and mentally from the effects of long Covid.

Her main concern now is to be seen by medical professionals and to feel that she is being listened to and understood. Along with the other attendees at the peer support group meeting, she spoke about not feeling listened to and about being repeatedly given the same tests and thus the same results. She is keen to be involved in any research to look at how we can better understand and treat long Covid.

I put on record how thankful I am to that lady, whom I have chosen not to name, for giving me permission to touch upon some of her story. Her story tells us that, although, in general, the medical effects of long Covid on a person are discussed, long Covid is clearly also linked to the emotional trauma that we all, individually and collectively, went through during the pandemic.

I imagine that long Covid will last for many years to come, as we all learn to live with the effects of an experience that we all hope and pray will never happen again.

The Scottish Government is investing record amounts of money in our national health service. That is more than welcome, and it highlights the Government's commitment to improving our NHS. However, as we see across the world, health services are struggling.

Preventative spending is vital and is better not only for the individual but for the country and its finances. If we do not do more to help people who are experiencing the effects of long Covid now, intervention will come too late for some, and much more finance and resource might be used in an ineffective way further down the line.

That said, I very much welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is investing in long Covid research. The chief scientist office is funding nine Scotland-led studies, totalling £2.5 million, that aim to improve understanding of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on physical and mental wellbeing. The projects are progressing; they are at about the mid-point stage of their 22 to 24-month duration.

I welcome the work that is under way in Scotland to support and improve the lives of those who are struggling with the effects of long Covid. However, from the conversations that I have had with those who are living with the condition and the additional conversations that I will, no doubt, have, I know that more can and must be done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I advise members that, due to the number of members who still wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Jackie Baillie to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Jackie Baillie*]

Motion agreed to.

17:51

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the motion to the chamber ahead of international long Covid day, which will take place tomorrow, 15 March.

For far too long, long Covid has not been viewed with the significance that it should be. In the past, the perception has sometimes been that Covid can be a debilitating disease for up to several weeks, but we know that many people have suffered continually from the condition.

Every time that long Covid is raised in the Parliament, we hear of even higher statistics that highlight how many Scots are currently suffering from the condition. Indeed, Jackie Baillie's motion mentions the estimated 187,000 people living with long Covid in Scotland. We all know that Covid has not gone away, so the issue will continue, and that number will continue to rise.

We have seen that long Covid can take different forms in different people. The condition affects different organs and different systems, so many different parts of someone's life can be affected.

The nature of the condition means that long Covid is inevitably more difficult to diagnose and even more difficult to define. Symptoms that individuals suffer from include chronic fatigue, painful joints, dizziness and decreasing mental health. The issue of decreasing mental health is particularly acute. Long Covid sufferers might find life much more stressful, and they might have much more anxiety. In some cases, they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. There are also countless examples of fit, young and healthy individuals who have found themselves no longer able to live normal lives for months—or even years—after getting Covid.

As part of international long Covid day, people with the condition have been encouraged to share an image of something that they can no longer do because of long Covid. That is perhaps one of the best ways to demonstrate how the condition reaches into every corner of people's lives.

Today's debate provides an opportunity to reflect on what is undoubtedly one of the pandemic's worst legacies. It should also provide an opportunity to reflect on how we tackle the issue.

For the past 18 months, my colleague Dr Sandesh Gulhane has been raising the plight of long Covid sufferers and highlighting the need for dedicated long Covid clinics to be established. Despite promises of additional funding, we have not seen those clinics materialise. Dr Gulhane has pointed out that long Covid was always going to be an issue that needed to be dealt with. There were always going to be consequences, and those consequences are still here. Despite now being nearly three years down the line, we are still waiting for dedicated, specialist services. That is a crying shame for people who are suffering on a day-to-day basis.

Action must be taken; it is long overdue. The voices of people who are suffering should and must be heard. With initiatives such as international long Covid day now becoming recognised, I am at least hopeful that we will not have to wait too long for further action. The Government must act now to provide assistance and support for people with long Covid so that they are respected and looked after.

17:55

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I thank my colleague Jackie Baillie for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

Long Covid is not simply a long recovery time from Covid-19, nor is it an occasional feeling of fatigue or sickness following a Covid-19 infection. That is a common misunderstanding. Long Covid is a complex, multisystem, neuroimmune illness that currently has no known cure. A recent ONS survey showed that an estimated 2.3 million people in the UK suffer from long Covid. A recent BBC "Panorama" documentary estimated that nearly 10,000 NHS workers are currently absent because of long Covid.

One of my constituents, Marie-Claire, is an NHS doctor in Edinburgh. Marie-Claire told me that the overwhelming response from colleagues was that they often had little understanding of the severity or specifics of the illness. Marie-Claire also suffers from long Covid. There is a growing stigma about long Covid within the medical community and wider society. She told me that patients are having to educate their medical professionals on this debilitating illness in order to get help.

Another of my constituents, Cass Macdonald, was a full-time NHS nurse who contracted Covid-19 while working in an out-of-office nursing role in Edinburgh. Despite having multiple underlying

health conditions and being told to shield according to the Scottish Government's advice, the same Government still advised that it was safe for NHS staff to come to work. Cass has been living with long Covid ever since and is unable to go back to full-time work.

Since Covid special leave has ended, Cass is now on standard sick pay, which has been halved this month and will be stopped altogether in September. Cass has also been told that, due to their financial circumstances, their only option is to declare themselves bankrupt or sell their home. A recent survey by key workers petition UK showed that Cass is part of the 20 per cent of key workers in the UK with long Covid who said that they were at risk of losing their home due to financial circumstances.

Like many others, Cass has experienced frustration within the health service due to lack of awareness surrounding the health impacts of long Covid. Tomorrow, Cass and other key workers will deliver a petition in London urging the UK Government to create a pension and compensation scheme for all key workers who have developed long Covid as a result of their front-line work during the pandemic. The petition already has more than 118,000 backers.

The Scottish Government must be part of the process to help stop the stigma around long Covid. It must do more to ensure adequate support for key workers who are desperately struggling due to long Covid. It must do more to increase public awareness of the danger of long Covid and to help people such as Cass and Marie-Claire and the thousands of others suffering from long Covid across Scotland.

I again thank my colleague Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber.

17:59

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I also thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber.

We have heard more and more from Covid-19 survivors that the impact of the virus lasts beyond the first few weeks of immediate symptoms.

As members have said, for some patients, Covid-19 has a long-term and far-reaching impact on their daily lives, impacting them physically, emotionally and cognitively. Post-Covid syndrome, which is now referred to as long Covid, presents a variety of symptoms. They range from physical symptoms such as pulmonary and cardiovascular symptoms as well as systemic issues such as extreme fatigue, to neuropsychological symptoms that impact cognition, speech, memory and emotion.

Members have described the condition already. As I am one of the final speakers in the debate, it is hard to come up with or reflect something different. However, I am interested in following up on the point that the varied symptoms demonstrate that long Covid is complex, and much is still not known about how Covid-19 will affect people over time.

Research is on-going and must be supported. Stuart McMillan mentioned research that is being undertaken. I have information on research from the Covid in Scotland study, which involved a large cohort of people. The study involved 33,281 cases of laboratory-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection as well as 62,957 individuals who had never been infected. The study looked at a wide range of people who have had Covid and some who have not had it. The results are interesting, although I will not repeat all the information that I have in front of me.

It is crucial that we think about the real-life experiences of people living with long Covid and that we involve those people. We need to continue to use that experience to inform the Scottish Government's approach to support, and we need to look at where support is most required.

I have read about the work that Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is doing with NHS Lothian, Pogo Digital Healthcare and patients with long Covid to develop a pathway for long Covid. The pathway aims to give patients access to the tailored talks digital platform and to get advice from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland's long Covid support service. The work involves engaging with people to hear about their symptoms. People self-assess their symptoms, which allows them to be directed to particular specialists—as we have heard, different specialists deal with different symptoms.

It is interesting to pick up on what the Office for National Statistics has said about the prevalence of long Covid. In social care, 85 per cent of the workforce are female; in education, 60 per cent of the workforce are female; and in healthcare, the figure is 76 per cent. Therefore, long Covid impacts women more in those areas. Obviously, the condition presents challenges for women's participation in the labour market, particularly as employer responses to long Covid have perhaps not been particularly supportive of women in the workforce. In a Trades Union Congress study, 52 per cent of respondents in the female workforce said that they had experienced some type of discrimination or disadvantage due to long Covid.

I am interested in whether the minister is pursuing any specific long Covid pathways into treatment for women and whether any further analysis could be done to look at the gender impact.

I will stop there, although this is a wide-ranging subject and I could easily have gone on for longer.

18:03

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber and allowing us to discuss the issue. I am a member of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, which is investigating long Covid and the Scottish Government's approach to it. We have taken evidence from many long Covid sufferers and, for sure, it can be a crippling condition. It can severely restrict a person's ability to work or even to take part in what we would class as everyday activities. It can be extremely debilitating. As has been highlighted, the problem is that, for many people in employment, the condition is not taken seriously. When people have to continually be absent from work, that impacts on their ability to do their work and potentially endangers their employment.

The problem is that there are multiple symptoms of long Covid. There can be recurring chest pain, brain fog, abdominal pain, extreme fatigue and neurological symptoms. If a person is suffering from recurring chest pain or recurring abdominal pain or any of those other symptoms, you had better believe that they want to get that seen to, because of course it is extremely worrying. They need to see a GP. We know that the NHS is under extreme pressure and that access to GPs is not all that it could potentially be in certain areas. Even if a person gets to see a GP, there are GPs who do not accept that long Covid is a condition. Even when a GP accepts that it is a condition, they have no place to signpost the person to. As has been said before, many people have ended up having to pay for private healthcare to get a diagnosis or even treatment, and, of course, that is leading to significant inequality, which we know already exists.

Interestingly, we heard in evidence from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland that it is treating long Covid and that it has capacity, but people are not getting referred to the organisation because GPs do not recognise or realise that Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is a potential destination.

My assertion is around the need to develop the health information technology system to not only accumulate the data from research—for which Scotland has an excellent reputation—but to deploy it in an effective way, which we are not particularly good at. Covid has highlighted a problem that we already had to deal with: our collection of data, our deployment of data, the ability of that data to cross NHS borders, and our ability to share data and good business practice.

Emma Harper: Brian Whittle and I were on the Health and Sport Committee together in the previous parliamentary session. Data and data sharing were a big issue. Does he think that the work that Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is doing needs to be connected directly with, for instance, the data platforms for learning for GP practices or GPs?

Brian Whittle: Emma Harper is absolutely right. Having been on that committee with me, she knows that the ability to collect and share data is an issue that has recurred for me over and over.

One issue that we always seem to see with a lot of conditions—multiple sclerosis was another one—is the need to be able to share information with GPs. I think that, because GPs are under extreme pressure, their ability to do consistent development is curtailed, and we need to generally look at how we allow our GPs to access that learning. I think that Emma Harper is absolutely right.

As I come to a close, I will say that long Covid clinics, which are not available in Scotland but are available elsewhere in the UK, are not only diagnostic and treatment centres but are the hubs for collecting data. Long Covid is real, and we are behind the curve in Scotland.

I finish by thanking Jackie Baillie once again for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is our business to raise the issue again.

18:08

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my colleague Jackie Baillie for her on-going work on long Covid and for bringing this debate an international long Covid day to the chamber. I thank colleagues from across the chamber for their contributions, but in particular I want to mention the importance of my colleague Mark Griffin's bill.

As we have heard, long Covid is, and will continue to be, one of the most challenging outcomes of the pandemic. It is a condition that debilitates, lacks a cure and lacks research and, sadly, it is one about which people still lack awareness. It is absolutely right that we mark international long Covid day—which, as we have heard, is tomorrow—and renew our commitment to all those in Scotland who are suffering as a result of the long-term impacts of the virus.

In the debate, yet again, colleagues across the chamber have warned the Scottish Government about the threat that long Covid poses. People suffering with long Covid have spoken to us as MSPs directly to highlight their concerns, and we have heard from members during discussions in the chamber and at other times in the Scottish

Parliament. However, I am not surprised that their demands and requests have been met with insufficient actions. That is part of the reason why we keep trying to bring the issue to the chamber.

As members will know, I often raise issues on health inequalities. I feel that Jackie Baillie is right to note in her motion the importance of not creating such inequalities in patient outcomes. Last month, the Scottish Parliament information centre released research that highlights that

“As a proportion of the UK population, the prevalence of self-reported long COVID was greatest in ... people living in more deprived areas, those working in social care, those aged 16 years and over who were not working and not looking for work, and those with another activity-limiting health condition or disability.”

We are still behind on research, and the impacts of long Covid will become clearer as we progress. However, the Scottish Government has totally taken its eye off the ball on health inequalities, so it is absolutely critical that we are alert to what could be yet further such inequalities that will impact Scots from deprived areas.

Before I conclude, I am keen to pay tribute to the health and activity rehabilitation programme team that works as part of the health and social care partnerships in Ayrshire's three local authority areas. On Friday, I was delighted to pay a visit to its base at the Lister centre in Kilmarnock to learn about the long Covid services that it will provide in the coming months to people living with the condition in the NHS Ayrshire and Arran area.

Early on in the pandemic, the team identified the need to support its staff, which it did through an occupational health model. That has given the team a real advantage in recommending its service to lead on long Covid in Ayrshire. From my visit, it seems to me that clinical leadership and a respect for a multidisciplinary approach are key to the team's achieving its outcomes. It has an equal approach across allied health professions, nurses, volunteers and support staff, and it does fantastic work in the community. I have no doubt that its long Covid provision can and will be a success.

As parliamentarians, we owe it to the staff of such services to ensure that funding is available and is uplifted whenever possible. I hope that the minister will address the funding issues that members from across the chamber have raised. As people look for support to help them to deal with breathlessness, fatigue, tiredness and other symptoms, we must be in a position to offer it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Fulton MacGregor, who will be the final speaker before I ask the minister to respond to the debate.

18:12

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): This week marks the anniversary of the point when we began to fully understand the scale at which the Covid pandemic would affect our lives. In the years since, we have seen rapid scientific breakthroughs, communities pulling together and a fundamental shift in the way that we live our lives. I want to put on record my welcome for the work of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee on a range of issues relating to the pandemic, including the issue of long Covid.

We are still trying to fully understand the condition. However, as other members have said, generally speaking, we can describe long Covid as being where an individual takes months to recover—if they recover at all—from Covid symptoms and suffers from persistent issues such as fatigue, high temperatures, breathlessness, cognitive impairment, generalised pain and mental health problems, to name but a few.

Like other members, I have been contacted by many constituents whose lives have been significantly affected by their struggles with long Covid. One constituent, who is only 27 years old, has been off work for two years and suffers constant pain every day. Although doctors have told him that he is suffering from long Covid, he is still waiting for further diagnostic tests with the NHS and is having trouble accessing the necessary benefits and supports as he awaits those. He tells me that he recently reached an agreement with his employers to allow him to return to work, which is promising. However, as other members have suggested, perhaps not all employers will be as understanding or as informed about long Covid as that local firm.

Another constituent was only 14 when he contracted Covid during the first wave of the pandemic. He is now 17 years old and has withdrawn from school and his social network, and his dreams of learning to drive and attend university have been put on hold indefinitely.

Doctors have diagnosed him with long Covid and now believe that he suffers from severe chronic fatigue syndrome. His mother, Tracy McMullen, has expressed her appreciation for the GPs and healthcare professionals who have helped her son up to now, but also her frustration that clinical support for cases such as her son's is nearly non-existent. I have raised the situation of Mrs McMullen and her son previously in the chamber, and I know that she has given evidence to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee and made a submission to the inquiry.

Of course, that is not to say that the Scottish Government has been inactive in this area, as some of the commentary in tonight's debate has

suggested. In September 2021, the Scottish Government set up the long Covid service, which uses an evidence-based approach to provide supported self-management, primary care, community-based support, rehabilitation and secondary care services, if necessary, to people with long Covid. The initiative was financed by the £10 million long Covid support package that was given to health boards to help them to respond to the situation.

My local health board, NHS Lanarkshire, uses a long Covid rehabilitation pathway, which offers dietitians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychological practitioners and speech and language therapists, among others, to people who are referred on to the pathway by their GPs.

Jackie Baillie: I think that we all welcome the £10 million that the Scottish Government is providing, but that money is being provided over three years, and it is not the £21.7 million that the Scottish Government has received in Barnett consequential. Does Fulton MacGregor agree that it would be helpful for the Government to put all of that money into the system to help long Covid sufferers?

Fulton MacGregor: We are still trying to understand long Covid. We should welcome the money that has been invested, but it is likely that more will need to be done. I will go on to develop that point.

I mentioned the situation in NHS Lanarkshire. I am due to meet members of its rehabilitation team soon to hear more about their work. I have heard very good things about the work that they are doing. NHS Lanarkshire has published on its website a long Covid self-management workbook, which offers individuals ways of alleviating symptoms and lists a number of other supports that are available, if required.

Three years on, we know that long Covid exists, and we know that it can be debilitating; in fact, some people have said that it is the pandemic after the pandemic. We know that people who suffer from it experience a wide range of symptoms. Local health boards have protocols in place to provide some aid, but much greater investment is needed to provide support in cases such as those of the constituents I mentioned earlier. As well as providing health assistance, we must ensure that the social security network does not allow anyone who is suffering from long Covid to slip through.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Maree Todd to respond to the debate. You have around seven minutes, minister.

18:17

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am very pleased to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government. I hope to respond to many of the points that have been raised, to set out the Scottish context and, of course, to reiterate our commitment to supporting people with long Covid.

Tomorrow's international long Covid day gives us an important opportunity to reflect on the impact that Covid-19 has had and continues to have on those adults and children who experience persisting symptoms. Those symptoms can vary considerably in their presentation and impact from person to person, and they can have significant effects across many areas of life. I pay tribute to our dedicated health and social care and third sector staff across Scotland, who have been working tirelessly since the beginning of the pandemic to support people with long Covid.

Unfortunately, as many members have mentioned, at present there are no broadly effective treatments for long Covid. The approach that is recommended in clinical guidance is to provide treatment, where possible, for specific symptoms or support to help people to manage them. In Scotland, that is being supported through local primary care teams, which conduct tests to investigate symptoms and provide direct support or access to other services. Those services might include third sector, community rehabilitation or mental health services and, for a smaller proportion of patients, further investigation of specific complications, which will be delivered in a specific specialty clinic or hospital setting.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That is what it says on the tin—that is what the Government has said for the best part of 18 months—but it is not what is happening in real life. I said in my speech that the Government is gaslighting victims and sufferers of long Covid by suggesting that there are treatment pathways when those pathways just do not exist. What does the minister have to say to them?

Maree Todd: I find it quite insulting that Alex Cole-Hamilton has used that term in the chamber. There is no intention to gaslight patients. However, from listening to people who have been impacted by long Covid, it is very clear that healthcare support and services have not always met people's expectations.

We also know that finding the right support can be particularly challenging when people have multiple symptoms or complex presentation. That is why this Government has established the £10 million long Covid support fund, which aims to increase the capacity of existing services and support those with long Covid. It aims to develop those into more clearly defined local pathways and

to provide a more co-ordinated experience for those accessing support.

Jackie Baillie: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. Research from SPICE has identified that £21.7 million in Barnett consequential has come to the Scottish Government as a result of NHS England treatment for long Covid. Where has that money gone?

Maree Todd: I am sure that Jackie Baillie is aware that we spend more per head of population on health than any other UK Government. We have more GPs per head of population. Spending in Scotland is 10.6 per cent higher than in England.

I put to Jackie Baillie, and to others who raised the point about services being better in England, the written response of the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's inquiry on long Covid. It stated:

"We note that the English clinics have been hugely expensive for the number of patients treated and that most treatment involves rehabilitation and symptomatic care."

Therefore, it does not differ significantly from what is on offer in Scotland, other than that it is significantly more expensive.

We have made—*[Interruption.]* Give me one moment to proceed. We have made an initial £3 million available to NHS boards and partners over this financial year, and a further £3 million will be allocated over 2023-24.

I would presume that all members in the chamber will be familiar with the clinical guideline; certainly, I would presume that Dr Sandesh Gulhane is already familiar with evidence-based guidelines. The clinical guideline produced by SIGN, NICE and the RCGP notes that one model for long Covid service organisation would not fit all areas. That is why we are supporting NHS boards to develop those tailored models of care, delivered by teams with knowledge and expertise of their local populations.

For example, as mentioned by my colleague Fulton MacGregor, between May 2022 and January of this year, NHS Lanarkshire's long Covid rehabilitation pathway has directed more than 580 referrals. That pathway delivers a single point of access for assessment and co-ordinated support from services, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychology, dietetics and speech and language therapy, depending on what is most appropriate for a person's needs.

NHS Highland, which covers the area where I live, spans the largest geographical area of all Scottish health boards, covering 41 per cent of the country's land mass. It has developed a long Covid pathway delivered by a virtual team—quite

rightly so. It includes occupational therapy and physiotherapy staffing to support assessment, rehabilitation and co-ordination. That pathway has had approximately 100 referrals since going live in September 2022.

Brian Whittle: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. Perhaps she would reflect on the fact that Ayrshire and Arran does not have any pathway for anybody with long Covid, except for those who work in the health board.

Maree Todd: Brian Whittle will be delighted to hear that six health boards have long Covid pathways up and running. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and NHS Ayrshire and Arran, have indicated that their pathways are expected to open later this month. Elsewhere, other boards are working extremely hard to conclude recruitment processes and to have defined long Covid pathways in operation as soon as possible. We have established a national strategic network to ensure that initiatives delivered by boards are robustly evaluated, helping to spread best practice and learning as quickly and effectively as possible.

There is still a great deal to be learned regarding long Covid, which is why we are contributing to the worldwide research effort to better understand the condition. Our chief scientist office is funding nine research projects investigating the longer-term effects of Covid, totalling £2.5 million. Initial findings from a number of them have been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

More broadly, our CSO research funding schemes are open. Let me be absolutely clear that applications on long Covid are welcomed.

Ventilation was mentioned earlier in the debate, and we know that it can make an important contribution to reducing the risk of transmission. Expert advice from bodies including SAGE and the Health and Safety Executive indicates that air cleaning and filtration devices—such as HEPA filters—are not a substitute for efforts to improve ventilation in order to mitigate the risks of Covid. We are taking forward the recommendations of our ventilation short-life working group, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of ventilation, increase technical skills and improve air quality in buildings.

It would be remiss of me not to recognise the work of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, including the work that it is currently undertaking, and the wealth of information that it has amassed from academics, healthcare practitioners and, most important, people with lived experience of the condition.

This is a brand new condition, and yet we have already done a great deal in Scotland. We have issued national guidance, supported research into

the condition, established a fund to support the development of services and set up a national strategic network to ensure learning between NHS boards and the sharing of evidence on long Covid. I recognise that that will be no comfort to individuals who are suffering and who are finding it hard to navigate care, but it is important to note that we are dealing with a condition that we are still learning about, and that all that has been done within the context of an NHS under immense pressure as a result of the pandemic.

I will correct one final thing before I close; I find myself obliged to correct just one of Alex Cole-Hamilton's inaccuracies. This is, in fact, the third time that this Parliament has debated long Covid. The last time that we debated it was in May last year, in Government time.

The Government remains committed to drawing upon the best available insight and evidence to inform our evolving approach to supporting people with long Covid. We look forward to engaging with the Parliament on the issue.

Meeting closed at 18:27.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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