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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 23 March 2023

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 March 2023

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

## General Question Time

### Sexual Misconduct Allegations (Councillors)

**1. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it produces guidance for local government on how allegations of sexual misconduct against councillors should be handled. (S6O-02053)

**The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson):** The guidance on handling such complaints is produced by the independent Ethical Standards Commissioner for Scotland. Allegations of sexual misconduct against a councillor while they are performing their duties should be dealt with by the Ethical Standards Commissioner as a breach of the councillors' code of conduct. Moreover, if a criminal offence may have taken place, that should be dealt with by Police Scotland.

Sexual misconduct is an issue that all parties should, and do, take very seriously. That is why the Scottish Government is currently taking forward measures to prevent individuals who are on the sex offenders register from being councillors.

**Meghan Gallacher:** Last week, a Scottish National Party councillor who claims to have been sexually assaulted by a former North Lanarkshire Council leader demanded reform of how the SNP handles sex complaints. It is the third claim of sexually inappropriate behaviour that has been made against that individual. Instead of supporting victims, however, North Lanarkshire SNP closed ranks. One councillor even claimed that Mr Linden had done nothing wrong and that "the only thing" that he was "guilty of" was "being ... young".

Does the minister agree that victims should be protected by political parties, and does he think that councils should have in place additional measures for councillors should political parties fail to support them?

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** I call the minister to respond on matters for which the Scottish Government has general ministerial responsibility.

**Ben Macpherson:** Thank you, Presiding Officer. As you allude to, I cannot comment on political parties. I refer the member to my first answer.

In considering how we move forward, it is unacceptable that people who are potential predators could be councillors. That is why we are undertaking measures to improve matters, including taking forward a review of section 31 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 in order to bar individuals who are on the sex offenders register from being councillors, and we are continuing to consider matters relating to the councillors' code of conduct.

### Windsor Framework

**2. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what its initial assessment is of the potential impact of the Windsor framework on Scotland's economy. (S6O-02054)

**The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee):** We welcome the Windsor framework, which offers an opportunity for the United Kingdom to reset its relationship with the European Union. However, the Prime Minister, by setting out his view that the framework puts Northern Ireland in an "unbelievably special position", has accepted that Scotland is now at a major competitive disadvantage, and has made crystal clear the immense damage that the UK Government's hard Brexit deal is causing to Scotland.

Despite voting overwhelmingly to remain, Scotland has been forced out of the EU, the single market and the customs union, and we have lost freedom-of-movement rights, which were so important to the Scottish economy.

Last week, the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed that as a result of Brexit, long-run UK productivity will fall by 4 per cent, which is equivalent to a loss in annual national income of around £100 billion in comparison with continued EU membership.

Given that that hard Brexit is supported by not only the UK Government but the Labour Party, it is clearer than ever that it is only by becoming an independent country that Scotland can regain the huge economic benefits of EU membership.

**Clare Adamson:** I thank the minister for his answer, and I concur with his concerns over the Office for Budget Responsibility's report. Can he give any comfort right now to Scottish businesses, which continue to suffer as a result of a damaging Tory hard Brexit? What comfort can he give them as they look across to Northern Ireland and see the advantages that Northern Ireland will have over Scottish businesses, given its access to the single market?

**Ivan McKee:** As I said in my earlier answer, we recognise the damage that that can do to the

prospects of Scottish business. Of course, the Scottish Government continues to work with businesses in Scotland to support them as best we can, given the damage that the UK Government is doing through those steps.

The people in Scotland have given a clear mandate for a referendum on Scotland's future. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, members.

**Ivan McKee:** Scotland has huge economic potential, but the UK economy, particularly post-Brexit, is now lagging behind many EU and international comparators. Should the people of Scotland, when given a choice, vote for independence, Scotland would get the full range of powers and the ability to rejoin the EU and build a country that is wealthier, more successful and fairer than the UK.

### **NHS Scotland Infrastructure Investment Plan**

**3. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will begin to set out its proposals for the NHS Scotland infrastructure investment plan, post-2026, in relation to new-build hospitals. (S6O-02055)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** An exact timeline has not been agreed for when the Scottish Government's infrastructure investment plan for 2026 and the following five years will be published, but, in line with previous iterations of the plan, I expect it to be published in late 2025.

**Edward Mountain:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Last week, I wrote to him and to all other Scottish National Party leadership candidates to ask whether they would support a new acute general hospital for the Highlands and Islands, to replace Raigmore hospital. I know that the cabinet secretary has been very busy and has been unable to give me an answer, but now he has the opportunity. Does the cabinet secretary support my call?

**Humza Yousaf:** Replying to Conservative MSPs should have been my priority, so I ask Edward Mountain to forgive me for not having got around to him. *[Interruption.]*

Conservative members might want to listen to the answer. I am very proud of Scottish Government investment in our Highlands and Islands. With regard to Scottish Government support, I announced £5 million of capital investment in upgrading maternity services at Raigmore hospital, and our Highland national treatment centre is getting an investment of £48.5 million. As Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I have had the pleasure of opening two new

community hospitals: one in Aviemore in September 2021, and one on Skye in March 2022.

There is no doubt that Raigmore hospital will require significant investment—through either a full refurbishment or, indeed, replacement—and, of course, we will work closely with NHS Highland to identify the best way forward.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** Can the cabinet secretary advise as to when we are likely to see construction of a new Crosshouse hospital in Ayrshire? The United Kingdom Government promised 40 new hospitals in England, the construction of which has been hampered by a lack of cash, is years behind schedule and is

“moving at a glacial pace”,

to quote Saffron Cordery, the interim chief executive of NHS Providers. We do not want to follow the Tories' appalling example.

**Humza Yousaf:** Indeed, we do not wish to follow that example. Of course, investment in our infrastructure and in health and social care is challenging, because of the Conservatives' economic vandalism, which means that, at peak inflation, the health and social care budget alone is worth £1.2 billion less, and the Scottish Government budget is worth £1.7 billion less.

NHS Ayrshire and Arran is working on its caring for Ayrshire programme, which is an exciting and ambitious programme that will transform health and care services across Ayrshire and Arran. The board's vision is that care should be delivered as close to home as possible and supported by a network of community services, with safe, effective and timely access to specialist services. As part of that programme, NHS Ayrshire and Arran is considering its acute healthcare estate, which includes Crosshouse hospital and what that will look like in the future. The Government will be fully supportive of that approach and we look forward to discussing those plans with the board when it is ready to do so.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** Earlier this week, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee heard evidence from health boards regarding external pressures on their service delivery, including the impact of inflation and increased utility costs. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Government has considered how to reduce revenue energy cost as part of the infrastructure investment plan proposals, for example, through capital investments in systems such as district heat networks, which could increase the sustainability of the hospital estates and support surrounding communities?

**Humza Yousaf:** We have considered that, and there are excellent examples of places where we

are introducing such efficient systems. Of course, we have an ambition to decarbonise our entire health and social care estate, and I am happy to make sure that that strategy is forwarded to Paul Sweeney. I also point to the fact that, in next year's budget, we will increase investment in the health service to a record £19 billion.

### National Health Service Dentistry

4. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle the reported exodus of dentists from NHS dentistry. (S6O-02056)

**The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd):** On 7 February, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care wrote to all NHS dental teams confirming the continuation of the bridging payment to 31 October 2023 while we prepare for the implementation of payment reform. Payment reform will comprise a new and modernised system that will provide NHS dental teams with greater clinical discretion and will provide transparency for NHS patients. It is our intention that payment reform will maintain the confidence of NHS dental teams by ensuring the future viability of NHS dentistry in Scotland.

**Colin Smyth:** The minister referred to confidence, but she will know from the crisis in Dumfries and Galloway that the reality is that no one can currently register with an NHS dentist. Practices in Dumfries, Annan, Castle Douglas and Thornhill have deregistered 20,000 patients. Crucially, half of those who are registered have not seen an NHS dentist for more than two years.

Given that the research from the British Dental Association, which warned about this exodus, shows that well over half of dentists have reduced their NHS work, what assessment has the Government made of the changes to the whole-time equivalent NHS dentist workforce since lockdown, and what guarantee will the minister give that my constituents will actually get to see an NHS dentist?

**Maree Todd:** There is no doubt that there are strong existential forces working on the dental workforce in Scotland at the moment. We are working through the backdrop of a pandemic that prevented work in dentistry for nearly a year and impacted on it for quite a period after that. We had a whole year of dental students not qualifying, and Brexit happened. In the area that the member mentioned, Dumfries and Galloway, one in two dentists was European.

The Scottish Government has put in place a framework of support to encourage more dentists to work in remote and rural areas, including in areas of the south of Scotland. That includes the Scottish dental access initiative, which provides

capital funding of up to £100,000 for the first surgery and £25,000 per additional surgery to dental providers who are setting up a new practice. We also have an enhanced recruitment and retention allowance of up to £37,500 for newly qualified training. We put that framework in place to mitigate the worst effects of Brexit on the reducing supply of dentists to Scotland.

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** Since Brexit, the rate of European Union and European Free Trade Association dentists joining the register has halved, although the Opposition would deny that. Therefore, will the minister provide an update on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to improve access to NHS dental services and the areas that are particularly affected by those challenges?

**Maree Todd:** The member is absolutely correct in saying that the consequences of Brexit are invariably having a disproportionate impact on NHS dental services in many areas, including Dumfries and Galloway—as I hear a member on the Conservative benches shouting from a sedentary position.

We have already seen improvements from the framework that we have put in place—we have seen a positive impact. I have heard that Dumfries and Galloway has already received expressions of interest for potential grant funding to open new dental practices, which the Scottish Government will absolutely be in a position to fund if applications are successful.

In addition, it is our intention to make formal representation to the United Kingdom Government that dentistry be included in the shortage occupation list. We also have the chief dental officer in active discussions with the General Dental Council to support it in speeding up the application process to clear the General Dental Council backlog.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

### General Practitioner Services (Rural Areas)

6. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last assessed access to GP services in rural areas. (S6O-02058)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** Last year, the Scottish Government published the "Health and Care Experience Survey 2021/22" in relation to people's experiences of GP services.

Health boards and health and social care partnerships are responsible for planning and delivering primary medical services, and the Scottish Government would expect them to make

use of that survey to identify any particular issues with access, including in rural areas.

**Rona Mackay:** Twechar, in my constituency, has been without a GP surgery since 2019. The ever-growing village is in a semi-rural area on the border between East Dunbartonshire and North Lanarkshire. The only option for residents is to register in the one practice in Kilsyth or in one of the two practices in Kirkintilloch, which are both some miles away.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that residents deserve a better service than that and that the HSCPs and health boards in the two local authority areas should work together to find an acceptable solution?

**Humza Yousaf:** I agree that they should work together. There are options available to the health and social care partnership and the health board there. If discussions are needed with my primary care team and officials, I will ensure that they make themselves available to the health and social care partnerships, the local authorities and the health board involved.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** The cabinet secretary's failure to deliver the new GP contract is the real reason why the *The British Medical Journal* says that there is a decline in the reported quality of some aspects of care in Scotland, with rural areas hit hardest. It is the fault not of overworked practices but of the cabinet secretary, who has compounded the error by cutting £65 million from the primary care budget. Will he commit to reinstating that crucial £65 million for primary care?

**Humza Yousaf:** What a brass neck! The reason why we had to reprofile our money—*[Interruption.]*—was the economic vandalism—

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, members!

**Humza Yousaf:** —of the Conservative Party, which meant that our Government budget was worth less by the amount of £1.7 billion—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you!

**Humza Yousaf:** That is what crashed our economy. That is a brass neck and a half.

What are we doing, Presiding Officer? There are more GPs per head in Scotland than in any other part of the United Kingdom, and some 3,220 multidisciplinary team staff members have been recruited in Scotland. The Scottish National Party Government will continue its record investment in health and social care, and I will leave it to the Conservatives to moan from the sidelines.

## NHS Forth Valley

**7. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the status of NHS Forth Valley since its escalation to stage 4 of NHS Scotland's national performance framework. (S6O-02059)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** Yes, I am happy to provide an update. There are some signs of improvement in performance in NHS Forth Valley. An example is in children and adolescent mental health services, where we have seen some improvement in waiting lists. It is not where we want it to be, but there certainly have been some improvements.

That and other work is being taken forward by an assurance board and an external support team chaired by Christine McLaughlin. In that role, she has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including local authority chief executives and the area partnership forum, which comprises local trade union representatives.

**Stephen Kerr:** The Royal College of Nursing and Unison have reported "very serious concerns" over

"unsafe practices and a culture of intimidation".

An independent review found that there was a "culture of fear". The BBC "Disclosure" programme on the national health service in Scotland was grim viewing. In it, a trade union representative at NHS Forth Valley said that staff were watching patients die and did not feel that they had been able to provide decent, high-quality care. Clinical teams have spoken out about wards that are short of staff and unsupported, about patient safety being at risk, and about staff on duty being pushed to breaking point. In November, vacancies were over 10 per cent for registered nurses and nearly 14 per cent for doctors. Can the cabinet secretary honestly say that he believes that the culture at NHS Forth Valley has changed? What are today's vacancy rates at NHS Forth Valley for doctors and nurses?

**Humza Yousaf:** Stephen Kerr raises some really important points. They are precisely the reason why I took the decision to escalate NHS Forth Valley to the second-highest level possible. One reason for that escalation was culture, so he is absolutely right to raise those issues.

NHS Forth Valley has issued an improvement plan, and there have been some improvements. I have also met with the whistleblowing champion at NHS Forth Valley to reiterate this Government's commitment to whistleblowing and to ensure that staff's concerns and anxieties are raised through the appropriate channels. If it is helpful to Mr Kerr,

I am happy to arrange a discussion between him and Christine McLaughlin, who is leading the oversight board.

### Sewage Spillages

**8. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans are in place to eliminate any spillages of sewage from the sewer network into rivers and lochs. (S6O-02060)

**The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan):** As I have reported previously to Parliament, the river basin management plans set out our long-term aims for improving our water environment. The plans are supported by Scottish Water's "Improving urban waters" route map, which commits to £500 million of investment to improve waste water treatment works, address unsatisfactory discharges and increase monitoring. Scottish Water published its first annual report on progress against the route map in December 2022, and that is on its website.

**Colin Beattie:** I understand that Scottish Water has committed to installing a further 1,000 spill monitors by the end of 2024. Can the minister advise what support the Scottish Government is providing Scottish Water to achieve that?

**Màiri McAllan:** In line with its improving urban waters route map, Scottish Water has identified the priority locations for 1,000 new CSO monitors, and installation will be completed by the end of 2024. Scottish Water's investment programme is supported by up to £1.3 billion of lending from the Scottish Government across the 2021-27 period.

This week, we mark world water day and Scotland's role as a hydro nation, and I put on record my thanks to everybody who works in Scotland's water industry. It has seen our overall water quality at 66 per cent, compared with the equivalent figure of just 16 per cent in England; we have 99 per cent of bathing waters now classified as "sufficient" or better; and £147 million is to be invested in further waste water improvements by 2027.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time.

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Scottish National Party Membership

**1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** As the month of Ramadan begins, I take this opportunity to wish all Muslims in Scotland and across the United Kingdom a very peaceful holy month.

The First Minister's party, when asked by journalists just last month whether it had lost 30,000 members, said this:

"As the SNP clearly stated when asked, fewer than 300 members have left the party over the period".

The quote continued:

"This story is both malicious and wholly inaccurate. Fortunately, few people are gullible enough to believe it."

It has since emerged that the story was 100 per cent correct, so why did Nicola Sturgeon's party—the party of Government in this Parliament—lie to the press and the public?

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** On matters for which the Government has general responsibility, First Minister.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I begin by wishing Ramadan Mubarak to our Muslim community. I think that I am in the very privileged position of having, of any constituency in the country, the highest proportion of Muslims living in my Glasgow Southside constituency. I know that the holy month of Ramadan is a very special time for Muslims, and I wish them all the best during it.

The issue of SNP members has been well canvassed over the past few days. I have nothing to add to what I have already said, except this: the SNP remains the only mass membership party in this country. We have, by far, more members than any other party represented in the chamber, and I think that I can say with some confidence that the SNP has more members than all other parties in the chamber have combined. However, I cannot say that with absolute certainty, so let me say, finally, to Douglas Ross that, if he wants a conversation, a debate or an interaction about party membership figures, it surely should be a meaningful one in which we can compare and contrast. Therefore, before we go any further, will Douglas Ross share with the chamber how many members his party has?

**Douglas Ross:** It is very interesting that the First Minister—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, members. We will hear Mr Ross.

**Douglas Ross:** It is very interesting that the First Minister speaks about confidence in numbers, because those seeking to replace her had no confidence in the numbers that her party's chief executive and her head of communications issued to the press. [*Interruption.*] This is an important issue here, in the Scottish Parliament.

**Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** How many members?

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me. Mr Ross is seeking to ask a question of the First Minister. Can we please do Mr Ross the courtesy of listening?

**Douglas Ross:** This is an important issue here, in the Scottish Parliament, for the Scottish Government, because it lied. It lied to the press and it lied to the public. That is absolutely clear— [*Interruption.*]—and Nicola Sturgeon is treating the Scottish public like idiots with that embarrassing defence—

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Ross, I remind you that all members are required to treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times. I remind you of what not only I but my predecessors—those who have sat in this chair before me—have said with regard to the use of particular language in the chamber.

**Douglas Ross:** But I think that everyone has accepted that the SNP lied over those figures. [*Interruption.*] The defence from Nicola Sturgeon is embarrassing—

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Ross—

**Douglas Ross:** The SNP's story went on like this—

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

**Douglas Ross:** We do not have points of order during First Minister's question time. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** First of all, I will decide when we are and are not taking points of order. However, as is established convention, I will not be taking a point of order until the end of this session.

**Douglas Ross:** SNP members do not seem to want to hear this. I wonder why. The SNP's story on those figures continued: it said that the impression given in the media was "flat wrong" as well as "malicious and wholly inaccurate". The SNP went on to say that nobody would be "gullible enough to believe" the reported reduction of 30,000 SNP members.

The truth is that the SNP as a party did lie, which is why its chief executive and its head of communications have resigned, so why would anybody be gullible enough to believe that Nicola Sturgeon was unaware of what her chief executive

and the most senior members of her party were up to?

**The Presiding Officer:** Before the First Minister responds, I remind all members of the requirement that we not use the word "lie" in the chamber.

**The First Minister:** The only character that is being revealed in the chamber today is that of Douglas Ross.

Douglas Ross will, no doubt, be a long-standing leader of the Opposition—well, unless his party has something to say about that. As such, he chooses the topics that he raises, which is absolutely right and proper. However, for the people who are watching, let it be noted that, on this, my last appearance as First Minister at First Minister's question time, Douglas Ross is not asking me about the national health service, education, the economy or climate justice. Instead, the topic that he has chosen is party membership figures. That is fine, but if we are to have a proper interaction—

**Douglas Ross:** It is about honesty and integrity.

**The First Minister:** Given yesterday's events in the House of Commons, I do not think that Conservatives should be lecturing anyone about honesty and integrity. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, members.

**The First Minister:** Before we go any further, if we are to have a debate about party membership figures, perhaps Douglas Ross will answer the question that I posed, on which we are still waiting for an answer: how many members does the Scottish Conservative Party have? Surely he knows. Tell us.

**Douglas Ross:** Nicola Sturgeon has started a week early—you get to ask the questions at FMQs when you are on the back benches, but, in your final FMQs as First Minister, you are supposed to answer.

The First Minister's farewell tour this week has been a masterclass in deceit and political spin. She was far too busy to appear in front of the Scottish Affairs Committee, but she somehow—somehow—managed to eke out time in her schedule to sit down on "Loose Women" to debate the great matters of state with Janet Street-Porter.

The First Minister has said that her party is experiencing "growing pains"—this must be the first time that growing pains have actually shrunk something. She has claimed that she has left her successor a "brilliant foundation". First Minister, the foundation is all that is left— [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Ross.

**Douglas Ross:** The house that Sturgeon, Salmond and Murrell—

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Ross, I am finding it very difficult to hear you from here. I would be grateful if we could hear one member at a time—and only those members whom I have called.

**Douglas Ross:** I was just saying how the First Minister has claimed to have left her successor a “brilliant foundation”, but the foundation is all that is left. The house that Sturgeon, Salmond and Murrell built is collapsing. SNP members have said so themselves—party president Mike Russell admitted this week that the SNP is in a “tremendous mess”. He is right, is he not?

**The First Minister:** If Douglas Ross wants to know about collapsing political parties, he should look at the poll about leaders’ favourability ratings that was published this very morning—it does not make happy reading for Douglas Ross.

These are not the issues that I would have chosen to ask about today, but Douglas Ross has chosen them. If he wants to talk about priorities, let me point out that I am not the member of this Parliament who missed a veterans event in order to referee a football match. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you!

**The First Minister:** On that point, I am not accountable to the House of Commons; I am accountable to the Scottish Parliament. I know that Douglas Ross has difficulty in deciding which Parliament is more important to Scotland, because he has one foot in each, but I know which Parliament is most important to Scotland. It is this one—our Scottish Parliament.

Finally, I am proud of the record of the Government that I have led through some of the toughest times that Scotland has faced in recent history. Ultimately, the only people who will cast a verdict on the record of my Government and future ones are the people of Scotland. During my time as First Minister, they have had eight opportunities to do that. At each of those eight opportunities, they have voted for me, the SNP and my Government. That is a record that I am very proud to stand on.

**Douglas Ross:** If the First Minister is proud of her record in government, let us look at it. In her final FMQs, let us go over it—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** We will hear Mr Ross.

**Douglas Ross:** On Nicola Sturgeon’s watch, Scotland’s schools have plummeted down international league tables. She has made no progress on reducing the attainment gap—she has broken her promise to close it completely. The named person act, the hate crime act and the gender recognition bill were all unworkable. Drug deaths in Scotland are the highest in Europe and are five times greater than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Right now—at this moment—one

in seven Scots is on a national health service waiting list.

On her final day in the chamber as First Minister, a cross-party committee of the Parliament delivered a damning report on ferries. It found that Nicola Sturgeon personally intervened to prioritise vanity over vessels, leading to huge delays and costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds.

On those and on so many other issues, Nicola Sturgeon ignored Scotland’s priorities in favour of her obsession with independence. She divided our country and failed on every mission that she set herself. First Minister, is that not the truth of your legacy?

**The First Minister:** That has not been the verdict of the Scottish people at any point during my time as First Minister. As First Minister, I have had eight election victories in eight years—that is the verdict that matters to me.

Let us look at my record as First Minister: progressive income tax; the Scottish child payment, which has lifted children out of poverty; the baby box; closing the attainment gap; record numbers of people from backgrounds such as mine going to university; a national investment bank; leading the way in addressing climate change; abolishing prescription charges; minimum unit pricing, which has saved lives; record-high health funding; the best performing accident and emergency departments anywhere in the UK; the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018; free period products; expanded—doubled—childcare; the Promise for care-experienced young people—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you!

**The First Minister:** —the highest level of school spend per pupil anywhere in the UK; the highest number of teachers per head, with 8 per cent more teachers now than when I became First Minister; free tuition for higher education; and free bus travel for those under 22. I could go on and on, but I am not going to, because this is my last session of First Minister’s question time.

### First Minister’s Record

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I join others in saying Ramadan Mubarak. It is a month of sacrifice, reflection and charity, when we remember those who are less fortunate here, at home, and around the world.

We live in serious times, with the cost of living crisis and a national health service crisis. Given that this is my last opportunity to question the First Minister, I want to ask about the finishing touches to what I am sure will be a handover document for her successor.

It is important to check what she believes is in the in-tray for the next First Minister. After 15 years of Scottish National Party Government, there is not a single Scottish institution that is stronger now than it was when her party took office. From the ferries scandal to the entrenched attainment gap, the NHS crisis and decimated local services, which of her Government's many failures does the First Minister think that her successor needs to address first?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I say with the greatest respect that Anas Sarwar is just wrong. Let us look first at some of the institutions that did not even exist when I became First Minister. For example, we have Revenue Scotland, which is making sure that we have the most progressive income tax system anywhere in the United Kingdom. We have Social Security Scotland, which is delivering benefits—including the Scottish child payment—to people across the country, and the Scottish National Investment Bank, which is leading this country's drive to net zero.

The NHS is, of course, facing real challenges as a result of the Covid pandemic, but it still has the best-performing accident and emergency departments anywhere in the UK. Tomorrow, I will be in Fife, opening our new national treatment centre, which will deliver more operations for people in Fife. It will soon be joined by national treatment centres elsewhere across Scotland.

In education, more young people from a background like mine are going to university than has ever been the case. There has been a doubling of early years education and childcare.

I think that that represents a strengthening of many, many institutions. Does my successor have a tough job? Of course, because we live in tough times, but I have confidence that, whoever my successor turns out to be—whoever is standing here next week—they will continue to build on that record, and they will continue to retain the trust of the Scottish people.

**Anas Sarwar:** I know that Nicola Sturgeon can try to take credit for lots of things, but I am not sure that she can take credit for creating the national health service—I think that might have been a previous Government.

Nicola Sturgeon likes to talk about records. Here are just a few that have been set in her time, which are piling up in her successor's sky-high in-tray: record A and E waiting times, with one in seven Scots on an NHS waiting list; record drug deaths; record vacancies for nurses and doctors in our NHS; record levels of children without a home; record levels of homelessness—I could go on and on, but seeing as it is her last First Minister's question time, I will not do that.

It is hard to see how Nicola Sturgeon's successor will be able to fix those problems, as they were sat round the Cabinet table with her. The decisions taken around that Cabinet table have resulted in more than £3 billion of taxpayers' money being wasted since 2007—that is £1,200 for every household in Scotland. At the same time, the SNP spent public money to build a culture of cover-up and secrecy, which is now beginning to unravel, all while Scots struggle to keep their heads above the waterline.

Given the scale of the challenges that are piled up in that in-tray, does the First Minister agree with two of the three SNP leadership candidates that mediocrity, continuity and incompetence will not cut it?

**The First Minister:** First, I never claimed to have created the national health service, but what I will claim to have done is help to protect the founding principles of our national health service, because I was the health secretary who abolished prescription charges for everyone in Scotland, which is something that, in all its years in government, Labour had never got round to doing. I also took a hospital that had been privatised under Labour back into the NHS.

On Anas Sarwar's £3 billion figure, we have already shown that to be utter nonsense in previous sessions of First Minister's question time, but I will not embarrass him by going back to the detail of that again today. Let me use another £3 billion figure. That is the amount of money that the Scottish Government is investing each year to mitigate the cost of living crisis to help people to deal with Tory austerity. If we were an independent country, we would not have to mitigate Tory austerity, but, while Labour still prefers this country to be governed by Tories at Westminster, rather than have self-governance and independence here, in our own Parliament, Labour will never be taken seriously in Scotland.

**Anas Sarwar:** Like many people across the United Kingdom, I look forward to the next general election, when we can boot out the Tory Government and get rid of the Scottish National Party's last excuse.

The First Minister has spent much of her political career talking about mandates. Her successor will inherit the SNP's woeful record, but they will not inherit her mandate. The most recent election was a pandemic election, one that the First Minister won by her direct appeal to steer the country through the Covid pandemic and recovery. That recovery has not even started. In fact, by every metric, things have got worse. Scotland now faces two crises: a national health service recovery that never began and a cost of living crisis in which families face spiralling bills and soaring energy prices.

As her potential successors squabble over their own records in Government, they cannot escape the facts. They do not have a plan for Scotland and they do not have a mandate from the public. That is why we need an election now. So, my final question to Nicola Sturgeon is whether she agrees with her own words:

“There are no words to describe this utter shambles adequately. It’s beyond hyperbole - & parody. Reality tho is that ordinary people are paying the price. The interests of the ... party should concern no-one right now. A General Election is now a democratic imperative.”

**The First Minister:** That was about the Conservatives at Westminster. One of the differences between me and Anas Sarwar is that I do not support Tory government of Scotland, because Scotland does not vote for Conservatives. I have fought three general elections as SNP leader and the SNP has won all of them. At every one, we have heard the same messages from Labour and, at every single one, the people of Scotland have given their verdict.

I am proud of the achievements of the Government that I have led. I will end on another one, because it is related to the Covid recovery and has been achieved in spite of what we are having to deal with from the Conservatives at Westminster. Today, Scotland has record high employment and record low unemployment and economic inactivity. We have a good foundation in this country. We face many challenges, but I have every confidence that my successor, who will be standing here next week, will continue to lead this country forward, will continue taking the decisions that are in the interest of this country and will lead this country to becoming an independent nation.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

**3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I, too, wish Ramadan Mubarak to everyone celebrating the month. And, on this national day of reflection and commemoration, I remember the more than 16,000 lives lost to us and the gaps that those leave in communities and families as a result of the Covid pandemic.

To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-01944)

She may not know the answer to that.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** That is, of course, a matter for the new First Minister. The only thing I know for certain is that I will not be in attendance.

I will say more about this in the statement that follows First Minister’s questions. Today marks the third anniversary of lockdown and my thoughts today, as they are at some stage in every single day, are with all those who suffered as a result of

Covid. I will have them in my thoughts, my mind and my heart for as long as I live.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** I am very grateful for that reply and share its sentiments.

The mental health treatment targets were introduced in December 2014, 11 days after Nicola Sturgeon was sworn in as First Minister. They have never been met—not once in more than 3,000 days, which is 99 consecutive months.

I have lost count of the number of times that the First Minister has told me that the situation was unacceptable and of the number of times that she has promised staff and sufferers that things would get better. In reality, Nicola Sturgeon quietly downgraded the office of mental health minister. Her finance department, headed by Kate Forbes, slashed £50 million from the mental health budget this winter and her health secretary, Humza Yousaf, give a personal promise to clear waiting lists for both children and adults by March 2023. We can look at the calendar: it is March, we are here and the Scottish National Party is nowhere.

There is a sea of human pain out there and so much unmet need. First Minister, do not just tell me that this is unacceptable. At this late hour, and at the final time of asking, will the First Minister admit that her Government has failed Scotland on mental health?

**The First Minister:** What I will absolutely say is that there is much, much more work to do on mental health. One of the things that has changed, certainly since I was a young person and even in the years in which I have been First Minister, is that we have reduced the stigma associated with mental ill health. More people are coming forward for help and treatment, and that is a good thing, but we must make sure that the services are there for them.

We have seen a significant increase in the budget for mental health. Under the SNP, mental health spending has doubled in cash terms. We see many more people working in mental health services than was previously the case.

Coming directly to child and adolescent mental health services, because they are important and there is so much more to do, I note that the number of children starting treatment in CAMHS in the most recent quarter is the highest on record by some distance, and we are now seeing the most sustained changes in CAMHS waiting lists for over half a decade. The overall waiting list has decreased by more than 9 per cent. The number of children waiting over 18 weeks has decreased by more than 30 per cent, and the number waiting over 52 weeks has decreased by more than 40 per cent.

There is much, much more to do, but progress is being made, and I know that it will be a priority for my successor, whoever he or she may be, to continue that progress.

### IPCC Sixth Assessment Report

**4. Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the AR6 synthesis report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (S6F-01959)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The evidence has never been clearer than it is now. We are fast running out of time to secure a liveable and sustainable future for the generations to come. The IPCC report must lead to an acceleration of global action to tackle the climate emergency.

Scotland is making long-term progress towards net zero, but we are now entering the most challenging part of that journey, which requires truly transformational action across society and our economy. That cannot and will not happen without all of us, including everyone across this Parliament, supporting bold steps as part of a national effort to tackle the climate emergency.

At the 27th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP27—Scotland pledged an additional £5 million to address loss and damage, and we will continue to advocate for practical action and finance to support the global south, where the effects of climate change are already being experienced.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Following the publication of the report, UN secretary general António Guterres made a plea to all Governments. He said:

“humanity is on thin ice—and that ice is melting fast ... This report is a clarion call to massively fast-track climate efforts by every country and every sector and on every timeframe. In short, our world needs climate action on all fronts—everything, everywhere, all at once.”

I know how serious and ambitious the First Minister has been in leading on the climate emergency agenda, and I appreciate that. Does she agree that this stark assessment must lead to transformational and accelerated action by all Governments—local government, the United Kingdom Government and her successor here in this Parliament—to combat climate change?

**The First Minister:** I agree whole-heartedly with Fiona Hyslop and I agree whole-heartedly with the comments earlier this week of the United Nations secretary general. There is no doubt that we need concerted and accelerated action on all fronts.

I am proud that Scotland is, and is recognised as being, at the forefront of the global journey to reach net zero emissions and a climate-resilient

future. This Parliament's ambitious climate change legislation requires all of us—Governments, individuals, communities and businesses—to take lasting action to drive our emissions down in a way that is just and fair for all.

However, we also need to see action and much higher ambition from the UK Government on the solutions for net zero that are currently reserved to Westminster, and, of course, we need other countries across the world to match those ambitions, too.

While Scotland's emissions reduction targets are in line with the global 1.5°C pathway, it is vital that other countries revisit and strengthen the ambition of their 2030 emissions pledges and long-term strategies to align with the 1.5°C pathway ahead of COP28.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** The IPCC report—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** We will suspend business.

12:28

*Meeting suspended.*

12:29

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We will resume business. I ask Liam Kerr to begin his question.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** The IPCC report gave stark warnings about how, if we are to have any hope of tackling the climate emergency, we must look at all green generation technologies. Given that countries such as Japan, Germany and France are swinging behind nuclear-generated energy, which is a zero-emission clean energy source, is it not now imperative that the First Minister's Government undertakes an evidence-based and science-led assessment of its knee-jerk banning of new nuclear in Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I agree with the sentiment behind that question. We all have to up our action on this issue, and green energy generation is a vital part of that. However, I do not agree on the question of nuclear. Nuclear energy is very expensive and we still do not know what to do with the waste in the long term. Further, of course, not all other countries have Scotland's potential for offshore wind, green hydrogen and other renewable sources of energy. Right now, ScotWind gives us the potential to generate up to 28GW of renewable energy. That is massive, and it will enable us to export as well as meet our own needs. I think that we should focus on renewable, clean, green renewable energy. Not only is that

right for the environment, but it gives us the opportunity to boost industry and the economy and create tens of thousands of jobs. That is where the focus of this and future Scottish Governments should be.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** The IPCC report is the starkest warning yet that, while our world leaders fiddle, the world burns, and that we are not on track to hold global warming at 1.5°C. Does the First Minister accept that, as she leaves office, Scotland is also failing to meet our climate targets? As the Climate Change Committee warns, Scotland is missing so many of those targets that they are

“in danger of becoming meaningless”.

Given that transport remains the biggest source of emissions, does the First Minister regret the fact that the savage cuts that have been made, on her watch, to our rail and bus services means that, while the dip in car use since 2016 is 12.5 per cent, rail numbers have collapsed by more than 50 per cent and bus passenger numbers by more than 40 per cent? Does she agree that it is a priority for her successor to reverse the cuts that she has made to those services?

**The First Minister:** I do not regret public ownership of our railways, I do not regret the changes to bus franchising and I certainly do not regret the free bus travel for pensioners and all young people under 22, which encourages people to use public transport.

However, I agree that Scotland, like all other countries, must do more. Scotland is doing more to cut emissions and to tackle climate change than almost any other country in the world. I have been privileged to attend climate change COP summits over many years now, and I know that there is a recognition of Scotland’s leadership—if not here, in this Parliament, then certainly among countries overseas. However, the bar for world leadership is set too low. Every country needs to do more, and to do it with urgency, and Scotland must continue to lead by example.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** The IPCC report is also a reminder that extracting every last drop of oil and gas today will condemn future generations to climate breakdown. Independent research commissioned through the Bute house agreement has shown that North Sea oil and gas output will continue to fall, while a just transition can deliver an increase in jobs in the years ahead. Can the First Minister say what kind of leadership we need from the Scottish Government to ensure a future for workers and the climate?

**The First Minister:** We need to continue the kind of leadership that we have been showing on this issue. I have the greatest respect for all who

work in oil and gas sector—they have contributed hugely to Scotland and we cannot make the switch overnight—but we must accelerate the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. As Mark Ruskell rightly says, even if we were not facing the climate emergency, the maturity of the North Sea fields means that we have to accelerate that transition there. We must do that in a fair and a just way, but we have the potential to do that and we should grab that potential with both hands.

### Poverty-related Attainment Gap

**5. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the outcomes have been of the Scottish Government’s “defining mission” to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. (S6F-01940)

**The First Minister:** This Government’s commitment is to substantially eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap in this parliamentary session, and good progress is being made on that.

The latest achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data demonstrated the biggest single-year decrease in the poverty-related gap in primary numeracy and literacy levels since records began.

We are improving outcomes for young people impacted by poverty beyond school, too. The percentage of 2021-22 school leavers in a positive initial destination is the highest on record, and the poverty-related attainment gap is at a record low, down two thirds since 2009-10. More young people than ever from deprived communities secured a place at university, and the previous commissioner for widening access described our approach as an “unambiguous success”.

That is a record that I am proud of, and I very much look forward to seeing my successor build on it.

**Stephen Kerr:** Objectively, the best that we can say is that the First Minister tried and failed—because education in Scotland is poorer.

Here is the First Minister’s record: fewer maths teachers; fewer technical education teachers; fewer computing science teachers; fewer language teachers; narrowing subject choice; and Scotland plummeting down the international league tables. On CFE levels in primary schools, her record is: literacy falling; reading falling; writing falling; numeracy falling; the attainment gap widening; and attainment falling overall.

Can the First Minister honestly stand there and say, hand on heart, that education was her top priority?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I can.

In his initial question, Stephen Kerr asked me about “outcomes”; I have just checked and that was the word that he used. I therefore gave him the data on the outcomes, but he obviously did not like it, so he wants to talk about inputs. Let me therefore talk now about inputs.

When I became First Minister, the number of school teachers in Scotland was 49,521. Today, the number of school teachers in Scotland is 53,459, which is an 8 per cent increase. In early learning and childcare settings, the numbers have increased as well. In Scotland, we have the most teachers per pupil in the United Kingdom, and education spend per person is higher than in either England or Wales. In Scotland, we have 7,573 teachers per 100,000 pupils; in England, where the Tories are in power, the number is just 5,734. In Scotland, we spend £7,600 per pupil; the Tories in England spend just £6,700.

Yes, I am proud of this Government’s record on education, and I really look forward to seeing it being built upon.

**Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** The recent Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis of Scottish tax and benefit reform found that the lowest-income families in Scotland are significantly better off—by around £2,000 on average—as a result of this Scottish National Party Scottish Government’s progressive tax and benefits policies. If that can be achieved with limited powers, how much further does the First Minister think that we could go if we were not beholden to a UK Government with policies that directly undermine this Government’s mission to tackle poverty? *[Interruption.]*

**The First Minister:** I thank Paul McLennan for that question. Again—this may be the last opportunity that I have to point it out—it is really obvious how uncomfortable the Conservatives in the chamber become when we talk about poverty. That should be noted.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies rightly acknowledges the impact that progressive choices are having for low-income families. To quote the IFS briefly, it highlighted that the Scottish Government

“has made clearly a distributional choice ... to channel a lot more money towards low-income families with children in particular and that has a meaningful impact on incomes.”

If I had to single out the thing of which I am most proud, it is that—helping to lift children out of poverty, in marked contrast to the approach of the UK Government’s welfare system, which pushes children into poverty. That is the difference—that is the contrast.

## Delayed Discharge

**6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the reportedly high levels of delayed discharge, which are estimated to have cost over £161 million in 2022-23 to date. (S6F-01960)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Earlier this year, we allocated an additional £8 million to support health and social care partnerships to secure extra provision of 300 interim care home beds. To date, that has enabled 408 people to be discharged from hospitals to those placements, with a total of 633 people currently benefiting from an interim care placement.

As part of the work of the ministerial advisory group on health and social care pressures, we continue to work tirelessly with health boards and health and social care partnerships to ensure that we are doing everything possible to support people out of acute settings and back into the community when it is clinically safe to do so.

Delayed discharge figures have improved substantially under this Government, and it is welcome that more than 96 per cent of all people leaving hospital are discharged without any delay whatsoever.

**Jackie Baillie:** Since the First Minister took office, more than £1 billion has been lost to delayed discharge. At her very first First Minister’s question time, I raised the matter of cancer treatment delays. In 2014, 94.2 per cent of patients started cancer treatment within 62 days, with a maximum wait of 187 days. The situation has now declined: 74 per cent of patients are starting treatment within 62 days, with a maximum wait of 326 days. Figures for achieving the 31-day and 62-day cancer treatment targets are at their worst ever.

When the First Minister entered Bute house, 148 patients waited for more than 12 hours in accident and emergency departments; now the figure is 6,600 patients. Previously, 318,000 people were on waiting lists; now the figure is over 772,000. Some 6,200 children were waiting for access to mental health services; now the figure is more than 7,500. Nurse vacancies have risen from 2,000 to almost 6,000. In 2014, there were just 15 excess deaths; now there are almost 4,000. Life expectancy in Scotland—

**The Presiding Officer:** Ask a question, please, Ms Baillie.

**Jackie Baillie:** —has gone backwards on her watch, and that is shameful. As if that were not bad enough, the First Minister gave us Humza Yousaf—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** We must have a question.

**Jackie Baillie:** —who is the worst health secretary since devolution.

Let me make one final plea to the First Minister. [*Interruption.*] Two weeks ago, she gave a commitment to look into the case of nine-year-old Harvey Martin, who has scoliosis and urgently requires surgery. Desperate for help, Harvey sent the First Minister a video message, but she has not yet replied. Before the First Minister leaves office, will she reply to Harvey and help him to get the surgery that he so desperately needs?

**The First Minister:** First, I will address the case of young Harvey Martin. Rightly, this week I have taken time to check with NHS Lothian about his case. I can confirm that Harvey will be given a date for his procedure very soon. NHS Lothian will discuss the date with his parents when they speak next week. I wish young Harvey all the very best.

On waiting times for cancer treatment, I advise members that, in the latest quarter, more patients were treated on both the 62-day and 31-day pathways compared with the figures for the previous quarter, those for the same time last year, and those for the final quarter before the pandemic. There is more to do, but progress is being made.

Jackie Baillie's initial question was about delayed discharge, and I will end on that. Before I do so, I reflect on the fact that Jackie Baillie asked me my very first question as First Minister, and she is today asking me—if not the final question—the final scheduled one on the order paper. Of course, when she asked me my first question she was standing to my left, as the principal Opposition representative; now she is on the Opposition benches to my right. That says a great deal about the verdict of the Scottish people in the intervening period. I am still standing here, in my place as First Minister, which also says a lot about the verdict of the Scottish people.

Jackie Baillie likes to make comparisons, so, finally, on delayed discharges, I point out that, today, around 1,700 patients are classed as experiencing such delays. That is far too many but, to be clear, today, that figure includes everyone who is delayed for any period of time—even for an hour. When Jackie Baillie was a minister, and when her party was on this side of the chamber, 2,200 patients were delayed for more than six weeks in our national health service. That figure represented more than 70 per cent of all patients who were ready for discharge being delayed for more than six weeks when Jackie Baillie was last in Government. Today, 96 per cent of patients are discharged with no delay whatsoever.

There is more to do, but so much progress has been made since Jackie Baillie and her party were in office.

## First Minister's Statement

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is a personal statement by the First Minister. Today marks the final contribution in the chamber of Nicola Sturgeon MSP as First Minister—our longest-serving First Minister and the first woman to hold the post. On behalf of the Parliament, I thank the First Minister for her service. I thank John Swinney MSP, the Deputy First Minister, for his service, too. They have both been in Government since 2007 and I wish them well for the future.

12:47

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Thank you, Presiding Officer, for your kind words. I am sure that I also speak on behalf of the Deputy First Minister in expressing that gratitude.

I have just concluded my 286th and final session of First Minister's question time, and this is the final statement that I will make in the chamber as First Minister. No matter what I do in the future, nothing—absolutely nothing—will come close to the experience of the past 3,046 days. Being First Minister of the country that I love has been a profound honour. I have led Scotland through good times, but also through the toughest period of our recent history.

Exactly three years ago today, I stood at a podium in St Andrew's house and asked the country to stay at home. My thoughts today, and always, are with those who lost loved ones to Covid, those who still live with long Covid, our young people who lost out on so many of the normal experiences of growing up and everyone who endured the trauma of separation and loneliness.

Covid shaped all of us. I know that it changed me, and, in many ways, it defined my time as First Minister. Above all, it reinforced in me an abiding admiration for the people of this wonderful country, who made such painful sacrifices to keep each other safe. In the toughest of times, our country showed the best of itself with love, care and solidarity. That will live with me for ever.

Being First Minister has been, variously and often all at once, challenging, exhilarating and exhausting but, every day without exception, it has been an utter privilege. I have already set out my reasons for stepping down now; I will not repeat them today. Suffice it to say that I know in my heart that this is the right time.

After more than 35 years in politics, 24 years in the Parliament, 16 years in the Government and more than eight years as First Minister, it is time for Nicola Sturgeon the politician to make a bit of

space for Nicola Sturgeon the person. It is time for me to contribute, in a different capacity, to the causes that I care so deeply about: gender equality, care-experienced young people, climate justice and always, until the job is done, winning Scottish independence. No matter how difficult change may be, I know also that it is right for my party, the Government and our country that I now make way for a new generation of leadership.

I have made my fair share of mistakes in the past eight years and, of course, there are things that I wish I had done better or differently but, overall and overwhelmingly, I am proud of what has been achieved. The doubling of early years education and childcare, the Scottish child payment, widening of access to higher education with a record number of young people from backgrounds like mine now going to university, minimum unit pricing for alcohol—a policy that is saving lives—a publicly owned and mission-driven national investment bank and putting the climate emergency at the heart of all that we do are just a few of the many policies that I believe will have a lasting impact on our country.

As the first woman to hold this office, advancing gender equality has also been close to my heart. My Cabinet has always been gender balanced. This Parliament legislated for free period products and strengthened the law on domestic abuse. Less tangible, perhaps, but just as important, is that no girl in our country now has any doubt that a woman can hold the highest office in the land. I heard a phrase the other day that struck a chord with me: "When women lift, girls rise." As First Minister, I have tried to put that into practice, and I will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

Presiding Officer, countless people have supported me along the way. Today, I will say a heartfelt "Thank you" to just some of them. First, I thank my family. Nothing—absolutely nothing—would be possible without the love and support that you give me, daily.

I thank my extended family, the Scottish National Party—the party that I joined at 16, when, on a good day, we would hit 12 per cent in the opinion polls. We have come such a long way together as a team; let us keep going, serving Scotland together, as a team.

I thank my colleagues here, in Holyrood, in SNP parliamentary groups past and present; the central office staff who support us; all my ministerial colleagues over the years—especially John Swinney, who is the best Deputy First Minister and the best friend that I could have wished for on this journey; and our staff in party headquarters, who have built a formidable campaign operation, enabling us to win 14 national elections since 2007.

To all those who have worked in my constituency office—in particular, to my current team, Paul Leinster, Caroline Scott, Mhairi Hunter, Carolyn McConville, Irfan Rabbani and Nikita Bassi—I say that you have had my back throughout, and you work tirelessly, every single day, to help me to represent the people of Glasgow Southside.

To my constituency party and to my constituents I say thank you so much for putting your trust in me, time and again.

To my special advisers I say that you have given your all to me and to the cause of building a better country. You have been led by two outstanding chiefs of staff in Liz Lloyd and Colin McAllister.

To our partners in the Scottish Green Party I say that I am very proud of the Bute house agreement. Thank you for joining us in Government.

I thank our brilliant civil service. Scotland is so fortunate in having the integrity, impartiality and professionalism of our civil servants, and I am privileged to have been served by some of the very best. I thank each and every one. However, I make special mention of those who have served in my policy unit and in my First Minister's questions team. The latter, especially on Wednesday evenings and Thursday mornings, really do have the worst job in the Government. For the avoidance of doubt, Presiding Officer, I point out that the good answers have always been down to them; the bad have been all me.

Finally, I thank from the bottom of my heart three groups of people who, because of the nature of the jobs that they do, have probably spent more time with me over the years than they have with their families—at least, I am sure that that is how it has felt. To my security team I say thank you for keeping me safe. To the wonderful Bute house staff I say thank you for always making me feel at home. To every private secretary, diary secretary, correspondence secretary, to the visits and events team, to the communications and camera teams—to everyone in my private office who has supported me over 16 years in Government—I say thank you for keeping me going. Obviously, I cannot name everyone, much as I would love to, but I want to mention a few: my longest-serving principal private secretary, John Somers, and the current incumbent, Chris Mackie.

Last but not least are three very special people who, individually and collectively, have been with me for almost all my time as First Minister. They were the core of my team during Covid, coming into the office while others stayed at home to give me the support that I needed to do my job. They are Nicola Dove, Patrick Crolla and Gary McGhee. You three will never know how much your care,

kindness and humour has sustained me over these years, and I am so going to miss you.

Presiding Officer, as I come to the end of my last speech as First Minister, I have some final reflections. To you I say that I am sure that you are hoping for a new First Minister whose answers on a Thursday lunchtime are not quite as long winded as mine. Thank you for your patience.

To my colleagues across the chamber: robust debate and holding the Government to account are the hallmarks of what we do here. That is as it should be. I thank those in the other parties for that. However, just maybe, we might enhance our democracy if, occasionally, we—all of us—treated each other with kindness, too, and remembered that we are opponents, not enemies.

To my successor, I say this. Next week, we will find out whose portrait will go alongside mine on the stairwell of Bute house. Subject to this chamber's approval, it will be either Scotland's second female First Minister or its first from a minority ethnic background. Either way, that will send the very powerful message that this, the highest office in the land, is one that any young person in Scotland can aspire to.

Never forget that every day in this office is an opportunity to make something better for someone, somewhere in Scotland. Do not shy away from the big challenges or difficult debates. You will not get everything right, but it is always better to aim high and fall short than not to try at all. Always draw strength, energy and wisdom from the people of this wonderful country.

It is for the people of Scotland—all of you, whether you voted for me or not—that I reserve my final words from this seat. Thank you so much for placing your trust in me. Words will never adequately convey the gratitude and the awe that I hold in my heart for the opportunity that I have had to serve as your First Minister. It truly has been the privilege of my lifetime—and with those words, Presiding Officer, I draw it to a close.

[*Applause.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes the statement by the First Minister. I call on other members to respond, starting with Douglas Ross.

12:56

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Although I believe that the First Minister and I see each other as adversaries rather than allies—the final session of First Minister's questions probably reiterated that impression—let me add a little balance in my final remarks to Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister.

When Nicola Sturgeon leaves office, she will bring to a close a political career in this chamber that few, if any, can or will match in its length: 24 years of service to her constituents so far, 16 years as a Government minister and more than eight years as First Minister. Indeed, since 1999, she has been a permanent fixture in this Parliament and on her party's front bench. In these times of political turbulence, that is staying power that many of us could only ever wish for.

She has been a formidable campaigner; her political opponents over the years can unanimously agree on that. No one can deny that Nicola Sturgeon has, for better or worse, left a mark on our country. We have all lived through the Sturgeon era of Scottish politics, and that era is now coming to an end. Nowhere will that change be felt more keenly than within the ranks of her own party.

I return to her role in Government as First Minister. For Nicola Sturgeon and her predecessors and successors, it remains the rarest of honours, and even rarer still for—as Nicola Sturgeon described herself—a working-class girl from Ayrshire.

I recognise the positive message that it sends that in Scotland, every child should have the ability to reach the heights that they dream of—and do you know what, Presiding Officer? Sometimes dreams do come true. I stand here in the chamber as the only recent politician to beat Nicola Sturgeon. I won the bet that I had with her, which was made back in 2021, for £100. For the record, I have to say that I am still awaiting payment—that is perhaps one final example of the delays from Nicola Sturgeon's Government. [*Laughter.*]

However, I mean this in all sincerity. Our exchanges have been sometimes difficult and always robust, but we seek to do better in our politics, and I think that every member in the chamber can listen to that message from the First Minister.

As she has done in the past, the First Minister spoke of the additional responsibility that she has had to help every woman and girl in our country to fulfil their potential. As the first woman holder of her office, she has been a role model for what women and girls can aspire to in Scotland today.

Those are all achievements of which the First Minister should be proud. However, although the First Minister is a talented politician, those talents have not always been used to the best of her ability in Government. I am not going to use this session to labour over the arguments that we have made on this side of the chamber time and again. I will simply say that, on her first day in office, Nicola Sturgeon promised to be

“First Minister for all of Scotland: regardless of your politics or your point of view”.—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2014; c 33.]

However, in some people's view, too often, she used her position to further her party's political objectives, rather than to bring the country together and govern in all of Scotland's interests.

I accept that holding high office is a great burden and honour, and, on this day of all days, it is right that we acknowledge the difficult responsibilities that the Covid pandemic placed on those in power. Along with the First Minister and other members, I put on record the thoughts of members on this side of the chamber for everyone who, sadly, lost their lives and for those who continue to mourn the loss of loved ones.

As I said earlier, it is no secret that the First Minister and I are not best friends, and I am sure that, as she watches from the back benches, she will not miss our weekly First Minister's question time exchanges. In my time as leader of the Opposition, I have asked Nicola Sturgeon 256 questions and, once or twice, I have even got an answer.

Away from this chamber, I know that political leadership takes a personal toll on those people who attain the highest office and on those closest to them as well. We could all see that the thanks that the First Minister gave to her family and her staff were difficult for her to articulate but were keenly felt. There will have been countless times that the First Minister will not have been able to be there for her family and friends, as she put the demands of leadership first. Therefore, I hope that, in standing down, the First Minister will be able to take comfort from having more time for family, friends and, of course, her passion of reading.

On behalf of members on this side of the chamber, although we have passionately disagreed with Nicola Sturgeon over the years and, no doubt, will continue to do so into the future, as she leaves the office of First Minister, I wish her well for whatever the future holds for her. [*Applause.*]

13:02

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Today is a significant moment in Scottish politics. Of course, it has personal significance for Nicola Sturgeon, but it is also significant for our politics, as Scotland prepares to face a new era and the twin crises of the national health service crisis and the cost of living crisis.

I will start by placing on record my respect and recognition for Nicola Sturgeon's more than 20 years of public service. I first met Nicola Sturgeon when I was a teenager—and that is meant as a compliment rather than a disparaging comment. It

is safe to say that both of us have grown up and changed a lot since then.

Regardless of our many differences, Nicola Sturgeon is—as even her harshest critics would accept—an able and formidable politician who has stood at the forefront of Scottish politics for more than 15 years. Although we have disagreed passionately about what is best for the people, I have never for a moment doubted her love for Scotland.

The election of the first woman as First Minister—an achievement that cannot be overstated—was an important moment for our country. It was a sign to women and girls, regardless of their politics, that there should be no limit to their ambition, that there was no position or office in the land that they could not aspire to, and that there was nothing that they should not be able to achieve.

I am sure that many people will point towards our more robust exchanges at First Minister's question time, but, on many occasions, Nicola Sturgeon and I have attempted to build consensus, particularly in calling out and challenging the rising levels of prejudice and hate in society. I think that that is, in part, driven by our deep connection with the south side of Glasgow, which the First Minister referenced. It is the most diverse part of Scotland, and I know how much celebrating the rich diversity in our communities means to her. I would even suggest that she has maybe worn traditional Asian dress more often than I have in my lifetime. There are many things on which we can disagree and divide, but one issue should always unite every political party in this Parliament, and that is the fight against prejudice and hate.

In her resignation statement last month, Nicola Sturgeon spoke about the personal toll that politics takes, and I often reflect on how much our politics has changed, how much more divisive it has become and how intolerant it can often be. The challenge for us all is how we build politics that allows for strong disagreement, passionate debate and robust argument, but never descends into hatred. Far too often, particularly online, our politics does descend into that hatred.

It is not by the praise or the criticism of her opponents that any First Minister will be judged; it will be by their record. As First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon led our country through challenging times, most obviously during the pandemic. I think that she is right—that is what will define her time. I recognise the immense pressure, and the toll that many of the decisions made in those difficult years will have taken. At a time of uncertainty and anxiety, she attempted to provide stability and reassurance to people across this country at the darkest moments.

It is fair to say that, during our many robust debates with each another, I have learned some of Nicola Sturgeon's tells. When her grasp of the detail might, on occasion, escape her, or when it is not on her side, she is quick to point to her electoral record. We have heard it again today—eight election wins. That is, undoubtedly, a political achievement to be proud of. It is a legacy that no one can deny and of which many of us can be jealous.

She is right to say that winning is important and that it matters, but, for leaders of any political party, what they do with that power when they win and how they govern also matter. It is also safe to say that never in the history of devolution has there been a First Minister with so much power, so much time and so much political capital. Despite that, we all know that there is still much more to do. The promise of devolution remains unfulfilled. Child poverty is still too high, national health service waiting lists are still too long, our public services are struggling and our economy needs to be restarted. We must now urgently confront those challenges, which must be our focus in this place.

I am sure that the Government will feel Nicola Sturgeon's absence from the front benches, although perhaps no one will feel it as keenly as her successor. Nicola Sturgeon leaves a Government and a party shaped in her image—they will not find a replacement like her. I and my entire party wish her the very best for whatever she chooses to do in the future. *[Applause.]*

13:07

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I am privileged to be able to offer a few comments from the Scottish Green Party at this moment.

Over the past wee while, I have heard both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister reflect on how they might have felt back in their early days as teenage activists if they had known the role that they would go on to play as leaders of the Government of Scotland. However, my first memory of meeting Nicola Sturgeon, years before I stood for Parliament, was when she was in opposition, not in government.

I am sure that there were times when being in opposition meant saying no, but, in the first year of this new Scottish Parliament, with the rights and equality of a marginalised group on the line, Nicola Sturgeon recognised that, when the Government does the right thing, the role of the Opposition involves being constructive. The law that is often called section 28 was a nasty homophobic hangover of the 1980s. In the first debate on repealing that law, Nicola Sturgeon said:

“Section 28 is plainly and simply about discrimination. It is about singling out one section of the population and

labelling it as unacceptable.”—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2000; c 965.]

She was not the only politician saying so, but what she did helped to ensure that the issue was not seen as Government versus Opposition and that rival parties with serious disagreements could work together to find the common ground for the good of the country.

I have agreed and disagreed with Nicola Sturgeon on issues over the years since then, but, in recent months, she has shown that same commitment to stand by another vulnerable group in our society while so many in politics and in the media were dredging up the tropes and prejudice of past decades and redirecting them against transgender people. I can still see today what I remember from those days—Nicola Sturgeon’s commitment to being an ally to marginalised people remains part of her character as a politician.

I did not know at that time that I would go on to join the Scottish Parliament or that I would have the chance to sit with Nicola Sturgeon on the advisory board of the yes Scotland campaign for Scottish independence. I did not know that I would share the stage with her at the Glasgow Hydro, of all places, even if we did have to share the bill with a certain Mr George Galloway.

I certainly could not have imagined that she and John Swinney would pick up the phone and offer to negotiate an agreement that would bring the Greens into Government for the first time in this country’s history, advancing action on climate justice and progressive values, and, in doing so, infuriating right wingers, vested interests, polluting industries and even one or two of the Government’s own back benchers.

I also see today what I remember from earlier days: Nicola Sturgeon sees the value in politicians and political parties recognising their differences but seeking common ground and finding ways to work together for the good of the country.

On this day of national reflection, we all share the sentiment that Nicola Sturgeon expressed a few minutes ago. As for the things that her time as First Minister will be remembered for outside of the political bubble, I think that, for most people, it will be her leadership during a pandemic that changed all our lives.

At the start of the pandemic, as we were just coming to terms with what the world was facing, some Governments around the world chose bluff and bluster, pretending that they knew the answers or offering false simplicity in place of the complex truth. Nicola Sturgeon made a braver choice—to be clear about what was not known and to express the same fears and uncertainty that we all felt. Throughout the pandemic, she not

only fronted up the Scottish Government response on an almost daily basis but did so with honesty, clarity and humility. By doing that, she earned the public trust.

Therefore, whatever the future brings, I thank both Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney for their service to Scotland. I wish them very well. My highest hope for them is that they continue to find ways to infuriate all the right people. [*Applause.*]

13:12

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Those of us who seek a life in public service must deal with events and times as we find them and not as we would wish them to be. Regardless of what circumstance throws our way, it is incumbent on all of us to commit to the task before us: to seek the best for our communities and, in so doing, try always to reflect the better natures of the people whom we seek to serve.

As the first woman to achieve the office of First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon has provided inspiration to the women and girls who will doubtless follow her to the highest office in the land. She has been Scotland’s First Minister through some of the darkest hours in our modern history. I think that it is important to recognise her tireless and substantial commitment to the office that she has held for longer than anybody else. That tireless commitment was no more evident than in the worst days of the pandemic—a time of unprecedented anxiety for our country—when she offered a voice of calm to people stuck at home.

She will be aware of the times that she has walked in step with my party, when she adopted our policies on things such childcare and the pupil premium. She will recognise the times when we have voted with her, sometimes against the prevailing winds—on the physical punishment of children, on alcohol pricing, on advancing the rights of Scotland’s LGBT+ community. She has acknowledged some historical wrongs, as well, as she did yesterday to the victims of forced adoption. She knows my background and, as such, I will always appreciate her continuing dedication to young Scots who are currently in the care of the state or who have experience of the Scottish care system. This chamber will debate her legacy, good and bad, long after her departure.

The First Minister and I are very different people. Our visions for the future of Scotland and of the United Kingdom just do not align, but I recognise hard work when I see it.

I am also grateful for the kindness that she has done me personally on occasion. The words of comfort that she once offered me in private

conversation when my daughter was hospitalised are something that I will not forget.

The sands of Scottish politics are now shifting in big and unpredictable ways. This is a moment, a crossroads, a chance to do things differently, and people are now looking for inspiration and new hope.

I finish by thanking Nicola Sturgeon and her deputy John Swinney for their service to our country, and I wish them well with whatever comes next. *[Applause.]*

13:15

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** It is truly an honour to speak today on the resignation of the First Minister, although that is a decision that I and, I think, the country are still coming to terms with. When the First Minister became First Minister, I was 17, and I was in the audience at Eden Court when she came to speak to voters and activists about her plans for Scotland.

I will come back to that moment later, but for now I am going to reflect on that plan for Scotland, because that plan is what brought us the baby box, the Scottish child payment and the Promise—all emblematic of the progressive values that the First Minister brought to the fore of the SNP and brought so many people into the SNP on the back of.

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on”

is rightly a very famous campaign line of Winnie Ewing’s, but Nicola Sturgeon did not wait for independence to bring it to life. She has been an ambassador for Scotland, and that will serve us well when her successors deliver independence.

She has always stayed true to herself, and this is the First Minister whom I, as a young survivor of sexual assault, watched stand up—not just when it was easy or abstract but when it was difficult—and say that women deserve justice. We can also look at how she has spent the last few weeks in her role, when people cannot accuse her of thinking about keeping her position next time or winning applause: she has tackled misogyny, delivered a very moving apology for historical adoption practices and, of course, spent time with the care-experienced young people of Scotland, to whom she was the first to say that the state does not just owe them a home; we owe them our love.

At a time when we were so isolated and separate, Nicola Sturgeon was trusted, invited and welcomed into millions of living rooms across the country. The last time that I was allowed to visit my mother was before the last lockdown—the lockdown when she caught Covid. We sat in her garden and she told me all about what Nicola had

said to her that morning, talking about the First Minister of Scotland as though she was someone from down the road who had popped in for a coffee. That is the kind of connection that Nicola Sturgeon has made with people the length and breadth of this country.

That brings me on to the second part of her legacy, because it is not just the policies that she put in place but the people she lifted as she climbed; the women she mentored, inspired and empowered; the people she told that their passion, their voluntary work and their opinions are politically valuable. They had been disenfranchised and she brought them in and gave them a voice.

They are all a part of her legacy, and that includes me, because that day, in Eden Court, I got to sit in the front row and ask the First Minister what she was going to do to make sure that more women and girls would enter politics in the future. It is a question that has been thoroughly answered since, but I remember her specific reply to me. She said, “Well, Emma, I would like to see more young women, Emma, making their voice heard, Emma.” *[Laughter.]*

Those words led me here, and I think that that will be the same for other women in this place, both now and in the future. I see little girls dressing up as Nicola Sturgeon for world book day, and I think that the First Minister has very safely achieved the goal that she set out in her statement: she has lifted, and girls across Scotland are rising to meet her. As one of those girls, I am confident that she will continue to inspire, no matter what she does next.

This has been a personal contribution but, as I speak on behalf of the SNP today, I know that we all want to thank her for her service, her selflessness and her dignity as First Minister. I will end by saying that I have read quite a few books on the back of the First Minister’s recommendations and I cannot wait to read the books that Nicola Sturgeon is going to write. *[Applause.]*

13:19

**The First Minister:** I will be brief, first, because I know that everybody wants to go and have lunch and, secondly, because I am not sure that I can go much further without crying. I thank colleagues across the chamber for their generous comments, which mean a great deal to me and which I deeply appreciate.

I say to Emma Roddick that I remember the exchange that she referred to really well. I cannot tell you how proud I am of you that you now sit in Parliament, making such a positive contribution.

Who knows? You may one day stand where I stand. I thank you for your contribution.

My interaction with Emma is one of probably thousands of interactions that I have had with girls and young women during my eight years as First Minister. If I have encouraged even a few of them to believe more in themselves and to stand a bit taller, I will be very happy, because that means a great deal to me.

More generally, to lead this country is the pinnacle of what this shy and introverted—that is still the case; it was not just when I was a young girl—working-class girl from Ayrshire could ever have dreamed of. This country is truly amazing and the people who live in this country, no matter where they came from, are amazing, too.

As I have travelled overseas as First Minister, which has been an enormous privilege, I have had the opportunity to see just how much Scotland punches above her weight. I have directly seen the respect in which people across the globe hold us. Perhaps all we need to do now, here, at home, is believe a bit more in ourselves.

Although I know without a shadow of a doubt that the time is right for me to go, I feel emotional today, perhaps because I know beyond doubt that, even if I live to be 100 years old, no phase in my life will be as special or meaningful to me as these past eight years have been.

You will, of course, see me very soon on a back bench near here, but, in the meantime, and for the final time from me as First Minister, I say to the people of Scotland: thank you from the bottom of my heart for the privilege of being your First Minister. *[Applause.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** It is now time to move to the next item of business, which is a members' business debate in the name of Pauline McNeill. There will be a short pause to allow those who are leaving the chamber and public gallery to do so before the debate begins.

## Supporting Taxi Drivers

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I encourage those who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible, as we are resuming business with a members' business debate on motion S6M-07686, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on supporting taxi drivers. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now, or as soon as possible.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises the contribution that taxi drivers make to the economy, connectivity and cultural life of Glasgow and the Greater Glasgow region; believes that taxi drivers provide a vital service to people who have mobility problems that make other forms of public transport unsuitable; understands that the service that taxi drivers provide does much to support what it sees as Glasgow's important night-time economy and hospitality industry, as well as provide the transport options which contribute to making Glasgow a UNESCO World City of Music; recognises the longstanding charity work carried out by Glasgow's taxi drivers through events such as the Glasgow Taxi Outing To Troon; considers that recent years have brought unprecedented challenges to taxi drivers, with the COVID-19 pandemic reducing passenger numbers, and significant regulation changes from Glasgow City Council mandating vehicle changes which, it believes, are unaffordable to many within the industry; notes the campaign from some taxi drivers for a fair implementation of new regulations, and congratulates the sector for all it contributes to the city.

13:25

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Follow that, as they say.

I do not apologise for bringing people back down to earth, though, and I thank members for staying, because it is time to stand up for taxi drivers across the country. Taxis are a vital part of our public transport system. In fact, the taxi sector has become more vital in recent years, due to unreliable train and bus services, which I hope will get better over the years.

This is my first members' business debate in this session, and I chose to make it about the plight of taxi drivers because the industry needs our focus and immediate action. I, along with many Scottish Labour colleagues, will speak today about our clear support and our demands for the sector. Today, as a Glasgow member, I stand in support of Glasgow taxi drivers, in particular, in order to highlight the contribution that they make to the city's economy, connectivity and cultural life. As I have said, they play a vital role in our public transport system by plugging the gaps that are left by our unreliable train and bus services and by covering times of the day when other forms of transport are not running.

I worked with taxi drivers in the previous parliamentary session and have, like many other members, been working with them during this session, too, in lobbying Glasgow City Council and the current Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, Kate Forbes, on their behalf. I believe that they were neglected throughout the pandemic and are being neglected now, with their concerns about the low emission zone that is being introduced in Glasgow—I cannot speak for other cities—being ignored so far.

Glasgow taxi drivers have said that they support the principle of LEZs; all that they have asked for is a short delay of a year to give them time to comply with the scheme. Even if that happens, it will not be enough time for many. Black cabs, in particular, have been an iconic feature of Glasgow city centre, and I do not understand why any city administration would, seemingly, go out of its way to ignore that important fact.

As we know, around 1,000 cabs out of the fleet of 1,420 are not Euro 6 compliant. In other words, there are 1,000 taxi drivers who, at the moment, would not be able to enter the LEZ in Glasgow. One can already begin to see the extent of the problem. Although 200 cabs have been given an extra 12 months, people in the rest of the taxi sector have been left to find thousands of pounds that they simply do not have during a cost of living crisis.

The worry, therefore, is that many will just leave the trade and will not be replaced. With the high cost of a new electric vehicle, at approximately £60,000, and the average age of a cab driver being nearly 60 years old—believe it or not—the finance option for a new vehicle is, for many, not a viable solution. Due to global supply chain shortages, the second-hand market is sparse, too, which means a significant lack of options for compliance. As we can see, there are layers upon layers of problems. The LEZ will have a devastating impact on traders, taxi drivers and low-income and older drivers who are unable to buy new cars.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** One of the services that taxis offer is transportation of particular groups of young people to and from school. Without an adequate replacement, those young people are going to lose out on their education. Taxi drivers are asking for only a short pause, so would it not simply be realistic for the Scottish Government and, in particular, Glasgow City Council to accept that request so that, as a result, the expectation with regard to education will be delivered?

**Pauline McNeill:** I could not agree more. There are so many dimensions to the issue that impact on the Scottish economy, including how people,

particularly young people, get to school and to work.

Steven Grant of Unite the union's Glasgow cab branch has said that the situation will have a "devastating impact on the trade",

which is why the union has called for a delay for all cabs with regard to the LEZ scheme until at least June 2024. I support Unite's call and I hope that the Government is listening to the cab drivers who work day in and day out in our city.

I hope that other members will address what is happening in their cities. So, if members will forgive me, I will focus a bit on Glasgow. Glasgow City Council must work with the drivers—which it has not done up until now—and allow time for them to source compliant vehicles. Taxi drivers have been crying out for support due to the inadequate grant support and the unfairness of restrictions that affect busy town centres. We need a new deal for the taxi trade, and we need a strategy that recognises the importance of taxis to our economy.

Glasgow City Council noted, in relation to the night-time economy, that its 2020 city centre strategy was

"aimed at ensuring Glasgow remains one of the top city centres and urban tourism destinations".

Research has revealed that

"the night-time economy—defined as activity from 6pm until 6am—generates £2.16 billion per annum for the city, supporting 16,600 full-time jobs, whilst the retail sector generates more than £3.3 billion and supports 17,000 full-time jobs."

The impact on the economy is extraordinary, and I am sure that that is the case in other cities.

It has also been reported that

"Combined employment from the sectors represents over a fifth of the City Centre working population."

Many workers in the city centre rely on taxis to bring them home after their shifts, and people who work in nightclubs and bars during the evening and in the early hours will be severely affected, as they will now have to rely on public transport.

I am sure that, like me, other members have had parents contact them about the matter—perhaps even people in their own families. Many people simply walk home from the city centre because they cannot get a taxi. It is quite frightening for a parent to think that their child or young person is walking quite a long distance to get home because they simply cannot get home any other way.

The lack of availability of taxis will greatly affect people who work in the city centre during the evenings and busy weekends. We must recognise

the vital role that the taxi sector plays in cities such as Glasgow. I am sometimes in the city centre quite late at night. As some members know, I am a musician, and I play in Glasgow city centre. I can already see that people are starting to leave the pubs earlier than they used to, which is simply because they are worried about getting home. There are obviously other issues around public transport, but having a properly viable taxi trade is absolutely vital to getting the city centre back into its former patterns.

Taxi drivers also provide a safe transport option for women, which was addressed in a debate a few weeks ago, and for vulnerable people at night. It provides an important service for people with mobility issues—a topic that will be covered by my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Glasgow Taxis has demonstrated on-going commitment to city safety through its commitment to the safe taxi scheme, which is a safety initiative to ensure that Glasgow students who are alone and find themselves stuck after a night out with no money can still make it back home safely by using their student card as payment in emergency situations. Too often, students end up in potentially unsafe circumstances and unable to get home. Glasgow Taxis is to be commended for its commitment to getting young students home safe at night.

As a Glasgow regional member, I have watched the Scottish National Party administration on the city council set up a policy that could quite literally wipe out the black cab trade in the city, with no response so far being offered as to how we will see our way through the situation.

Taxi drivers from across Scotland, who lobbied Parliament only recently, were given grant funding to compensate for the impact of restrictions during Covid. Some local authorities paid out more than once, but Glasgow did not. Glasgow City Council paid just once out of the fund, and there seemed to be no realisation that Glasgow, being the most locked-down city in the United Kingdom, would experience such a devastating impact, which we are still feeling now. That is why I have brought the debate to Parliament today.

We must learn lessons from the restrictions that were imposed. I hope that a pandemic of the kind that occurred will never happen again, but we must learn that we have to support trades such as the taxi trade in the period in between, while they try to recover.

I am glad that I have had the chance to speak in the debate and I look forward to hearing the other contributions.

13:34

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I thank Pauline McNeill for securing the debate on such an important topic. Provision of taxis is a vital part of our transport system, and I very much share the concerns of taxi drivers across the country about the challenges that are facing the sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the cost of living crisis.

Taxi drivers provided an invaluable service to key workers and vulnerable people throughout lockdown and beyond. There was a great welcome for the £57 million of support that was offered to taxi drivers by the Scottish Government in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

As deputy convener of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, I have had the privilege of hearing evidence from taxi drivers and their representatives from across the sector on the further support that is needed in order for the industry to fully recover from the effects of the pandemic. The committee listened carefully to the proposals that were set out in the petition that was lodged on behalf of Unite the union. I very much welcome Transport Scotland's announcement that it will explore with trade unions and other stakeholders the best forum for engagement with the taxi trade and for addressing on-going concerns.

As the motion recognises, support for taxi drivers is not just a transportation issue, but is of cultural, social, economic and environmental concern, so I welcome the Scottish Government's cross-sectoral approach in treating it as such. For example, I am proud of the Scottish Government's ambitious plans to prioritise the just transition to net zero by making low emission zone retrofit grants available to taxi drivers to support their shift to lower emissions and greener vehicles. I acknowledge that it has been difficult for taxi drivers in Glasgow to do that. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has seen evidence from the taxi sector about potential challenges that low emission zones might present to taxi drivers, so I am reassured to know that our Minister for Transport is working closely with taxi driver representatives and unions to discuss the matter further.

Fife is one of the most heavily populated local authorities in Scotland, and although we benefit from a range of rail and bus services, taxis are an essential part of our transport chain. They contribute significantly to access to Fife's array of hospitality, tourism, nightlife, manufacturing industries and outdoor activities. With the summer season on its way, it is essential that taxi drivers feel supported and valued as major players in our local economy, as they are in Glasgow, too.

I am sympathetic in respect of the financial pressures that are facing taxi drivers. We cannot ignore the glaring and obvious pitfalls of the UK Government's recent spring budget. Households across the country, including those of taxi drivers, are facing the biggest fall in living standards on record, and families are seeing their incomes being devastated by the cost of living crisis.

I am confident that the Scottish Government is using its limited powers and resources to address that cost of living crisis. Although the Chancellor of the Exchequer's increased funding to the Scottish Government is welcome, it is nowhere near adequate to deal with the significant fiscal challenges that the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities are facing as a direct result of the economic chaos that has been caused by Westminster. I know that it will be a huge disappointment to the taxi industry, but the chancellor missed a vital opportunity to give real support and to grant the Scottish Government the necessary levers to provide taxi drivers with meaningful support.

The chancellor's measures will also do little to mitigate the damage of Brexit, which has intensified the driver shortage crisis in Scotland. The impact on labour shortages has been felt across Scotland, including in my constituency. In evidence that was submitted to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, Fife Council raised concerns about how taxi operators are having to turn down hires regularly because of a shortage of drivers across Fife.

The problem has been exacerbated by a massive decrease in taxi driver numbers. According to the Scottish Taxi Federation, driver numbers have been devastated by Covid, with many deciding not to return to the taxi trade in favour of taking other employment.

I would like to conclude by giving immense thanks to taxi drivers in my constituency and across the country for continuing to provide the people of Scotland with fast, safe, reliable and economical transport. It is clear that the industry faces many pressures in the aftermath of the pandemic, as well as through Brexit and the cost of living crisis. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee will continue to take evidence from the sector in order to advise the Scottish Government on the best way forward.

13:38

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank my friend and colleague Pauline McNeill for bringing the debate to the chamber and for all the work that she has done to support the taxi trade, including in Glasgow.

I will use my time to talk about how important taxis are to me and other disabled people. Most types of public transport in Glasgow simply are not accessible to me, as a disabled woman. I cannot use the subway because most of the platforms have steps and no lifts, and even where I could get to the platform, the trains are not accessible for wheelchair users. Buses have a one-wheelchair rule, which means that I cannot travel on a bus if a wheelchair user or a pram is already on board, and I cannot travel on buses with my partner, who is also a wheelchair user. I told members this story earlier this month. It not only hampers my ability to get around; it is dangerous. I also told members of the experience that I had when I had to travel on my own at night and was followed home.

Not even ambulances are fully accessible in the city of Glasgow. When I fell last year, there was no space in the ambulance for me to take my wheelchair with me or for my husband to come. It was taxis that stepped up. This is a crucial issue for disabled people and women, as I will come on to.

I am not alone. Research carried out by Transport Scotland shows that disabled people are less likely to have a driving licence than non-disabled people and less likely to have a car available to their household than non-disabled people. Accessible public transport is vital in ensuring that we can travel around freely and participate in society as our peers do, but we are not there yet.

For most disabled people—me included—taxis are by far the easiest and most accessible form of public transport available. Disabled people make twice as many taxi journeys a year as non-disabled people. Right across the region, Glasgow black cabs help disabled people to get to school, go to work, see friends and access hospital appointments. As I said, they even provide an emergency service.

Taxis are key not only to disabled people; they also provide a safe form of transport for many others, including women, particularly when travelling home at night. They are fundamental to so many people, which is why I am deeply concerned about the impact that the low-emission zone in Glasgow will have on the trade. We are already seeing problems. As my colleague Pauline McNeill has said, people are walking home or leaving early. We have heard about disabled people not getting to work on time because of delays that are caused by fewer cabs being available. We have heard, including from my colleague Martin Whitfield, about trouble getting disabled children to school. That is all because there are already fewer drivers in the trade. The situation is serious.

Although I support action to address climate change, including the creation of low-emission zones, our transition to net zero must be just, and to be just, the transition must protect jobs and equality. As it stands, the implementation of the low-emission zone in Glasgow will fall far short of that standard.

I first met representatives of the Glasgow cab section of Unite in February 2022 after it had launched its campaign to stop the black cab blackout the previous weekend. Not long after that, I met Glasgow Taxis, the largest supplier of licensed taxis in Glasgow, which has an entirely wheelchair-accessible fleet. They all told me the same thing: without urgent action, the low-emission zone will be devastating for the public, the taxi trade and drivers in Glasgow. My colleague Pauline McNeill has set out in detail the stark reality that those drivers face.

We are in a cost of living crisis. Many drivers are already struggling to make ends meet, as we have heard in the debate. Without action from the Government, they will not be able to afford to meet the requirements, and funding is not the only factor. As we have heard, a decline in the supply of parts is also affecting the industry and delaying retrofitting work.

Other local authorities such as Edinburgh and Aberdeen have recognised how hard this is for the taxi trade and have rightly delayed the implementation of their low-emission zones until 2024. However, Glasgow City Council is refusing to do that for many taxi drivers. Drivers are not opposed to action to tackle emissions; they are simply asking for more time and financial help so that they have a fair chance of meeting the requirements of the low-emission zone.

There is already a significant problem with job losses and unemployment in Glasgow. What thought has been given to drivers for whom, in many cases, reskilling is simply not an option? What are they to do? What are disabled people, women and everybody else who relies so heavily on taxis meant to do when so many taxis go off the road?

Since the moment that I learned about the devastating impact that Glasgow's low-emission zone could have on the black cab trade, I have not stopped fighting to save them. We cannot let Glasgow's accessible black cab trade die, we cannot leave thousands of drivers without jobs and we cannot leave women and disabled people without safe and accessible transport. Will the minister please set out how she will take action to give Glasgow's black cab trade a fighting chance of survival?

13:43

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing this really important debate to the chamber. When I was driving into Glasgow earlier this week, I saw a rather depressing sight. As I drove along the M77, there were massive roadside signs advertising the fact that the low-emission zone will come into effect in June, so it seems that there is no turning back—this is going to happen.

Pauline McNeill rightly described taxis as part of our public transport system. That is how we need to view them, particularly in a city such as Glasgow—Edinburgh is the same. In Glasgow, we have become used to having lots of black cabs around; we have been able to just stick out a thumb and get one. There were so many black cabs that, when my wife and I got married, a long time ago, we invited guests to just stick out their thumb, get a black cab and go to where we were having our celebratory meal. That is how good they have been.

I fear—as do Pauline McNeill and the members of Unite the union with whom I have been working—that we will lose hundreds and hundreds of black cabs in Glasgow. That, as people have pointed out, will affect women—I know that the minister feels that strongly—and, as Pam Duncan-Glancy said, disabled people who need to get home, particularly late at night. Black cabs provide a service that cannot be provided by anyone else.

Glasgow City Council knows the issues and should understand the trade. I will explain the black cab trade to you, Deputy Presiding Officer. In Glasgow—in fact, across Scotland—our taxi drivers tend to buy second-hand vehicles, many of which come from the London market, so they have to wait for those vehicles to appear in the second-hand market. They are asking for extra time because those vehicles are just not in that market yet.

Glasgow faces a cliff edge in June, when we will lose taxis. That is a fact. The city will suffer. Not only the city but people who live near the city and people who go into it will suffer. I refer to people who live in places such as East Kilbride, where I am from. Glasgow is a regional centre, so the issue is not just for the people of Glasgow but for people who come into Glasgow.

Glasgow City Council can and will introduce the low-emission zone, but it can still be flexible. It could exempt taxis for the year in which taxi drivers are asking for an exemption. It is not too late. I say to the minister that, if she speaks to her colleagues in Glasgow City Council, she should tell them that the low-emission zone meter can and should be paused. That would benefit women, disabled people and children, it would benefit

members of the public who need taxis and it would benefit the taxi trade. It would make sense.

13:47

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I congratulate my Glasgow colleague Pauline McNeill on bringing this important motion to the chamber for debate.

I hope that the minister has heard the words of members around the chamber on the critical issue that is faced by taxi drivers across our city and Scotland more widely. I speak from some experience: my dad is a taxi driver. He is in his 60s and drives a taxi in Glasgow. He does that because he was made redundant from the shipyards and it was a way for him to earn a stable income and have more control over his life after suffering from the impact of deindustrialisation in Glasgow.

That is the story of many taxi drivers in our city, who do the job because it offers flexibility and a stable income. They are, by and large, in their 50s and 60s. They are not the sort of people who are prepared or able to take on tens of thousands of pounds of debt to finance the purchase of new vehicles—nor would they want to, because they are not at the point in their careers where that makes sense.

We therefore have this wicked problem of a crunch. A new technology is coming in and internal combustion engine vehicles are being phased out, the new second-hand market is not established yet and there is not the financial wherewithal or the products available to facilitate that transition meaningfully. To add insult to injury, Glasgow City Council is pig-headedly pressing ahead with the blunt implementation of a low-emission zone and has not paid heed to the valid concerns that taxi drivers have raised.

I know that taxi drivers are not luddites. They are not anti-environmental improvement. They want to go with the grain, but they need to be given a fair deal in the way that bus companies have been given a fair deal to renew their fleets with substantial and generous public subsidies along with their large capital-raising capacity.

Taxi drivers, who are often self-employed, often do not have the means to raise capital and are at a point in their lives where they cannot get that kind of finance, so they need extra support from the Government. If they do not get that, the public good that taxis provide—which colleagues across the chamber have so eloquently described, whether it be the educational aspect, disability access or support for our night-time economy—will suffer. Indeed, we will all suffer, because we all have skin in the game with regard to having a thriving taxi industry.

Given that the transport system in Glasgow is basically non-existent from half past 11 at night until 6 am, taxis are all the more critical. We have heard about the safety implications of their not being available for workers and those who participate as consumers in our night-time economy, and we have also heard about the chilling effect that it is having on our wider economy, which is worth billions of pounds a year. Glasgow's city centre has a very low residential population, so the city relies disproportionately on, as Mr Simpson described, people travelling from the outer suburbs and from places such as East Kilbride to visit hospitality venues in the city centre. If they are not able to do that, it will change behaviour, which will have an effect on revenue and result in business failure. If we do not address this issue at first hand, it will have a compounding effect.

We have lots of opportunities. I know that we have heard pretty damaging figures such as the number of licences in Glasgow being down by 15 per cent since 2019. In fact, I would argue that, when we add in shift drivers, the actual availability of taxis on the road is twice as big a factor, with a potential loss of up to a third or even a half of the available taxis on the streets of Glasgow at any one time. That number is pretty horrific, and I know from personal experience of coming off the train at Queen Street in the evenings how difficult it is to get a taxi, particularly midweek.

However, although this is a major issue, there are solutions. Greater Manchester's clean air plan shows that it is possible to take action to improve air quality without harming the taxi trade; its proposal for a Greater Manchester-wide clean air zone has been introduced alongside funding of £21.4 million for the taxi industry to renew its fleet and allow for the transition to more compliant vehicles. We could do the same sort of thing with a major manufacturer such as the Allied Vehicles Group, the UK's largest taxi manufacturer, which is based in and employs 600 people in Glasgow. That is one example of a joined-up approach that could be taken—that is, working with the industry to develop a product that is practical and which can work better than what has been done previously. The switched-on taxi loan scheme does not work. It does not provide the scale that is needed, and it does not address the issues.

I therefore appeal to the minister to look again at this problem and work with the council and the industry to solve it. There is a willingness to do this—we just need to get the right pieces in place to make it work.

13:52

**Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** I thank my colleague Pauline McNeill for highlighting this issue in the chamber.

The motion highlights the important service that taxi drivers provide to the transport sector. They offer a means of transport to those who are unable to take public transport, as well as a safe route home for those thousands of people who are not comfortable with using public transport either on their own or late at night. They also provide a means of transport to those who are physically unable to take buses, trains or trams and in places where public transport is not easily accessible.

I also echo the words of the motion in emphasising the support that Scotland's taxi services provide to the hospitality and events sector. As shadow minister for culture, I, too, recognise the important role that taxi drivers play in revitalising the culture sector in Glasgow and Edinburgh after what have been a difficult few years for the industry. Lots of industries felt the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, but such unprecedented times forced many taxi drivers to give up the profession entirely. Throughout the pandemic, taxi drivers struggled with severely reduced passenger numbers and restrictions that made it very difficult for them to work full time. They did not receive enough support from the Scottish Government and, as many taxi drivers are self-employed, they were forced to find other means of income. The fact that many did not return to the profession after the pandemic has further exacerbated the shortage of taxi drivers in cities across Scotland.

The Scottish Government's move towards low-emission zones will further exacerbate the challenges faced by taxi drivers and make their jobs even more difficult. It is clear that not enough is being done to support them through this transition, and the Scottish Government needs to reinforce the value of taxi drivers and do more to support their important job.

As I have already mentioned, taxi drivers provide a safe route home for those who cannot travel on public transport or who feel unsafe when walking home alone—something that I highlighted in my speech on international women's day.

Taxi drivers often provide this vital service while dealing with a massive amount of unruly, aggressive and intoxicated passengers. Many of my constituents who are taxi drivers have told me of the difficulty of having to deal with stressful and complicated situations by themselves, because many are self-employed. More should be done to ensure that taxi drivers are met with the same level of respect as any other public service provider. The Scottish Government must facilitate

action to support taxi drivers and their valuable contribution to the night-time economy and the culture industry.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Jenny Gilruth to respond to the debate.

13:55

**The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth):** I start by congratulating Pauline McNeill on securing this afternoon's important members' business debate. Pauline McNeill was right to say that our taxi drivers are vital to the Scottish economy.

I have listened carefully to members' contributions, and I appreciate the issues and concerns that they have raised. I will try to respond to each in turn. I am conscious that, next week, I might not be the transport minister, so I want to put on record my commitment throughout my time in post to engaging directly with our trade unions and particularly on this issue. In fact, I met them on the matter only last week.

As we heard earlier, exactly three years ago today, the country entered a national lockdown. "Stay at home" was the mantra for us all; saving lives was the imperative. As we have heard today, lockdown restrictions cut us off from family and friends, but they also necessitated certain businesses stopping trading—cafes and shops ceased to trade. Indeed, the Scottish economy contracted by 20 per cent during the first few months of lockdown. The Scottish Government provided support and made available around £4.4 billion in grants and non-domestic rates relief. That helped to save many businesses—it was a lifeline. However, as we have heard from Pauline McNeill and others today, it was a really challenging time for our taxi industry.

We also know, as we heard from members, that demand for taxi services plummeted during the pandemic. Operators reported an 80 per cent drop in bookings—we heard about some of that in Foyso Choudhury's contribution—and many drivers chose to leave the profession, as we heard from Mr Sweeney. Those who stayed in the profession reported huge reductions in their income.

The Scottish Government provided specific funding to the taxi trade through the taxi and private hire driver support fund and latterly through the taxi and private hire vehicle driver and operator support fund. However, as we heard from Pauline McNeill, the importance of the night-time economy, particularly during our recovery from the pandemic, cannot be overstated. Foyso Choudhury will know of my particular interest in that, given my previous ministerial responsibilities as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development.

It is important that, in the Government, we have a holistic approach that recognises the challenge that our night-time economy in particular faces. That is a particular issue for Glasgow, where it is such a thriving industry. As I am half Glaswegian, I must put on record that I lived in Glasgow for nearly a quarter of my life as a student and, latterly, when I was working. Therefore, I very much recognise the vibrancy of that night-time economy and the need to support it adequately. In particular, that includes our taxi drivers who work in that environment.

As I have put on the record, I have previously met the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Unite. At the end of last year, I also met the Scottish Private Hire Association to talk about this issue and others more broadly. The sector faces a number of challenges at this time.

We heard from David Torrance about some of the challenges in relation to driver shortages, which have been exacerbated to some extent by Brexit. As I mentioned, it is also true to say that some have simply chosen to walk away from the trade completely.

I want to mention the importance of having properly licensed taxis. As I think we heard from Graham Simpson and others, women and minorities often depend on our taxi trade to get home safely.

**Pauline McNeill:** Before you move on to that, I want to highlight something that Paul Sweeney talked about. It is a good point that has also been made to me in conversation. Do you have any influence in your post—I wish you well in it in the future—to talk about how local authorities such as Glasgow could sit down with companies in other parts of the sector and bring them together a bit more?

I have called for a new deal for taxi drivers. Part of the issue is that Glasgow was the most locked-down city, and the city is obviously not returning to what it was. I know that you are talking to lots of people, minister. That suggests to me that perhaps you could encourage authorities such as Glasgow to make a deal encompassing companies that can bring something to the table.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Speak through the chair, please.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I am more than happy to consider the member's suggestion. In relation to licensing, I have been in discussions with officials on that point this morning. Of course, responsibility for licensing sits with another minister in the Scottish Government, but I think that there is a requirement for more commonality in respect of how the system is administered across local authorities to ensure that there is more of a level

playing field. If that is the point that the member was alluding to, I recognise it very much.

**Paul Sweeney:** To develop the point about taxi renewal and a product being available, the switched-on taxis loan scheme is not attractive to older drivers, for the reasons that I mentioned in my speech, but perhaps work could be done with manufacturers such as Allied Vehicles to develop a personal contract purchase scheme or a patient leasing scheme that might be attractive to drivers. That might allow drivers to transition without the huge up-front capital cost of buying a vehicle, which is currently £60,000 to £100,000.

**Jenny Gilruth:** The member makes an important and valid point. I will not give him a commitment on the record today, for reasons that he will well understand. However, there is a persuasive argument in relation to how that could be administered in future. As we heard from David Torrance, irrespective of who holds this position next week, Transport Scotland will continue to engage with the transport minister on the matter, and directly with local authorities, because it is an on-going challenge.

Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke of some of the challenges with accessibility on our wider public transport network. She will know that I am very live to those issues through the wider work that we are undertaking in relation to women's safety. However, there is a huge challenge there, and of course taxis play a vital role in relation to accessibility. Irrespective of who holds this post in future, the Government will need to do more on that matter.

I do not think that there has been a debate today about the need for low-emission zones. A question was raised at First Minister's question time relating to climate change and how we are going to reach our ambitious climate change targets. Undoubtedly, low-emission zones have a role to play in that regard. Earlier this week, data was published that showed that Scots living in some of the poorest areas in Scotland are much more likely to die from lung conditions. Asthma + Lung UK is calling on Governments, including the Scottish Government, to do more to tackle health inequalities by improving air quality, and low-emission zones have a key role to play in that endeavour.

We have spoken at great length about some of the specifics in relation to Glasgow City Council. Obviously, the decisions are for Glasgow City Council but, as minister, I put on the record that I have discussed the matter with the council, most recently only two weeks ago, I think.

Glasgow City Council is responsible for granting exceptions. As I think I have discussed with Pam Duncan-Glancy in a previous parliamentary

exchange, there is a specific challenge in Glasgow because of the age of the current fleet, which is much older than the fleets in other parts of the country. That is, in part, due to the council's licensing conditions historically having been more lax than those in other parts of the country.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** On that basis, does the minister agree that there is a case to be made that Glasgow should delay the implementation of the low-emission zone for taxi drivers so that measures such as those that my colleagues Paul Sweeney, Pauline McNeill and others have suggested can be put in place?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Obviously, that is a matter for the city council, but I hear the member's point.

It is, of course, for Glasgow City Council to outline its position, but I recognise that taxi operators and the unions have been engaging with the local authority. Very recently, Glasgow has confirmed that there will be an additional year for drivers whose taxis cannot be retrofitted, and the position for others is simply a requirement to demonstrate that they have signed up to the process of applying for funding. I understand that guidance is about to be issued on that early next week. Of course, that is a matter for Glasgow City Council. I certainly discussed the matter that the member has raised with the unions only last week.

I am conscious of the time. We have discussed at length some of the issues in relation to the importance of low-emission zones. I recognise members' views, particularly in relation to the challenges that are being experienced in Glasgow. As transport minister, I commit to work with our trade unions and the city council to reach a resolution. I recognise that the city council is taking action.

The taxi trade plays a vital role in Scotland—it gets people from A to B; it protects vulnerable passengers, as we have heard; and it provides mobility to those who otherwise might not be able to access key services. The Government has absolutely committed to improving our air quality through the roll-out of low-emission zones. We will continue that important work, and we will continue to support the taxi and private hire trade, which makes a vital contribution to Scottish society. We will continue to support the sector as best we can.

14:04

*Meeting suspended.*

14:29

*On resuming—*

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Skills

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time on education and skills. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

I advise members that there is a lot of interest in asking supplementaries, so I appeal for those not to have a lengthy preamble and not to have secondary and tertiary elements. I also appeal to members of the ministerial team for brevity, as far as possible, in their responses.

### Asbestos Removal (Schools)

1. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support the safe removal of asbestos from school premises. (S6O-02045)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** The statutory responsibility for the management of asbestos in schools rests with local authorities, and we expect local authorities to provide a safe environment for all school users.

As health and safety is not a devolved matter, the Health and Safety Executive is responsible for ensuring that local authorities comply with the legislation and requirements in relation to asbestos, and it offers information and advice on complying with those duties. In addition, HSE undertakes school inspections to assess the management of risks from asbestos in the school estate.

**Marie McNair:** The presence of asbestos on school premises is a concern to me, as an MSP for a town with high levels of asbestos-related illness, because of our industrial heritage. Evidence suggests that the continued presence of and potential exposure to asbestos in public premises, especially schools, poses an on-going threat of contracting illnesses such as mesothelioma. Does the cabinet secretary agree that more needs to be done to quantify the scale of the problem? Asbestos campaigners, trade unions and others are calling for a phased removal of asbestos from all schools. Is the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities considering doing that?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** We expect local authorities to provide a safe environment for all

school users, and we recognise the hazard of asbestos. However, it is important to stress—in line with the Health and Safety Executive's advice—that asbestos is dangerous only when disturbed. All HSE guidance should be followed when any removal of asbestos is planned or carried out. For example, local authorities must assess and manage the risk from asbestos, and they are required to know whether their school estate contains asbestos, where it is and what condition it is in.

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** Earlier this year, it was reported that asbestos is still present in more than half of Scottish schools. It is critical that the Scottish Government acts as quickly as possible to remove asbestos from schools, to ensure that pupils, teachers and staff are learning and working in a safe environment. What impact assessments have been carried out on the effect of asbestos in schools on the safety of pupils and staff?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** For the sake of brevity, I will say only that pupils, students and all staff are working in safe environments in their schools.

### Circular Economy (Education)

**2. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how the education system encourages a better understanding of circular economy principles and skills. (S6O-02046)

**The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn):** The education and skills system is essential in supporting the transition to a net zero, circular economy. Scotland was one of the very first nations in the world to embed sustainability education as a cross-curricular entitlement for all learners through our learning for sustainability programme. That programme brings together a range of themes, such as climate change, social justice and the circular economy.

In addition, the “Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan 2020-2025” makes it clear that circular economy skills will be critical for the transition to net zero, and we will continue to work with key partners, such as Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and Zero Waste Scotland, to deliver those skills in our education system.

**Maurice Golden:** In 2016, the Scottish Government said that Zero Waste Scotland would identify and support circular economy teaching champions. When I asked for an update on that in 2020, it turned out that there were fewer than 100 such champions out of 24,000 secondary

teachers. When I asked about the issue again in 2022, the minister agreed that the Scottish Government had not done enough. Can the minister provide an update on what has been done over the past year and how many circular economy teaching champions there are now?

**Jamie Hepburn:** I cannot give the member the precise figure now, but I can say that we continue to look at the curriculum that is in place and the offer that is available through the learning for sustainability programme. We are currently in the process of looking to strengthen our approach to implementation, and we expect to publish an updated action plan shortly, which will look at those very matters.

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** Zero Waste Scotland provides a range of bite-size resources about the circular economy that are already aligned to the curriculum for excellence. Those range from a resource for pupils in primaries 1 to 3 about the life cycle of a strawberry—which pupils love—to one for pupils in secondary 1 and 2 about how to reduce energy use at home. Will the minister set out how those resources can benefit our young people's education through links to the experiences and outcomes that are listed in curriculum for excellence?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please be as brief as possible, minister.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Those resources give practical, interesting and enjoyable ways for young people to engage in learning about the challenges of moving towards a circular economy and I commend their use. They are available to teachers and we encourage all of them to engage in that area.

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Our colleges are crucial in developing skills for the circular economy. During a debate earlier this week, the minister said that £26 million of funding would be

“provided to colleges in the usual fashion”.—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2023; c 69.]

Does that mean that the funding will be delivered without additional ties and that it can be used for mainstream budget purposes?

**Jamie Hepburn:** It means that the Scottish Funding Council will shortly make an announcement about indicative allocations, which is the usual process.

### Examinations (Mitigation for Strike Action)

**3. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what mitigations the Scottish Qualifications Authority will have in place during this year's exam diet for any senior phase

pupils who have been adversely affected by targeted strike action. (S6O-02047)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** The SQA confirmed in April 2022 that existing modifications to the national qualifications from 2022 are being continued in the 2023 academic session. Those modifications vary by subject and level, and they include reductions in course assessment, requiring less coursework than in a normal year and leaving more time for learning and teaching.

The SQA has also confirmed plans for a sensitive approach to grading, dependent on the impact of any disruption on exam and coursework performance. Although they were implemented to acknowledge the on-going impacts of Covid, those measures will also help to mitigate disruption arising from the industrial action.

**Pauline McNeill:** The cabinet secretary will know that all pupils missed five days of school due to strikes but that pupils in targeted constituencies, including those in the First Minister's constituency of Glasgow Southside, missed a further three days. Some Scottish Labour members, including me, have been contacted by pupils who are worried about how that will affect their exam performance and about how exactly the SQA will take that into account. When my colleague Michael Marra raised the issue with the cabinet secretary, she said that she was engaging with the appropriate local authorities to understand the impact of the action on their schools and to explore what further actions can be taken—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please ask a question.

**Pauline McNeill:** What exactly does that mean? Does it mean that pupils who lost out will be identified for further support?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** The original question was about the work that the SQA has done, which is relevant to young people across Scotland. Education Scotland is also undertaking work. That includes the national e-learning offer, which provides learners with a searchable database of almost 25,000 regularly updated resources across hundreds of courses for senior phase learners.

I have also ensured that I am kept up to date with what is happening in each area where targeted strike action took place. I understand that two of the three targeted high schools managed to open to some extent during the strike days, which is important. Schools, local authorities and our agencies are working hard to provide support not only for pupils in the targeted areas but across Scotland. I am, of course, paying particular attention to the work that we can do to support children and young people who were impacted by that targeted action.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A number of members have supplementary questions. Those will have to be brief, as will the responses.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Will the cabinet secretary say something about the study support that is available through the national e-learning offer, the resources that are being provided for senior phase learners through the Perth and Kinross virtual campus and the extra support that is being provided over the Easter break as a result of the very positive recent budget decisions by the Scottish National Party Administration?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I have already mentioned some of the work that is happening in our national e-learning offer, including e-Sgoil. That work is available to our young people and includes a mix of live teaching and recorded lessons during the evenings as well as study support over the Easter break. Schools in Perth and Kinross have been encouraging young people to sign up to that.

I have also been advised that every school in Perth and Kinross has sought to provide a range of on-going support to young people using the mix of online and in-person approaches, and I welcome that.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Can I tempt the cabinet secretary to be even more specific about the nature of the support that is being provided? That was the subject of the original question. For example, is she offering councils some additional funding to pay for one-on-one tutoring or group tutoring? Is she advocating that schools actively create virtual interactive tutorials for pupils so that they can get additional support? How about a library of virtual lessons? What about some peer support programmes? What specifically are the Government and its agencies doing? These things do not have to cost much.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** As I have already said, there is a searchable database of nearly 25,000 senior phase resources for learners. That support is of the same scale as the support that the Government ensured was there during the Covid pandemic. It is important to recognise that the Government has continued, through Education Scotland and particularly e-Sgoil, to provide support for children and young people at this difficult time. I thank everyone who is continuing to support our children and young people, both in schools and virtually, in the work that they do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask Beatrice Wishart to be brief.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** If the SQA is showing willingness to mitigate the impact of strikes, will the cabinet secretary indicate

how it can take into account the double whammy that some senior phase pupils in Shetland have experienced with adverse weather resulting in school closures for up to 10 days as well as schools having chronic staff shortages, which has meant that, in some cases, pupils have had no dedicated subject teacher for a full school year?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** The materials that I have mentioned—both the materials from the SQA and the national e-learning offer—are available across Scotland. That is important, and I am sure that there is a role for all members in encouraging their constituents to be aware of the support that is out there for them. There is also a role for councils. I recognise that, in some areas, there are challenges in attracting teachers in specific subjects, and we would certainly expect councils to provide support for schools in that regard, on top of everything that is already being provided by the national agencies that I have mentioned in my previous answers.

### Bullying in Schools

**4. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** Presiding Officer, thank you for giving me permission to leave portfolio questions early. I apologise to members in the chamber.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce bullying in schools. (S6O-02048)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** Bullying of any kind is unacceptable. It is for schools and local authorities to decide how to address bullying in each individual case and in their area.

However, with regard to national support, we continue to fully fund respectme, Scotland's anti-bullying service, in order to build confidence and capacity to address bullying effectively. Education Scotland recently completed a thematic inspection of the recording and monitoring of bullying in schools. We take the findings of that work very seriously and we have immediately put in place a range of actions to respond to it.

We have begun a review of our national guidance, "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People", and we have established a working group of stakeholders to support that. Inspectors will also undertake a second phase of the inspection work that will look at good practice in how schools are addressing bullying.

**Douglas Lumsden:** I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer, but if we cannot measure it, we cannot improve it. The data that we have obtained through a freedom of information request from schools in Aberdeen shows that there are huge disparities from school to school in how bullying cases are recorded. Some record

only confirmed bullying incidents while others record all incidents prior to investigation.

I ask the Government to take the issue seriously and urgently issue guidelines to all local authorities so that we can start measuring the problem consistently and start improving the situation.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Douglas Lumsden makes a very important point. Every single teacher should be encouraged to record any bullying behaviour that is going on and it should be taken seriously in the school and the local authority setting. That is exactly why I set out in my original answer Education Scotland's work on thematic inspections, because we recognise that there is inconsistent recording and monitoring of bullying in schools and we are now taking action to respond to that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask Martin Whitfield to be brief.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** At the heart of bullying lies the victim who has had their human rights abused. The sixteenth of March saw the second anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill waiting to become law in this Parliament. In a very helpful blog for young people, Clare Haughey has explained what the situation is. Can the cabinet secretary tell us when that bill will return to this Parliament?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** As the member will be aware, and as the minister has already set out, we are continuing to work with the United Kingdom Government on proposed amendments to that bill. No one in this chamber disagrees with the view that the bill should be brought back to the Parliament as soon as possible, but it is important that we try to work together with the UK Government to ensure that we are aware of any concerns that it may have on the issue. It is an important issue that we need to get right. It is frustrating that action on it is taking the time that it is, and I very much look forward to bringing the bill back to Parliament.

### Childcare Support

**5. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve childcare support. (S6O-02049)

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey):** In 2023-24, we will invest around £1 billion in the delivery of our funded early learning and childcare offer. Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom to offer 1,140 hours a year of funded early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds, and we are progressing plans to expand the childcare offer in Scotland by expanding free early

learning and childcare to one and two-year-olds starting in this parliamentary session with children who will benefit most. We have already started to design and deliver funded school-age childcare services in targeted communities across Scotland as part of our commitment to building a system of school-age childcare and to fund it for those on lowest incomes.

**Sue Webber:** Last week's United Kingdom budget certainly caught out leadership hopeful Humza Yousaf, who tried to pass off a plan to give 22 hours of free childcare a week to one and two-year-olds as a new announcement. In fact, that promise was made by the Scottish National Party before the 2021 Holyrood election. That was two years ago, and the SNP is no closer to honouring that pledge, while the UK Government will start rolling out free childcare in April next year. Will the minister commit to using the extra funding from the UK budget to match and accelerate the UK Government's childcare offer for nine-month to two-year-olds?

**Clare Haughey:** As I said in my initial answer, we are progressing our plans to expand the childcare offer in Scotland to one and two-year-olds starting in this parliamentary session with the children who will benefit most, and it was good to see that the UK Government has finally caught up with the importance of investing in childcare, which is critically important to children and families and essential to our economy.

Ministers will look carefully at what consequential funding is available to Scotland as a result of the budget. My understanding is that it will be very limited—only around £20 million. Of course, it will be for the new First Minister to set out details of their plans for any further investment in childcare in this parliamentary session.

**Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** As the minister says, provision in Scotland is currently way ahead of anything that the UK Government provides in terms of childcare and we know where to look for instruction and example when it comes to childcare: independent states such as Denmark, which have the levers to fully provide for their childcare. Does the minister look forward as I do to the day when Scotland's children can benefit from the investment and progressive policies of an independent Scottish Government?

**Clare Haughey:** Yes, and, as Joe FitzPatrick says, Scotland already has the most generous childcare offer anywhere in the UK, and we believe that all children should be entitled to high-quality funded early learning and childcare regardless of the working status of their parents or carers. Under UK Government plans, a child's access to funded childcare will depend on the working status of their parent or carer.

Of course, in an independent Scotland, the Scottish Government would have access to the full range of levers through tax and welfare assistance to give children the best possible start in life and plan for their needs holistically.

### Schools (Highlands and Islands)

**6. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many school pupils in the Highlands and Islands are currently being taught in schools that are not of a "good" or "satisfactory" suitability. (S6O-02050)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** Statistics on the suitability ratings of the school estate are collected on a local authority basis. Across the five local authorities that make up the bulk of the Highlands and Islands, a total of 11,989 pupils are in schools that are not of a good or satisfactory suitability.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** The cabinet secretary will be aware that there are 64 primary schools across the Highland Council area that are in poor condition. I have been contacted about one school in that category—Dunvegan primary school, on Skye—in relation to which there are concerns over damp, mould and regular flooding, as well as a number of other conditions.

With fewer than one in five primary schools being ranked in good condition, it may come as no surprise to the cabinet secretary that the Highlands have the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy across the whole of Scotland. As the Scottish Government continues to squeeze council budgets across Scotland, can the cabinet secretary say when primary school pupils in the Highlands will be able to be taught in safe school buildings that help, rather than risk hindering, their learning?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** It is important to recognise the work that this Government has already done on the learning estate. We have seen the learning estate investment programme, for example, which follows on from the successful £1.8 billion schools for the future programme, which delivered 117 new or refurbished schools. Of course, 37 projects have already been announced through phases 1 and 2 of that LEIP programme, including in the Highlands and Islands—for example, the Tain three-to-18 campus, Broadford primary school and Nairn academy. Those are important investments that are being taken forward in the school estate, and I am delighted that the Scottish Government can support local authorities in doing so.

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Last month, ambitious plans for a new

school and community facilities in Broadford went on display for the first time. Along with a replacement Nairn academy and a campus for Tain, that represents key investment in my region. Will the cabinet secretary give an update on the status of those projects and set out what improvements will be delivered through that investment in the education of young people in the Highlands and Islands?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** The Tain three-to-18 campus is currently in construction and is due to open to pupils in early 2025. Both Nairn academy and Broadford primary school are in the development phase, with designs progressing. I was delighted to visit Broadford in October of last year to speak to the teachers and young people there and share their excitement and enthusiasm for the new school that is now being developed.

### Free School Meals Eligibility (Income Threshold)

**7. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to increasing the income threshold for free school meal eligibility for families not currently covered by any free school meal entitlement. (S6O-02051)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** All primary school pupils in primaries 1 to 5, and eligible pupils in primary 6 through to secondary 6, can benefit from free meals in Scotland. That is the most generous provision anywhere in the United Kingdom, saving parents £400 per eligible child per year.

In December, we announced additional investment to fund the expansion of free school meals to primary school pupils in receipt of the Scottish child payment, as the next step towards universal provision for all primary school children.

**Carol Mochan:** We know from the last update that just over two thirds of those eligible for free school meals took them up. We also know that the Scottish Government has control over eligibility thresholds and could increase that further.

Free school meals are a flagship policy of this Government, but a third of those who are eligible are not using them, while children from low-income families are still going hungry during the school day, with Aberlour reporting that thousands of ineligible families have now accrued school meal debt.

Will the cabinet secretary therefore consider increasing the eligibility threshold beyond the already promised extension to P6 and P7 in order to tackle hunger and support low-income families in the South Scotland region and beyond?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** There is, of course, an important role for councils in encouraging those within their schools to recognise the current eligibility settings and in encouraging take-up. We are making progress in our provision of free school meals.

We recognise that a number of local authorities are facing challenges in planning for that substantial expansion of free school meals. That is exactly why we have seen provision in the Scottish Government budget for 2023-24 for not only revenue funding but capital funding to support that.

Of course, that is not the only thing that the Scottish Government is doing to support families on low incomes who are struggling during the cost of living crisis. I point to the £3 billion that we provide through a range of measures that help to mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis, including the very important Scottish child payment.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A couple of members wish to ask supplementaries, which will need to be brief.

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** We already have the most generous provision of free school meals anywhere in the UK. Of course, we would like to go further, and we would do so but for the fiscal constraints of devolution—a situation that Labour endorses. Will the cabinet secretary set out how many children will benefit from the recent additional investment that will expand free school meals to all primary 6 and 7 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Modelling carried out by the Scottish Government estimates that around 28,000 children will be able to benefit from our additional investment to expand free school meals to primary 6 and 7 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Has the cabinet secretary given consideration to breakfasts when giving out free school meals? We know that the education establishment is the key battleground in tackling health inequalities, and perhaps tying that up with activities such as sport, art, music and drama at the same time would encourage children to come to school early.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Another aspect that we are working on, and which addresses that issue, is our wraparound childcare provision. It is important that we ensure that we provide not only breakfast but adequate childcare, which will not only assist that child or young person but also perhaps help their family to get into employment.

I take Brian Whittle's other point on the importance of the provision of sport and of encouraging young people to exercise, and I recognise his continuing commitment to that.

### **Developing the Young Workforce (Fife)**

**8. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the developing the young workforce programme in Fife. (S6O-02052)

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** DYW Fife successfully piloted the implementation of DYW school co-ordinators and to date has signed up 19 employers to the young persons guarantee. Between April and December 2022, it reported around 12,000 interactions between employers and young people. A recent example of those was that 120 high school pupils from Fife took part in a traditional trades skills day.

The Scottish Government values the impressive work of DYW Fife and the DYW network in helping young people to achieve positive post-school destinations. In Fife, 94.8 per cent of school leavers in 2021-22 were in positive destinations such as work, training or further study three months after the end of the school year. That is up from the figure of 93.9 per cent in 2020-21 and is the highest figure since 2009-10.

**Annabelle Ewing:** I welcome the progress that is evidently being made. However, will the minister advise what steps are being taken actively to encourage more businesses in Fife to get involved in the programme and to stay involved, so that young people in my Cowdenbeath constituency have the best possible life chances?

**Neil Bibby:** That is part of the core purpose of our DYW regional groups, which is why we continue to fund them to undertake such activity. The schools co-ordinators whose funding we have now supported in all mainstream secondary schools will play an important role in that regard. One really good way to achieve that is to have business-to-business engagement, where those who are already involved in the network engage with others to talk to them about its benefits. In that regard, the Fife regional group will soon hold a session for new employers to hear from existing employers about the benefits of engaging with young people and to share best practice. I encourage Ms Ewing to ask businesses in her area to sign up and take part.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I thank members and ministers for their co-operation in getting through so many portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause while ministers change seats before we move to the next item of business.

## **Employment Support for Veterans and their Families**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08332, in the name of Keith Brown, on employment support for veterans and their families. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:58

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown):** I am delighted to open the debate on employment support for veterans and their families—particularly because, in the past hour or so, I had the opportunity to meet members of my old unit, 45 Commando, who came to Parliament at the request of Graeme Dey. I heard their concerns and questions about the role of the Scottish Government in the matter.

Members will know that the Scottish Government remains committed to improving support for our veterans and their families and, crucially, to ensuring that they face no disadvantage as a result of their service. We also aim to ensure that Scotland is their destination of choice following that service.

We take a whole-of-Government approach to supporting our veterans and armed forces communities across a number of policy areas including health, housing, employability and skills. We work together closely to improve and refine the support that is on offer to veterans and their families. I welcome the opportunity to lead the debate and to provide members with details of the work that is being undertaken to support veterans and their families—particularly in relation to their employment and skills.

Veterans and their families make a huge contribution to our local communities and to society, including through the vital experience and skills that they bring to the workforce. We want to maximise opportunities for them to do just that, as well as trying to address barriers that prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

As members including Edward Mountain will know, in the past, the families of members of the armed forces have not really been at the forefront of thinking among the armed forces community, but they are crucial to the good morale of those who serve in the forces. Why should they suffer in terms of employment prospects because a member of their family—usually a spouse—is a member of the armed forces?

I will mention some of the employability services that benefit our veterans and their families. For our part, we remain committed to working with

stakeholders, communities and service users to design and deliver an employability system that is person centred and treats people with fairness, dignity and respect. With regard to the group that I have just mentioned—the families of armed forces members—it is crucial that the system acknowledges their experience.

It is disturbing to think that, in many recent years, nurses, teachers and, potentially, doctors have not been properly used or given proper opportunities to benefit Scotland and themselves. We should ensure that we address that.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I totally agree with the point about getting the families and spouses of serving personnel into work or employment. However, in my most recent couple of visits to RAF Lossiemouth, the biggest problem that was highlighted concerned childcare. The real issue that is stopping people getting back into work is not lack of opportunities in the workplace but lack of childcare. Surely, that will have to be addressed as a matter of urgency, too.

**Keith Brown:** The Government has done a great deal in relation to childcare. Of course, some changes have been announced in the UK budget, which might allow for further changes in childcare provision in Scotland. The particular point that Jamie Greene raises about families of members of the armed forces has been raised with me in the past. I have an open mind about what we can do to further improve current provision; we will see in the course of time how the United Kingdom Government's provisions work out and what the implications of the measures are for us, here in Scotland. We take a whole-of-Government approach, which obviously includes childcare.

We also take a "No one left behind" approach to transforming our employability support and our devolved employability service, which is called fair start Scotland. We are delivering support that is flexible and easy to navigate, and which integrates and aligns with other services and is driven by evidence and need.

Jamie Greene mentioned RAF Lossiemouth. There was a case of two people who were leaving the Royal Air Force who, between them, came up with an innovative idea or product that they wanted to sell into the defence market. They stayed in that general area. Too often, there are people whom the taxpayer has paid an awful lot of money to educate and upskill whom we are willing to see being dispersed to the four winds instead of retaining their skills here. I know that the member's point was about childcare, but I stress that we must keep more of those people involved and working in Scotland for the benefit of the Scottish economy.

Our services aim to support those who face the greatest barriers to employment, including people who are experiencing mental health challenges or disabilities. We want to support them to gain and sustain fair employment. I will repeat a point that I have raised before. Notwithstanding the very low unemployment rate—it is down at 3.1 per cent, which I cannot remember having been the case in my adult lifetime—too often in the past, former members of the armed forces who got a job were expected to be grateful for having a job, but the jobs that they get should be commensurate with the experience, abilities and skills that they have developed in their time in the armed forces.

We know that individuals do not access services in isolation, so it is right that we take on the role of joining up services and, essentially, hiding the wiring that is behind them. We are continuing work to strengthen integration and alignment of services including housing, health, justice and others in order to create a more joined-up and effective system, thereby ensuring that everybody in Scotland, including our veterans, is given the opportunity to prosper and achieve their potential.

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The cabinet secretary has acknowledged that we need a joined-up structure. One of the areas that has been identified is the benefits system. His benefit take-up strategy acknowledged that veterans are less likely to access the benefits that they are entitled to. How is that being managed?

**Keith Brown:** Alexander Stewart has raised the issue, so I will mention that a shocking number of members of the armed forces access universal credit. That should simply not be the case. We should pay members of the armed forces enough so that they do not have to access benefits. That is crucial, because universal credit is often a passport to other benefits. If that is the problem to which Alexander Stewart referred, I am certainly willing to have a discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government to see whether we can tear down some barriers. However, members of the armed forces should not have to draw down benefits such as universal credit.

As I said, we are trying as much as we can to do joined-up work on behalf of veterans and their families. We are trying to ensure that we have a holistic wraparound package of support, which can be particularly valuable to people who are leaving the armed forces. Our key worker approach can respond to the need for more intensive health support and advice.

Also, if we can get the Ministry of Defence to pass on people's health records to a local general practitioner in advance of their leaving the armed forces, that could save so much time and so much

grief for that person. If the GP can be made aware of where the person served and their health history, that can nip continuing problems in the bud. However, all the factors need to work effectively in tandem for there to be an effective transition, and our “No one left behind” approach holds the importance of that at its core.

Military leavers can also access support through our devolved national employability service, fair start Scotland, which offers 12 to 18 months of tailored and person-centred pre-employment support, along with up to 12 months of in-work support for individuals and their employers. The support that is offered includes access to workshops and guidance on utilising the transferable skills that veterans have gained during their service, thereby helping them to identify their strengths and potential career routes.

That is crucial because, so often in the past, people have come out of the armed forces not sufficiently aware of their skills. I have heard stories—as we all have, probably—of people saying, “Well, I can run and I can shoot a gun.” However, people learn so much more than that in the armed forces; if they do not understand that, they cannot pass it on to an employer.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Would Keith Brown welcome a better transition from the armed forces’ side, through their giving veterans who are leaving a better understanding of their skills? He spoke about the GP health record handover, which is crucial, but members of the armed forces sometimes struggle to identify the many skills that they have. Are the armed forces themselves not best placed to at least signpost the benefit of those skills in civilian society afterwards?

**Keith Brown:** I absolutely agree. However, we have to work within the powers that we have. I hope that this will come up during the debate: we have developed a Scottish Credits and Qualifications Framework tool that allows civilian employers to understand, for example, what a particular armed forces training course involves and, crucially, allows veterans to articulate that in a way that is understood by civilian employers. However, I absolutely agree that, whether on health, employability or housing, the armed forces should be doing more while people are serving.

I am pleased to confirm that we have extended provision of fair start Scotland for another 12 months, which means that people can continue to be referred to that support until 31 March next year. During these times of financial uncertainty, especially for the most vulnerable people in society it is more important than ever that we ensure that people have access to the services and support that they need, so I know that the announcement will be welcomed.

It is also true to say that we are, despite the fact that most people transition successfully, all too aware of the challenges that some veterans face. Sometimes, we hear of people’s difficulties in finding suitable and enduring employment, or we hear that their experience and qualifications are not adequately understood and appreciated. That was the burden of my answer to Martin Whitfield’s question.

I am pleased that the tool that I mentioned was launched earlier this month. I am proud to say that the Scottish Government has provided funding for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework partnership’s new military skills and qualifications discovery tool—which is quite a mouthful. Much of that work was carried out by my predecessor, Graeme Dey, during his time as Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans. It helps employers and educational institutions to understand the range of skills and expertise that people who leave the armed forces have to offer.

It is also worth highlighting that the timing of the tool’s launch could not have been better. Across the country, skills shortages continue in many sectors, and many employers are starting to realise that there could be a huge untapped resource in service leavers and veterans, and that that diverse group, with its wide range of skills, could help to address some of the shortages. The tool can help both veterans and employers to understand the contribution that they can make.

Our national strategy for economic transformation, “Delivering Economic Prosperity”, sets out our aim to

“ensure that people have the skills they need at every stage of life to have rewarding careers”.

People can—most do—leave the armed forces at a relatively young age, with another career ahead of them. Service leavers and veterans can and, indeed, must be part of that ambition, if we are to succeed.

We need to use existing talent in Scotland, but we also need to grow the working-age population. As part of that, we will implement a focused talent attraction programme, including targeted interventions, that is supported by the minister-chaired industry advisory group, to attract key skills and talent from the rest of the UK. That will include working with people who support the transition to civilian life to encourage individuals to make Scotland their home as they leave the military. New jobs that are emerging as a result of our transition to net zero will need new thinking, and we know that many existing jobs will require new and enhanced skill sets.

The Scottish Government is committed to increasing the number of veterans whom it employs, and we continue to explore a number of

ways to achieve that, including through the going forward into employment programme. We had a stand at last year's Career Transition Partnership careers fair, where we had the opportunity to engage directly with armed forces personnel. I should say that every MSP in the chamber can do the same as I do for my annual job fair, by ensuring that the armed forces are present and are able to offer opportunities to young people and others in their area.

That commitment is why, in late 2020, the Scottish and Welsh Governments jointly funded Business in the Community to deliver a refresh of the "Capitalising On Military Talent: Everything You Need To Know About Employing Armed Forces Veterans" toolkit to include information for employers on the benefits—to go back to a point that was raised earlier—of employing military people's family members. That toolkit seeks to increase employers' knowledge of how to employ partners successfully, and lets them know about the particular pressures that a spouse, for example, of someone who is serving in the military might face and how they can continue to participate and progress in the workforce.

We remain committed to contributing to the Forces Families Jobs website, on which we provide links to adverts for Scottish Government jobs. We are also committed to helping veterans to gain employment in the Scottish Government, and we have a proud track record on armed forces reservists working in the civil service.

Earlier this month, we launched our working with the business community campaign to help employers to understand the benefits that veterans bring to the workplace. In the past, we have had help directly from the Prince of Wales, now the King, whom I approached personally. We certainly hope to continue that partnership in order to ensure that, by using his influence with some very large employers, we can encourage employers to take on more former members of the armed forces.

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

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, can I check whether you moved your motion?

**Keith Brown:** I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that it continues to make to Scotland; recognises the challenges that some

veterans can face when transitioning out of the military, particularly in relation to employment; notes the work of the Scottish Government to address these issues and improve the employment prospects of veterans and their families; understands that poor mental and physical health may exacerbate barriers to employment for some veterans, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with other devolved administrations and the UK Government, to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to employability, healthcare and other services across Scotland.

15:12

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am grateful that the cabinet secretary decided to move his motion, so that I can move my amendment to it as part of the debate.

I thank the cabinet secretary for using Scottish Government time to bring the debate to the chamber. Although the cabinet secretary and I have many differences, I think that we share the belief that we served in the best parts of the armed forces in the world.

I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has listened to calls from members to hold separate debates on remembrance and on support for services in our armed forces community. The subjects are interlinked, but they are both distinct in their own right and merit their own separate debates—long may that continue.

I pay tribute to our armed forces community for everything that they do for this country. They contribute not only on the front line but sometimes close to home, as we saw during the pandemic. That is why I believe that local authorities should always celebrate armed forces day—something that, I note with sadness, Highland Council has forgotten to do for a while; I will raise the matter with it.

We must remember that a lot of the good that our armed forces do is hidden and goes unnoticed. We should never forget, for example, the very strong ties that bases develop with their local communities. We have only to look at RAF Lossiemouth, which hosts activities such as the local community amateur dramatics club, and at the fact that it was prepared to shift its fence to allow the establishment of a medical practice. RAF Kinloss also plays a large part in the local communities by promoting good causes. We should also never forget that the army at Fort George provides training facilities for the best football club in Scotland: Inverness Caledonian Thistle. Those are the hidden contributions that embed our armed forces into their communities.

Our servicemen are always here for us, so we should make sure that we support them in return. As we should never forget, they are prepared to

give their all for our freedom, so it is only right that we are prepared to support our veterans when it comes to health, housing and employment. After all, that is only a small price to pay, and it is worth every penny.

That is why I welcome the combined approach that has been taken by the UK Government and the three devolved Governments to create a joint strategy for our veterans. That collective effort deserves praise and shows how working together can bring about serious progress. We have reached the halfway point of that 10-year strategy, so now is a good time to reflect on its achievements.

In recent years, we have seen the promotion of modern apprenticeships to early service leavers, providing them with vital new skills and career opportunities; the tackling of disadvantages that veterans and families face when they require social housing; and more investment in the Scottish veterans fund, which is crucial for charities that deliver support to our armed service personnel. Credit must be given to the Scottish Government for the part that it has played. All Governments have played a part in that work, and all areas of the work have progressed well. The UK Government has introduced relief on national insurance contributions for employers who take on veterans in their first 12 months post-service. That is good news. The UK Government has also just launched a review of welfare provisions for veterans, to identify any gaps in or duplication of support.

Of course, all those actions are built on the principles of the armed services covenant, which the Scottish Conservatives propose should be enshrined in Scottish law. Doing so would be right, because it would enhance the support that is given to veterans and their families, whether it relates to access to education, securing a home, building a new career or receiving the right healthcare. There is always much more that can be done, and that is what we should strive to do. That point was made to me recently when I met the Scottish veterans commissioner.

Homelessness remains a huge challenge. The latest figures show that 640 veterans across Scotland have been assessed as homeless, which is truly shameful. No one should be without a home, especially those who have been prepared to sacrifice everything to protect our country. I am encouraged that the UK Government is delivering a further £8.5 million of funding to end veterans' homelessness in England in 2023. I would like the Scottish Government to make a similarly strong commitment, because I am not convinced that the refreshed veterans strategy goes far enough in that area.

**Keith Brown:** Can Edward Mountain state the number of veterans who are homeless as a proportion of the general population? His speech is very much like a UK Government speech. Should the work that the UK Government is doing in relation to veterans result in consequentials coming to Scotland for that work? After all, the work is being done. In this Parliament, we have no statutory responsibility for veterans, so we choose to spend the money that we spend. Should we not also get the consequentials?

**Edward Mountain:** It is typical of a marine to try and ambush me, and he has probably done it quite successfully. I cannot give him the exact number of veterans who are homeless as compared with other members of the public who are homeless. I believe that it is everyone's responsibility to resolve that homelessness, and that any help that the UK Government could give the Scottish Government should be given, because it is vital that we ensure that veterans are not homeless. I am happy to campaign with the cabinet secretary on that point if he wants me to.

**Martin Whitfield:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Edward Mountain:** Presiding Officer, do I have time to take another intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Yes—there is time in hand.

**Martin Whitfield:** This is not meant as a criticism, but surely one homeless veteran in Scotland is one homeless veteran too many.

**Edward Mountain:** The simple answer is yes, because every veteran should have a home or access to home. I believe that it is wrong if they do not, so the answer is, simply, yes.

More work can be done on healthcare provision. I recognise that good work has been achieved in that area, with the creation of veterans champions as points of contact in national health service boards, but it is a difficult issue, and we need to make it better.

Certainly, when I was discharged, my medical records never followed me anywhere, which was not to my advantage. It is not to the advantage of any soldier if their medical records cannot be made available to their general practitioner. There may be times when items on those medical records need to be removed, from a security point of view, but, in principle, medical records should follow veterans.

The champions in NHS boards are supported by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, which, I am pleased to say, was able to extend funding for veterans champions through to March 2024. However, there are big questions about what will happen beyond that date, and it would be good if

in his closing speech the cabinet secretary could say what long-term support the Scottish Government can offer to ensure the continuation of that vital scheme.

Members will be aware that, in previous debates, I have called for an end to the threat of repeated inquiries into historical allegations of abuse. I have raised the case of Dennis Hutchings from my regiment. I will not talk in detail about that today, but I will leave everyone with this simple question: is it right that elderly and terminally-ill veterans are hauled before courts to face legal action over the decisions that they made to defend the country and its freedoms? Are we comfortable that they may well die facing those court trials, as Dennis Hutchings did? I add only that we should never underestimate the dangers that our servicemen and women face, and we should never forget that they are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

For that reason, as a country, we owe them a debt of gratitude, and we should look after them when they have completed their service and as they return to civilian life. That moral obligation falls upon all Governments across the United Kingdom. We are five years into a 10-year strategy, and I believe that there is still work for this Government to do. However, it has made a commendable start and, for that, I give it credit.

I move amendment S6M-08332.1, to insert at end:

“, and notes the importance of the close working relationships between Armed Forces bases and their respective local authorities, allowing for the potential development of improved social, health, educational and employment opportunities for service families and the communities that they live in.”

15:22

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am pleased to open the debate for the Labour Party. I thank the cabinet secretary for the valuable opportunity to speak on a matter that all of us in the chamber must be passionate about: the support of veterans and their families in any way that is practical and necessary. In that spirit, Labour will support the Government's motion this evening.

It is Labour's view that the qualifications, skills and experience of service leavers and veterans, whether reserve or regular, are undervalued and poorly recognised. The Scottish Government has a duty to right that wrong and indignity. Despite the unique impacts that the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have had on many veterans, and the laudable efforts of the Government to make progress, there is much more that needs to be done. Part of the reason why we are having this debate today is to put in place tailored support and to increase the funding to ensure that there is the

capacity in our country to meet the scale of the challenge.

All of us who feel passionately about supporting veterans must do more to promote the proper use of the term, particularly among early service leavers. Often, early service leavers or reservists, or those who have left under difficult circumstances, struggle or are reluctant to identify themselves as veterans. They are entitled to identify themselves as veterans, whether they serve for decades with an illustrious career or undertake simply one day of basic training.

When the Scottish Government announced that it would include a question in the 2022 census about service in the armed forces, that was very welcome, as it will give advocacy organisations and others engaged in those issues tangible data from which to direct their outreach work. I hope that the cabinet secretary might be able to confirm when that data will be available.

I turn to a celebration of the work that is already being done on support for veterans and their families, in employment and in other areas. It is important to acknowledge that much good work is already being done to support ex-service personnel to take up employment in the civilian world. Large organisations such as Barclays, the FDM Group and Network Rail have dedicated programmes for ex-service personnel to support the transition from armed forces working environments to a civilian working environment.

Many other businesses, organisations and local authorities have committed to the armed forces covenant to treat personnel, veterans and their families fairly, and I put on record my admiration for those who signed that important pledge and, most important, who adhere to those values.

Labour supports establishing clear statutory targets to underpin delivery of the armed forces covenant, to provide a central focal point for supporting the anecdotal evidence that we have of good practice.

The organisations undertaking that work know that we, in Parliament, also understand that veterans and their families bring admirable qualities and values that they learned in the armed forces community and apply them to their work, to the benefit of all with whom they come into contact. If they are provided with the right support and transitional training, veterans and their family members are worth their weight in gold and are some of our best citizens.

I recently visited RAF Lossiemouth and the garrison at Leuchars. The big issue that was raised, which Jamie Greene has alluded to, was that supporting those who are still serving to maintain their position with the resilience of their families around them is critical as well. That

requires greater liaison between the Scottish Government, local authorities and the Ministry of Defence to ensure that there is an adequate supply of housing, that childcare facilities are available and that there is support for things such as starting up a business or contact with local professions, so that those families are engaged and integrated into the local community.

In Glasgow, SSAFA and Glasgow City Council jointly support the activity of Glasgow's Helping Heroes. Since 2010, that organisation has provided a holistic service that provides advice and support on matters such as housing and homelessness, employability and training, financial issues, welfare benefits and health issues. I have witnessed at first hand the wonderful work of Rachel Tribble and her team, which is so transformative for service users. It is no exaggeration to say that their work can greatly improve, and even save, lives.

On Tuesday evening, it was my great pleasure to host SSAFA and Glasgow's Helping Heroes here in the Parliament to celebrate their work and consider the evaluation report that was commissioned as part of Glasgow Helping Heroes' 10th anniversary. The report, "GHH: A Vital Service—Enabling our Armed Forces community to thrive", confirms that the social return on investment in such services is enormous and tangible. Researchers from the University of Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian University concluded that, for every £1 that was invested in the Glasgow's Helping Heroes service, the social value of the result was £6.63. That figure reflects the time when Covid-19 restrictions were in place. It is estimated that, in normal times, the return could be as much as £11.68—an amazing return on investment, and something that we should look at as a national exemplar. That is why I ask the cabinet secretary and members across the chamber to support the amendment in my name.

Veterans and their families are not any more likely to struggle with unemployment than are those in wider society, but it is undeniable that they face unique challenges when working on civvy street. The holistic approach to support that is modelled by Glasgow's Helping Heroes ensures that all those who are in our armed forces communities can thrive and continue to make our workplaces more diverse and ever more successful.

I move amendment S6M-08332.2, to insert at end:

“, and calls on the Scottish Government to enhance tailored support services available to veterans by scaling up examples of successful models, such as the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association and Glasgow City Council's Glasgow's Helping Heroes service, to become national standards.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. I advise members that there is quite a bit of time in hand, should they wish to make additional points or take interventions.

15:27

**Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** It is rare indeed, Presiding Officer, to be encouraged to avoid brevity.

As Edward Mountain did, I warmly welcome today's debate. As a Parliament, we have established a pattern of having general debates about the armed forces and veterans community and its needs. We expand on those perhaps only when we consider the content of occasional reports by the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, so having the chance to drill down into a particular and key aspect of all this is quite useful.

I speak from a deeply personal perspective because, two years on from the end of my tenure as veterans minister, I retain a keen interest in all matters relating to the armed forces and veterans community.

I very much look forward to interrogating the progress that has been made regarding the employment of the 2,000 or so serving personnel who leave the military and settle in Scotland each year, not to mention their families. That progress is entirely down to partnership working between local and national Government, the public and private sectors and our veterans charities. However, let us be candid: progress in their employment is not just about doing right by those groups. If we are honest, we know that it is also about exploiting a talent source that none of us can afford to ignore. I am all for acknowledging publicly the employers that make a virtue of recruiting from the armed forces community, but we should be clear that they do so not out of altruism but because they recognise that they are sourcing from a skilled and reliable employment pool.

A few years ago, BT conducted a survey of its workforce. It looked at the attributes of the veterans cohort as set against those of the wider workforce. It was discovered that the former had a 40 per cent better attendance record. Well done to the firms and organisations that have a track record in this area, but let us see their involvement for what it is: a reflection of the employability of the individuals who are being produced by the services. What we need is more businesses and organisations in the public and private sectors evangelising on the benefits of hiring from the forces. I know that the Scottish Government is actively encouraging that.

Having said all that, let me pay tribute to the employers who have looked beyond those who are leaving the services and sought to provide

employment opportunities to spouses and partners of serving personnel. Barclays is a fine example of such employers. It can be extremely difficult for those spouses and partners to find worthwhile jobs when they have had to leave behind family support networks and have childcare responsibilities to consider.

Of all the visits that I made during my tenure as veterans minister, few left as lasting an impression as those that involved meeting the partners and spouses of serving personnel, be that at Faslane or the self-help Can Do hub at Leuchars. If we owe our servicemen and servicewomen every assistance to secure gainful employment when they move on, our obligation to their spouses and partners while they remain in service is no less.

That is why I very much welcome the continuing positive relationship between the Scottish Government and the Forces Families Federation and the on-going involvement with the Forces Families Jobs website. The federation, as many of us here will know, does sterling work in promoting and advocating for the people it represents.

I am pleased to note the way in which a particular Scottish Government initiative has morphed since 2018. That concerns work designed to make it easier for employers and educational institutions to recognise the skills and expertise of those leaving the forces. Initially, that took the form of giving military—specifically infantry—qualifications a civilian translation. That served those affected well, but a more holistic approach has been developed. We now have the SCQF military skills and qualification discovery tool, which the cabinet secretary referred to earlier, and I think that I am right in saying that it now covers 45 job roles, all told.

In relation to Martin Whitfield's earlier question, I should acknowledge the clear progress that has been made by the Army, for example, on career development work and on furnishing its personnel with formal qualifications that will aid them when it comes to finding work when they leave. The Army has, historically, been lax in that regard, perhaps fearful that providing such qualifications would encourage people to leave at a time when retention and recruitment remains a very big issue. However, on a recent visit to Leuchars Station—the same one that Paul Sweeney made—I was very heartened to hear directly from serving personnel about the qualification opportunities and, indeed, the encouragement that they were receiving to go for those qualifications.

Returning to the subject of morphing, I note that the veterans employability strategic group has also undergone considerable change since the cabinet secretary established it in 2017. Not the least significant change was the adoption of a new co-chair approach, which involved the appointment of

Sue Bomphray, who was then a human resources director at Barclays. As Keith Brown's successor, I made that appointment, having been hugely impressed by the work that Sue had led at Barclays on employing veterans and, just as important, their spouses. The ambition was to get more private sector employers involved, not just those from the public and third sectors. I hope that, in his closing remarks, the cabinet secretary might be able to tell us about the progress that the VESG has led. Otherwise, I am going to regret highlighting my role in the changes that I have noted.

One of the limited number of positives to come out of the pandemic was that the Scottish Government, as an institution, saw up close just how multiskilled our armed forces are. I well recall meeting a group of army logistics experts operating out of St Andrews House who had been drafted in to support the NHS in the distribution of key items. When chatting to the team, I encouraged them not to compromise on their "can do" attitude and approach when they went out into the field, which they did not. The impression that they left has been tangible. For example, I understand that, since 2021, about 50 veterans have joined the Government's staff ranks. That is welcome, and there is clearly scope to build on it, but the more that cohort's talents are experienced at first hand, the more, I suspect, it will be seen as an employment pool worthy of fishing in.

That also goes for employers way beyond the Scottish Government, so I am pleased to see the Government fulfilling its programme for government commitment to improve employment opportunities for serving personnel when their time in the forces ends, with a particular focus on the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, because it is not just large companies and organisations that would benefit from employing those individuals.

We have made progress on improving the employment offering for spouses of serving personnel and veterans, but there is more to do.

15:34

**Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** I begin by echoing the words of my colleague Edward Mountain and the cabinet secretary about the sacrifices made by veterans and their families and by recognising their service. Our brave servicemen and servicewomen make immense sacrifices to keep our country safe and secure. They serve our nation with honour and distinction, and it is our duty to ensure that they are provided with the best possible support upon their return to civilian life. We owe them a debt that can never be repaid in full.

We must make every effort to give the 250,000 veterans who live in Scotland all the support that they deserve. A key area of support relates to employment, as many veterans struggle to find work when they leave the armed forces, despite having a wealth of skills and experience. That is especially true for those who have been injured—whether physically or mentally—in the line of duty. Since 2021, the UK Government has granted employers 12 months' relief on national insurance contributions when they take on new veterans. I welcome the work between the UK and Scottish Governments in the area of employment.

The joint strategy for our veterans, which was launched in 2018, is a great example of what can be achieved when both of Scotland's Governments work together constructively on things that really matter. As Chris Hughes of Veterans Scotland said at the time,

"It was particularly refreshing to see the governments across the United Kingdom come together to take collective ownership of the strategy and put the needs of the veterans community before party politics, an achievement that has been widely applauded by stakeholders."

The joint strategy will run for 10 years. It has already been effective, although, as we all acknowledge, we must continue to update and refresh it as new evidence is gathered. In that light, it was positive to see the cabinet secretary update the action plan for veterans last August—I expect that he will keep it under continual review.

The strategy has several strands, and one of the key themes is supporting veterans into employment and furthering the career opportunities that are available to them. The Scottish and UK Governments have progressed that key aim by working in collaboration where possible.

A strong and positive example has been set by Skills Development Scotland's collaboration with the MOD, which supports career transitions and increases career guidance for armed services personnel who are entering their resettlement period. I am keen to see the Scottish and UK Governments explore other areas in which they can work together, especially in respect of employment opportunities. Indeed, I would support any initiatives that involve further collaboration of that nature.

In my parliamentary region of West Scotland, good examples exist of projects that bring together public sector organisations that seek to help veterans. I refer to a joint initiative between the University of the West of Scotland, NHS Lanarkshire and St John and Red Cross Defence Medical Welfare Service, which is a charity that provides medical welfare to people who operate on the front line, whether that be in the military, the police service or the health service. That initiative

was awarded a grant to examine how welfare support and technology can benefit isolated veterans.

The UK Government recently announced that the project would share funding of £5 million with 22 other projects—all with the goal of driving forward cutting-edge treatments and technologies to support veterans' healthcare. The projects have been launched to help the physical and mental health of veterans. It is a great achievement for the University of the West of Scotland to gain funding for that kind of innovative research. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the university's main Paisley campus to speak with some impressive young journalism students, which made me feel very old indeed.

It was encouraging, too, to see the UK Government launch, at the beginning of this month, a review into welfare provision for veterans. The review seeks to identify gaps in support in order to better align the workings of a range of support services with the needs of the veteran community, and it aims to enhance the quality of the services that veterans receive. I look forward to the outcome of the review, which I am confident will improve the current system for veterans and their families.

My party has proposed the introduction of a new top-up benefit to support veterans in receipt of universal credit, using the devolved welfare powers that the Scottish Parliament now has. We believe that that benefit should be provided alongside an armed forces and veterans bill, which should further enshrine the voluntary armed forces covenant into law and guarantee access to a variety of key services.

Scotland has long played a pivotal and proud role in UK military history. As I have said, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our servicemen and servicewomen. Saying that is the easy part, but our gratitude must extend beyond warm words into firm actions, some of which I have touched on. It is commendable that the UK and Scottish Governments are focused on working together to uphold our commitment to veterans, and I hope to see that continue. I am pleased to support the Government's motion and the amendment in the name of Edward Mountain.

15:40

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I am privileged to have in my constituency Glencorse barracks, in Penicuik, which is the home of 2 Scots, the second battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. Across the road and up the hill from that, there are army homes in Milton Bridge. I have visited both and, in due course, I will refer to the

meeting that I had with the wives and partners and will speak about the issues that they face. I agree with the cabinet secretary that their support is essential in sustaining the morale of our service personnel.

The first, though obvious, observation to make is that the term “veterans” embraces many different people: those who have had short service careers; those who are long serving; those who have been on the front line in places of conflict and combat, peacekeeping; and those who have not. There are those who live alone and others who live with parents or partners and have parental responsibilities. There are those who have suffered life-changing injuries and those with combat stress. That list is not exhaustive; therefore, one size does not fit all, but there are common experiences.

First, I will touch on the issue of data, which is not a boring topic but is fundamental to identifying the breadth of the challenges and meeting them. I note that, for the first time, in the Scottish 2022 census, there was a question about previous experience in the armed forces. I understand that that information has yet to be published, but it will be very useful. We know that our servicemen and servicewomen face particular challenges as they re-enter the civilian community. Living and working in a culture of conformity, structure, obedience, rank and service tours that take them away for months on end, and where access to housing and healthcare is provided while income is guaranteed, all contrasts starkly with life in a civilian community.

They go from tours that take them away from family, partners and friends to the world of the civilian, in which decisions and choices that perhaps were previously made for them now have to be made by them. They are home most of the time; they have to make their own health provision, find work and fit in. The comradeship that came with the job may be distant, and they have to make new social ties. That is not just hard for them, it is often very hard for their families. Their partner or wife will have run a household without them for months on end, making all the day-to-day decisions, even when they were on leave. There have to be adjustments all round—that is true for any children, too. They have to fit back into a domestic household that functioned quite well without them. If they have returned from some horror overseas, that has to be factored in.

**Graeme Dey:** Christine Grahame has made some valid points. Does she recognise that one of the most challenged cohorts is single early service leavers? I would contend that that is a growing issue for us to address.

**Christine Grahame:** Indeed. I tried to cover most things, but my list was not exhaustive.

Of course, funding to provide routes to adjustment helps, as well as person-to-person support. I note that, between 2020 and 2023, £750,000 was allocated to support work in health, wellbeing and quality of life, which has been expanded to include all veterans over 60 instead of 65.

I will dedicate the rest of my speaking time to veterans’ partners and families—especially those in which there are children. After all, wherever a father, mother or partner goes, children often have to follow, which means changing homes and schools and adapting to yet another community. I have to say, though, that Penicuik—both the schools and the community at large—has welcomed those stationed at Glencorse. Indeed, when the barracks was threatened with closure by the MOD, the community rallied round to save it, and it has been reprieved.

It is difficult for a wife or partner to hold down a career when they are on the move. Children, too, may find that, within months of settling in one school, they are off to another. When I met wives and partners of servicemen from Glencorse, I was made very aware of the restrictions on their lives—which, to be clear, they accept without complaint. They also support each other, especially when a partner is being sent on a long tour to a difficult part of the world. Yet, apart from setting up online businesses, the mobility of their partners prevented them, in many ways, from following careers.

That must mean that, eventually, when their armed forces partners end their final tour of duty, even more huge adjustments have to be made all round. On discharge, a home has to be found and a GP registered with. I note the reference that the cabinet secretary and Edward Mountain made to the importance of the MOD ensuring that medical records are transferred promptly. There are also the issues of schools and, not least, employment to be dealt with. All of that must be done while two people—let alone any children—have to get used to being with each other 24/7.

For some, that transition simply does not work. There can be marriage and relationship break-ups, with all the fallout that can be predicted. Some turn to alcohol and, indeed, drugs, which, for some, can lead, in time, to homelessness and even imprisonment. Lack of employment can be a major component of that. Veterans have skills that can be carried over into civilian life, which should be utilised. There are staff in the Parliament, especially in security roles, who have a background in military service.

Our veterans make that huge adjustment to civilian life. It is not only essential but just that we help them, given the job that they have done on our behalf, which might have involved seeing

dreadful sights that they will carry with them throughout their lives.

I know that, to an extent, the cabinet secretary has already addressed this, but I ask him to set out, in his summing-up speech, how support is extended to our veterans' immediate family—the parents, the partners, the wives and the children—when that transition becomes a reality, given all the challenges—private, personal and public—that I have touched on, which will undoubtedly follow.

15:46

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** I am proud to speak in this afternoon's debate, which honours our veterans and their families and which seeks to advance their important contribution to communities across our nation. It is an important and necessary debate on employment support for veterans, and I speak in support of my Labour colleague Paul Sweeney's amendment. I agree with much that he, the cabinet secretary and every member who has spoken so far have said.

Over many years, our service personnel have been delivering security for the people of Scotland and the UK at home and overseas. I doubt that any of us would dispute that those who have served our country so well deserve the very best support as they make the transition back into civilian life.

As well as addressing their well-documented healthcare and housing needs, these days, we increasingly need to support veterans into employment opportunities. As Poppyscotland and others have highlighted, most veterans are no longer at retirement age when they leave the armed forces, so ensuring that our armed forces personnel have support and assistance to transition into employment is vital. It is important that that journey is started and enabled as early as possible in the resettlement process—that is important, first and foremost, for the individuals involved, as well as their families.

As we have heard, transitioning to civilian life can be difficult and disorientating for veterans, especially if they are also learning to live with physical or mental injuries. Employment is therefore vital for reintegration and mental health. It provides meaning and a sense of purpose, structure and routine in one's life. Just as important is paying the bills. We must recognise that the current cost of living crisis will be having a particular impact on our veterans.

Veterans have an enormous social and economic contribution to make to our communities, and we have a moral obligation to those who have protected us and our families to ensure that we honour the moral contract that we

have with them and their families during transition and beyond.

Like Russell Findlay, I represent West Scotland, and I am privileged to have in my region many examples of civil society organisations that work to honour and support our veterans. Erskine, Scotland's largest veterans charity, has been caring for veterans across Scotland since 1916. Through its care homes, veterans village and activities centre, Erskine offers a very special blend of dedicated care, compassion and understanding to residents and their families.

I have been proud to visit the organisation on a number of occasions, and I have been incredibly fortunate to meet many of its residents and staff, who are led ably by Ian Cumming. In return, I was delighted to show a group of veterans around the Parliament building and the chamber just a few weeks ago.

Renfrewshire is also home to a remarkable new social enterprise that is blazing a trail for veterans' employability. Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company is a division of Royal British Legion Industries. Its factory is commercially viable and produces signs, panels, and high-quality digital printing while providing opportunities for many, including veterans who are learning to live with an injury or disability. I have seen that enterprise for myself, as I know a number of other members have. It is truly inspiring, and it is a model that I hope can be replicated across industry and across the country. There are other examples of great work being done by organisations, and I commend them all.

However, all is not well. Caring for our veterans cannot be left to civil society alone. If a Government's first duty is to protect its citizens, its next duty must be to protect and honour the men and women who do the protecting. It is unacceptable that many veterans continue to experience difficulty in accessing employment and skills development.

**Keith Brown:** Mr Bibby used the word "duty". For the Scottish Government, that is a largely moral duty, although we have some degree of legal duty in relation to the covenant. If Mr Bibby thinks that we have a legal or statutory duty, is he willing to join Edward Mountain and me in saying to the UK Government that we need the consequential funding to provide further services for veterans?

**Neil Bibby:** I will come to that, and I will be happy to look into the issue of funding. If we have legal duties, there must be funding to go with those.

As Graeme Dey did, we must recognise the role that our armed forces played in the pandemic, while also recognising the significant impact that

the pandemic had on many veterans. It is incumbent upon both the Scottish and UK Governments to ensure that veterans have the support they need. I commend the employability initiatives and other actions set out by the Scottish Government in November last year. However, I note that many employability initiatives are delivered through local employability partnerships at local authority level and that the appalling cuts inflicted upon councils by last month's budget therefore appear to represent a lack of joined-up thinking.

We must consider other practical issues, such as the childcare that Jamie Greene mentioned at the start of the debate. We must also connect our veterans to public transport. On a practical note, the bus stop at Erskine veterans village has been moved too far away for many residents and visitors to comfortably be able to reach it. My constituent James Gillies has raised that issue with me. It highlights the deficiencies in our bus services and the need for people to have not only bus passes but buses on which they can use them. I hope that the bus companies involved will reconsider what is happening there

Meanwhile, over the past 13 years, the UK Government has broken too many of its promises to our veterans, as has been repeatedly highlighted by Johnny Mercer MP. Waiting time targets for veterans' mental health support have been missed, there has been a failure to deliver identity cards to speed up access to vital services, and many former forces personnel report negative experiences when claiming compensation.

The Armed Forces Act 2021 places a legal duty to deliver the armed forces covenant on all manner of public bodies, but many veterans I speak to feel that it lets UK Government ministers off the hook. Scottish Labour, in contrast, supports establishing clear statutory targets to underpin delivery of the armed forces covenant. A future UK Labour Government will fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law and will scrap visa fees for non-UK veterans and their families after four years of service. Labour has also launched a UK-wide listening campaign called veterans' voices.

Above all, we must work with veterans to ensure that they receive the employability and other support that they deserve. By ensuring that at both Scottish and UK Government levels, we will fulfil the sacred moral contract that our society makes with those who serve.

15:54

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I, too, am pleased to speak in this afternoon's debate, which acknowledges the

significant contribution that veterans make on their return to civilian life following service in our military.

Men and women leave the military for different reasons, including injury, ill health, personal circumstances and completion of their service. For many, their circumstances are such that they can consider and embark on a new work life. By virtue of their training, job roles and experiences, many service leavers return with invaluable skills, qualifications and knowledge, including as mechanics, engineers, doctors, plumbers and lawyers. Leavers also have highly developed personal skills in areas such as effective communication, problem solving, team working and leadership, all of which are transferable into new and fulfilling work roles that will benefit not only them and their families but their communities and the local economy.

Underpinning a successful transition are the people who stand beside service leavers—their families, who have also, essentially, served their country. Partners are an important protective factor as they can provide emotional, practical and financial help while service leavers consider their next steps.

However, we know that, for some, transition can be very difficult. Compromised mental and physical health, alcohol use, domestic abuse, personal debt and even grievance are well-documented vulnerability factors that can take their toll at a time of great change. An added vulnerability factor for many is the current cost of living crisis, as members have mentioned. I am pleased that the Scottish Government veterans fund, which has supported a range of fantastic projects for veterans over a number of years, has been doubled this year to ensure that veterans and their families have the support that they need.

The extent to which employment support has developed in recent years is welcome. I am pleased that the veterans employability strategic group now has membership from the private sector. That is an important step in recognising the benefits of employing veterans, not least as we grapple with labour shortages across Scotland.

The energy sector is one of the fastest-growing sectors in our economy and it already offers many employment opportunities that are suited to former and transitioning military personnel. According to Dr Alix Thom, workforce engagement and skills manager for Offshore Energies UK, the energy sector provides highly skilled and well-rewarded employment opportunities. To meet its future commitments, the sector is already working to match industry job profiles with military roles, identifying transferable positions and training and conversion opportunities.

Energy firms are increasingly recognising the benefits of recruiting men and women from the armed forces. Team leadership qualities, organisational skills and technical knowledge are all highly prized by the sector, and career opportunities exist in the fields of engineering, project management, health and safety, and the skilled trades.

In my constituency in the north-east, I regularly speak to energy sector businesses that are actively recruiting a broad range of talent and skills in an extremely competitive labour market, and our veteran community has a strong contribution to make to our Scottish renewables industry. Earlier this week, when I visited the newly-constructed south harbour in my constituency, I heard that the Port of Aberdeen proactively promotes employment opportunities to groups that represent military veterans.

Another sector that is actively recruiting veterans is the cyber space. Cybersecurity is a growing industry, with cyberattacks becoming a growing concern for businesses in all sectors, and Scotland is not exempt from that. The security training, experience and skills that service leavers have make them ideal candidates for a range of cyber and information security roles. There are clear parallels given that cybersecurity requires analysis of threats and vulnerabilities. Veterans live and breathe security, and they may also have personal and professional qualities that lend themselves to such roles.

**Graeme Dey:** The member makes some good points, and I would like to develop her theme about particular talents. Keith Brown and I met people from RM Condor, which is home to 45 Commando group. It has emerged that the talents around health and safety that those people have because of the work that they carry out can translate into civilian life, as can their experience in relation to mental health support, which they have got because of their trauma risk management—TRiM—training. Will the member acknowledge that point?

**Audrey Nicoll:** I absolutely agree with Mr Dey that veterans bring with them not only professional experience but many personal attributes, such as those that he has highlighted.

Some veterans will also have existing security clearances and leave the military with information technology and cybersecurity qualifications that mean that they can literally walk into a new role.

Those are only two examples of sectors that benefit from our veteran community, and I am acutely aware that pathways to employment can still be challenging for many service leavers. I was pleased to hear about the range of employment support that was outlined by the cabinet secretary

earlier. I am proud of Scotland's long tradition of supporting a place for veterans across education, housing, healthcare and employment. However, we all know that there is much more to do.

We owe our veterans a huge debt of gratitude. As such, it is incumbent on us to do everything that we can to ensure that they can access the support, training and education that they need. As a member of a military family, I will certainly do my bit within that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I call Jamie Greene to speak for a generous six minutes.

16:01

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** That is very generous, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I thank the cabinet secretary and all members who have contributed thus far in what I think has been a very good debate. It is not without its politics, but nor should it be—after all, we are in Parliament. It goes without saying that there genuinely is a cross-party sentiment that we owe a great amount of thanks to those who serve our country, those who have served our country and, indeed, those who have made the ultimate sacrifice—not everyone is able to come back and be re-employed or readjust to society, because many do not come home at all.

We also have the great privilege of having among us those who have served. They are represented on two of the front benches, but are also represented among the staff in the Parliament and in many of our constituency and parliamentary offices, where there are people who either have served in the forces or currently serve in the reserves. We owe them all a huge thanks today.

Of course, as we have discussed many times in the chamber, many of us have personal experiences and relationships with the armed forces through friends and family who have served, going as far back as the first and second world wars as well as more recently.

As I was doing some research ahead of today's debate—well, as my staff were doing some research for me, rummaging through the local papers—some interesting anecdotes and stories came up. I will share with the chamber the story of Tommy McVey, a Greenock pilot who shot down an enemy plane in world war 2. His plane was attacked by a German plane and the other pilot, a 24-year-old man, was fatally injured, leaving Tommy to take control of the plane himself. He managed to do so and made it back home. He survived. He got married. He had a wife and kids—in fact, his nephew is a councillor on Inverclyde Council. However, like so many

veterans, he really struggled and carried the weight of that experience with him throughout his life—I think that many veterans do that but do not talk about it.

Of course, those are the wars that occupy our TV channels—the ones that we talk about the most—but not all veterans went to war, and not all veterans who did so were on the front line. Many people who serve do so in places of famine or places of genocide. They perform peacekeeping missions and also work in the aftermath of a huge amount of natural disasters and—as we have learned over the past few years—pandemics. Trauma can actually occur pretty much anywhere. It is met with in many places and in many ways.

I say that because I want to challenge the overused notion of what a veteran is. The stereotype that is often used is someone who is male, war torn, perhaps injured, homeless or suffering from addiction, mental health breakdown or post-traumatic stress disorder and so on. Of course, those issues exist—I will go on to talk about that, too—but I think that anyone who has retired from service and come back into society is a veteran. Any one of those people is a veteran, and many of them go on to have great lives.

Many of them go on to re-employment and opportunities; many of them go on to the private sector, which I will talk about in a second. Many even go back into the forces as reserves, sometimes part time but often full time, going back to use the skills that they developed. They are all veterans, too—so much so that there are estimates of there being around 250,000 veterans in Scotland.

When we brush away the politics, we have heard today that both of Scotland's Governments have been working together constructively—directly on a ministerial level and through the civil service, which is important. They will not always get it right and those relationships are not always perfect, but it is only if the national Governments at both levels as well as local government get involved that we can truly paint a picture of improving outcomes.

I have name checked the UK Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Mr Johnny Mercer, in the chamber before. I should probably also mention his wife, who has often got quite a lot to say. It is important that there are role models and that people have loud voices and are not afraid to use them, even within their parties and Governments. We should have more of that in politics.

**Keith Brown:** Will Jamie Greene take an intervention?

**Jamie Greene:** Yes—in one second, as I want to make a point.

The reason why it is so important is that, since 2001, an estimated 2,000 former soldiers or veterans are believed to have taken their own lives. That is a stark statistic. I wanted to mention it because, although our understanding of mental health and PTSD has improved over the years, those numbers are still depressingly high.

**Keith Brown:** I will quickly intervene on two of the points that Jamie Greene raised.

I heard what he said about the two Governments working together, but I have never known intergovernmental relationships to be as bad as they are now. I have met with every previous secretary of state over the decade that I have been doing this. The current one refuses to meet. I have had people ignoring letters and not meeting me across the board. That is a counterpoint to the fact that, as Jamie Greene said, some good work is being done between the Governments.

The definition of a veteran is someone who has served even for half a day. Martin Whitfield was right when he said that every person who is homeless is one too many. The point that I was making in relation to homelessness, which Jamie Greene mentioned, is that, whether we are talking about homelessness, mental health issues or imprisonment, veterans are not overrepresented in those categories compared to the general population. The horrible notion of their being mad, bad and sad is not true. Many veterans—the majority—successfully transition to civilian life.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you that time back, Mr Greene.

**Jamie Greene:** I appreciate that.

The cabinet secretary makes two very important points, which I would like to reflect on. If it is the case that members of the Scottish Government are struggling to get appropriate communication from their counterparts in the UK Government, Keith Brown is right to raise that. It is also right that we feed that back in any way that we can. I am not a member of the UK Government, but it has a building up the road, and I am very happy to feed that back through any channels that I have. I agree with the cabinet secretary that that is not appropriate or respectful.

The second point was about the issue of overrepresentation of veterans in states of distress, including homelessness. I am not hearing anyone on our benches making the argument that they are overrepresented, but they are there. I think that the estimate was that there were more than 600 homeless veterans last year, and one is too many. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary may not have a statutory duty to look after homeless veterans, but he has a statutory duty to look after homeless people; ultimately, they are

citizens of this country whether or not they are a veteran. It is in that vein that I would like him to reflect on that point.

I could probably go on for another six minutes—there is so much more to say—but the issue of employment is the crux of the debate. The question is not why someone would employ a veteran, but why they would not. That is the point that Graeme Dey made. We are seeing a bit of a brain drain from many of the armed forces, because many people are seeing better terms and conditions in the private sector. Many have been attracted to contractors and private companies—even going to work for those contractors in the bases and on the premises where they once served. They are disappearing out of one end and coming back in at another. There is nothing wrong with that; it is good. It may offer them better opportunities as they move on in the future, but it creates a bit of a struggle in getting people in the door of our armed forces.

We have talked a lot about families and children, which is also an important issue. I will reflect on my visits in relation to that. I have now had a few visits to RAF Lossiemouth and to Faslane, and, when we talk to the families and spouses of serving members of the forces, the big issue that they struggle with is getting local employment that matches their career paths, which they have probably had to put on hold or, in some cases, give up entirely. Someone cannot do the same job, like for like, in Inverness as they could in London, for example.

They are also struggling with childcare, which is a devolved issue. The provision of local childcare might be a matter for local authorities but, when a community has an influx of thousands of people, it creates problems with access to health services, education and childcare. The crux of the Scottish Conservatives' amendment is that we should look at the issue as a whole and ensure that local authorities are a big part of the solution and not a big part of the problem.

I will close my contribution on this note. We are on the right track. I am encouraged by the tone of the debate, but I take on board the cabinet secretary's points on his difficulty in interacting with the UK Government. I hope that the situation will improve. If it does not, I ask him to come and talk to Conservative members here who might be able to help with that if we can. Our veterans deserve nothing less—in fact, they deserve a whole lot more.

16:10

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, acknowledge the importance of our veterans and armed forces and note their contribution to

Scotland and the wider world. I associate myself with Jamie Greene's comments on the wide understanding of what veterans are and the extent of their contribution to the world. As other members have done, I pay my respects to veterans who have been injured or who have lost their lives in conflict or subsequently as a result of the impacts of their work.

Last year, we debated the mental health needs of veterans. At that time, I said that we should look at supporting our veterans more holistically and do more to ensure that they have better access to employment and health services. However, we must also ensure that services are cognisant of the fact that transition from a military career creates many challenges in housing, employment and mental and physical health. Therefore I am glad to see the Government securing a debate on veterans' employment linked to housing, healthcare and multi-organisational support. As the motion suggests, such support for veterans must be co-ordinated and person centred. Only by learning from good practice will we see adequate, widespread support for our veterans. The purpose of Scottish Labour's amendment is to clarify that we should put in place national standards based on well-evidenced research of veterans' needs and outcomes to ensure the best possible quality of life for those leaving active service.

On Tuesday evening, I was honoured to attend an event that was sponsored by my colleague Paul Sweeney, which other members also attended. The Glasgow's helping heroes model provides an easily accessible, needs-led service. Services come together around housing, finance, physical and mental health, and other forms of support that individuals can access at a time that is right for them. As we have heard, the report entitled "GHH: A Vital Service—Enabling our Armed Forces community to thrive" makes important reading, and I encourage members to find it online. The personal stories that are detailed in the report show us the reality of difficult transitions in which people often feel alone, with a sense of confusion about where to turn, and sometimes find themselves unable to ask for help. The research rightly recognised the importance of having co-ordinated services such as GHH in supporting not only individuals but members of the wider community, who can benefit from the existence of such services in their area and can direct people at the time that is right for them.

Every veteran is owed the right support to ensure that they are able to realise their potential and live full and successful lives after service. All members who have contributed to the debate have demonstrated that that is what we want. However, evidence shows that, as happens in many walks of life, social inequality is a predetermining factor in the employment

prospects of ex-military service people. Some researchers have suggested that, although high-ranking officers and soldiers are offered similar transition resources, those from the lower ranks find that their opportunities are underpinned by economic, social and structural inequality that has significant effects on transitional employment outcomes.

We must acknowledge that, to ensure that transitional needs are met in key areas such as housing, health and finance, veterans—particularly those from poorer social economic backgrounds—need space to develop their skills and make decisions about their future employment. It is clear to me from having spoken with ex-servicemen and women recently that pathways to employment can be difficult and that it is essential to have an extra layer of advice services, such as under the GHH model.

**Paul Sweeney:** Will my friend recognise that one of the key aspects of the Glasgow's helping heroes service that is so powerful is that it is veterans advising veterans, and that their lived experience is often critical? Often, those who are employed and still serving in the armed forces who advise people who are about to leave do not have the same insights as people who have been through the process already.

**Carol Mochan:** Yes, it was very clear—and it was powerfully demonstrated in one of the short videos that were shown at the event that I attended—that people's ability to support one another once they are out in civilian life is invaluable.

I was pleased to attend a local Ayrshire British Legion group breakfast recently. I attended with local Labour councillor colleagues, and I was grateful to members of the British Legion group for explaining to me the transition needs of those returning from active service to civilian life, particularly in a more rural area such as East Ayrshire and South Scotland. I found the stories from family members very revealing, and the work with the individual and their wider support circle struck me as extremely important.

Like other MSPs, I have worked alongside members of our armed forces community during campaigns and outreach down the years. In that time, I have been struck by the deep sense of commitment and dedication that they have, not only to their own home but to the wider community that they live in. We need to capture that.

Many of the charities and community groups that we all work with on a daily basis have people with a forces background at their heart, using the skills that they have learned to better improve the place that they call home. That includes groups such as Veterans First Point Ayrshire and Arran,

which provides first-class employment and housing support services, as well as a comfortable environment where those with military backgrounds can share their experiences, which is a very important aspect.

If we can reflect a sense of that commitment today and help to deliver veterans the level of service that they deserve—and I think that the motion and our amendment can achieve that—we will put ourselves on a path towards paying our veterans back, at least in some form, for the service that they have given to our country.

16:17

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** My constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands has three Army bases within its boundaries, including Dreghorn, Redford infantry barracks and Redford cavalry barracks. In addition, we have Glencorse to the east and to the north the former Army headquarters at Craigiehall, which is currently lying empty.

I have visited the barracks in my constituency on a number of occasions, the most recent one being only a couple of weeks ago, when I met Aramark trainees and apprentices providing hospitality and housekeeping services at Dreghorn barracks. Many of its employees are family members of serving Army personnel, who ensure that Army families have a better standard of living until the time comes for them to transition into civilian life. It is no surprise that companies such as Aramark employ Army family members.

It was found in a recent report by the Army Families Federation, "Military spousal/partner employment", that

"30% of employers said that military spouse/partners show resilience and determination and 22% said that they are willing to go the extra mile in their work."

It is estimated that there are 100,000 veterans of working age, with their families, living in Scotland. The average age of those leaving the Army is 29. As a result, they will spend more of their life in civilian employment than in Army life. These are highly trained individuals, who have transferable skills that are often sought after by employers, not only in Edinburgh but across Scotland.

The Scottish Government's programme for government committed to securing improved opportunities for veterans, and it accepted the recommendations within the Scottish veterans commissioner's reports on employment, skills and learning, and on housing. That includes ensuring easier access to further learning and training, resulting in the Scottish Government providing additional funds to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership to develop a

skills recognition tool for use on the My World of Work website. That alignment of existing military skills and civilian qualifications should give veterans the best chance to compete for jobs when settling in Scotland.

Improved connections to the business community by the veterans employability strategic group has resulted in membership, for the first time, from private sector employers. That presents an important step towards bridging the gap between public sector policy, service delivery partners and employers—to the improved understanding of the benefit of employing veterans and to ensuring that they find suitable employment. It should also help to reach out to small and medium-sized companies as potential employers or as mentors to veterans who want to start their own business.

The Forces Families Jobs website is a central portal for employment and training opportunities for military spouses and family members. It was launched in 2019. All employers who advertise on that website have signed the armed forces covenant, and a profile is provided for each to explain their commitment to being forces family friendly. The Scottish Government continues to work with Forces Families Jobs to signpost vacancies by directing people to Work For Scotland, the Government's own job website. In addition, large public employers, from the NHS to Police Scotland, have designated websites or recruitment teams to support the recruitment of veterans.

Many soldiers will face other challenges when they leave the service, but the biggest difficulty that is faced by veterans in Edinburgh, before they can even start to seek employment, is finding a home when they leave the forces. Despite Scotland having some of the strongest homelessness legislation in the world, and all local authorities having a legal duty to provide support to anyone at risk of homelessness, including veterans, there are still housing issues in some parts of the country.

The number of people who live in Edinburgh city has increased by more than 13 per cent, in recent years, which has put substantial pressure on housing waiting lists. During the period from 2007, the Scottish National Party Government invested £558 million in housing grant support in Edinburgh, which contributed to the completion of more than 13,000 affordable homes. Over the five years from 2021, Edinburgh will further benefit from the affordable housing supply programme's investment of £234 million towards the delivery of even more good-quality affordable homes, which is an increase of £32 million—16 per cent—on the previous five years.

Despite that, the growth of the Edinburgh population is such that we need to make use of all suitable housing to help meet the demand. The MOD, as a landlord, owns hundreds of units of empty service family accommodation in Edinburgh and the Lothians. I have highlighted that issue, over many years, with all the individuals who have held the Westminster defence minister brief. Thankfully, at long last, the MOD has agreed to sell some of those empty properties to the City of Edinburgh Council, starting with an initial batch of 23 of the 78 homes that have lain empty over many years on the Dreghorn estate.

**Edward Mountain:** Will the member give way?

**Gordon MacDonald:** I am just finishing. Sorry.

I hope that it will not be long before the other 900 empty MOD homes across Scotland will become available to the 600 homeless veterans and others who require a home. That will go some way to removing one of the barriers that are faced by Army personnel in their transition to civilian life and employment in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the final speaker in the open debate, after which we will move to closing speeches. I expect every member who has participated in the debate to be in the chamber for the start of those.

16:23

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** Presiding Officer, before I begin, I apologise to you, the cabinet secretary and others in the chamber for arriving late to the debate. I meant no disrespect.

I thank Keith Brown for the engagement that we have had on what is an important motion. As others have highlighted, it matters because it acknowledges some major challenges that we perhaps do not often recognise or discuss. Research has shown that working-age veterans are twice as likely as non-veterans to be unemployed, and that many discover a lack—real or perceived—of transferable skills when they come to seek civilian employment. Difficulties in both mental and physical health; housing problems, as we heard from Gordon MacDonald and others; inadequate transition planning by the armed forces; family issues, including schools issues and relationship breakdown; financial problems; and unhelpful public attitudes can all build barriers to successful integration into civilian work.

We celebrate the many ways in which the needs of veterans and their families are being recognised and addressed, including in specific work by GP practices, schools and Social Security Scotland, and by the Armed Services Advice Project. That

work, along with the partnerships that the motion highlights, will be essential to ensuring their continuing and enhanced wellbeing.

Some of the challenges that veterans experience arise directly, and entirely understandably, from their deployment in combat or conflict zones. Harmful levels of drinking, violent behaviour, anxiety and depression, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder, are all natural and understandable responses to the horrors of war and its aftermath. In addition, the deployment of special forces means that the UK's soldiers are involved in more conflict than we might imagine.

However, there are also aspects of military culture that, even here in the UK, in our relative peace, are deeply problematic. Bullying, racism, sexual assault and harassment within the armed forces must be addressed as assiduously as in any other workplace—in fact, especially so, given the lack of employment rights or union representation.

Many people experience fulfilling careers in the armed forces and would recommend the life to others. However, there are others for whom the promise that is held out by contemporary consumer-led military recruitment, of adventure, social mobility, self-fulfilment and camaraderie, brings bitter fruit. Those for whom military life is most damaging, are, overwhelmingly, the very young and those who come from backgrounds of poverty and trauma, who are signed up to serve in the infantry in the most dangerous of roles. In an era of recruitment shortfalls, those are the very young people who are being targeted by increasingly commercial advertising campaigns in both traditional and social media.

In 2021-22, 30 per cent of new recruits to the British Army were aged under 18, and more soldiers were enlisted at 16 than at any other age. The UK is the only country in Europe, the only NATO member and the only permanent member of the United Nations Security Council routinely to accept 16-year-old recruits. That policy has been condemned by children's commissioners in all four nations—

**Edward Mountain:** Will the member give way?

**Maggie Chapman:** Yes.

**Edward Mountain:** I thank the member for giving way on that point. We need to be careful when we talk about young people joining the armed services. While they can join the armed services and go through the training before the age of 18, they cannot take part in active service or bear arms until they are 18. Would the member care to acknowledge that fact?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, Ms Chapman.

**Maggie Chapman:** I acknowledge that point, but some of the issues that I have spoken about, and the surrounding impacts, mean that some of those 16-year-olds are the most vulnerable and are therefore the most likely to have adverse experiences when they leave the Army, as I will come on to talk about.

The policy has been condemned by children's commissioners in all four nations, by human rights and faith organisations and by veterans themselves. Those 16-year-olds are likely to experience the worst outcomes throughout their time in the Army—the evidence on that is clear. Many leave before they are 18 and find themselves both out of work and out of education. Most disadvantaged young people now stay on at school or college after 16, but those who leave with the plan of joining the Army rarely return to the education that they left.

If they remain as soldiers, it will probably be in the infantry, where there is a higher likelihood than in any other part of the Army of becoming a casualty, mental or physical, or of death. The younger they are, the more adverse childhood experiences they have already had, and the earlier they leave, the more likely it is that the experience of initial training, with its intense stressors, including isolation and exhaustion, its stimulation of aggression and its harsh discipline, will create or exacerbate long-term mental ill health. *[Interruption.]*

Those teenagers who have left the Army disappointed, disillusioned and perhaps deeply damaged are as much veterans as the older men who fought in the Falklands or in the second world war. Their plight is often invisible, but our responsibility towards them is no less for that. It is our responsibility not only to support them, in every way possible, but to ask how we can protect other vulnerable young people from becoming early veterans. In 2018, the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee reported on armed forces visits to schools. It noted that recruitment is not just an event but a process, and it made recommendations about guidance, scrutiny and data.

At a time when war is in all our thoughts, and when military spending and prestige are increasing, we might do well to revisit that issue with a consciousness of how positive campaigns—such as support for girls in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education—can be used as a wedge to normalise the presence and influence of the military.

I commend the work of those who raise awareness of issues about the armed forces, especially in relation to young people, including the provision of information about their obligations and rights. As other members have done this

afternoon, I put on record my thanks to those organisations and employers who seek to support veterans—of whatever age—and their families not only into employment, but with all the other aspects of civilian life that are fraught with difficulties and challenges for people who have experienced horrors that most of us are grateful not to have endured.

In conclusion, members of this Parliament and the people whom we represent will hold a wide range of views about war, the armed forces and the role of the military in Scotland's future, but we can share a recognition that people who have joined and left the armed forces, after a long or short period, deserve our most serious care and attention.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I gently remind members to make sure that their mobile devices are in silent mode. We move to the closing speeches of the debate.

16:31

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** This afternoon's debate has been fascinating, interesting and very respectful. A number of members have pointed out that members across the chamber extend our thanks to our armed services, past and present, for what they do. We have had not only a fascinating insight into the often less seen work of the armed forces, but examples of veterans, third sector organisations and companies that are guiding the transition out of the armed forces and into civilian life.

Scottish Labour is very clear that we require statutory targets to underpin the delivery of the armed forces covenant, which many members have spoken about this afternoon. It should be the very base of expectation for those who serve in our armed forces, be that for half a day or for many decades, when they are welcomed back into communities.

Scottish Labour recognises the particular challenges that armed forces children and young people face and that their opinion should be listened to and taken seriously in all matters that affect them. I will return to that later in my speech.

Before I do so, I will highlight the opening contribution from my colleague Paul Sweeney, and, in particular, his reference to the event that happened this week with Glasgow's Helping Heroes, which was also mentioned by my colleague Carol Mochan. Along with fascinating and incredibly insightful videos and a very worthwhile report, "Enabling our Armed Forces community to thrive", the phrase that caught my attention at the event was that those who were brave enough to join up need to be brave enough to push open the door to a supportive, holistic

group of people who understand the challenges that they have faced—a single, one-stop shop for all the support that they need in Glasgow. I extend my thanks to all those who were involved in that event, including the Forces in Mind Trust, which funded it.

A number of contributions mentioned the very great variety of veterans that we now have in our communities, from young people who left because life in the armed forces was not what they expected—Maggie Chapman pointed out the challenges that they face—all the way through to, as Jamie Greene emphasised, the more classic view of a veteran that people have in their minds. They all deserve the support of this Parliament and the rest of Scotland for what they have done.

People who suffer both physical and mental trauma as a result of their time in service—there are 2,000 of those individuals in Scotland—face very particular challenges, an aspect that was recognised by a lot of speakers, especially Graeme Dey. It is always worth listening to someone with his expertise and knowledge of the subject, about which he speaks passionately.

**Graeme Dey:** I thank the member for his kind words. On the subject of veterans who have been left damaged in some way and who suffered through their time in service, will he join me in recognising the cohort of gay and transgender people who are now represented by Fighting with Pride—which the cabinet secretary is well versed on—but who could have been jailed merely for being homosexual in the Army, as it was portrayed at the time? The last such person was jailed in 1995. Will he join me in recognising that cohort and our responsibility to now put right what they suffered, as far as we can?

**Martin Whitfield:** Absolutely, and I am very grateful for that intervention. Our armed forces reflect our wider society exactly as our wider society is, and the support that we extend to any minority group in society should also be extended to the equivalent minority group in our armed forces.

This did not happen in Scotland, but I know that a significant number of veterans will be aware of the death of Peter Brown, the veteran flight sergeant from the Windrush generation, who recently died on his own. The call has gone out to find family members and those who recall him, and those who wish to support him, to attend his funeral. That speaks to a position in which we would never want to find ourselves, but it also speaks to the reality of what some veterans are facing today.

I will speak about Christine Grahame's contribution, because I found it incredibly powerful. The simple statement that one size does not fit all

our veterans is so important in any aspect of interaction, as was the point about the lack of proper data, which we need. Christine Grahame, Jamie Greene and others spoke powerfully about the spouses and partners of our veterans, and about our young people. We are still incredibly short of data on our armed forces children.

**Edward Mountain:** Many of our veterans' families cannot be compensated and looked after by schemes that are set up by Governments because they are not veterans themselves. Will the member take a moment to congratulate the associations in regiments and units that take pride in raising money for families to assist them where the Government cannot?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Whitfield, I can give you the time back.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very grateful, Deputy Presiding Officer. There is no challenge whatsoever in my extending thanks and gratitude to all such organisations and groups. I think that that speaks very much to what we have heard today about the comradeship that is sometimes lost when people leave the armed forces. That comradeship is such a strong part of our armed forces.

I take the opportunity to mention Forces Children Scotland, which is an incredibly important organisation that supports veteran families. It supports the transitions between schools that we have heard about, when our young people have to explain to their friends in school what being an armed forces child is like. They talk about their fear of and concerns about moving and having to make new circles of friends, but there are also those who stay in one place, with one parent being away on service.

There is the Forces Life board game and comic book, which armed forces children created to explain to their friends what their experiences of being a forces child are like. For decades, the group has worked to advocate for and support children and young people, and it has tried to persuade our local authorities to have forces champions to reach out to them.

The children and young people in forces and veteran families have experiences that are unique—the anxiety about the parent who is away on active duty, the difficulty of relocating regularly, and the challenge that that brings in education and the social support that those families need. Some are young carers who have responsibilities for younger siblings that they feel have been placed on their shoulders, which can impact on their future opportunities and employability.

The debate has been very positive and I am glad to have taken part. It is a debate that we should have regularly to keep an eye on the

Scottish Government's commitments, both the statutory ones and those that they rightly take on on behalf of the people of Scotland. It is also an opportunity for people in our armed forces, veterans and, in the case that I make, their families and children to know that we are thinking of them, that they are important and that they will remain central to the decisions that we make here.

16:39

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives and to speak in support of the amendment in the name of Edward Mountain.

I welcome the fact that time has been set aside to debate how best we can support veterans as they transition into civilian life. It is right that we also acknowledge the important role that veterans' families can and do play throughout that process, and that we discuss how we can best support them to do so.

We owe our veterans a debt of sincere gratitude for their service to our country. Many of us, from all parties, have acknowledged that debt today. As well as our gratitude, we owe veterans a commitment to do all that we can to support them to contribute to society. That is vital.

Veterans are often spoken about as one group, but the truth is that veterans come from various backgrounds, with different skill sets, talents and needs. However, the common feature among veterans is that they all have something to offer society after leaving the armed forces.

Around 1,800 of those who leave the armed forces each year come to live in Scotland. It is estimated that, by 2028, nearly half of veterans will be of working age. It is therefore important that we acknowledge how much they have done and that we help them to transfer their skills to civilian life effectively.

As the Scottish veterans commissioner has set out, the aim for veterans when transitioning is to find the correct job rather than just any job. It is a common trend among individuals leaving the services that they sell themselves short when trying to find employment. It is vital that we ensure that they do not sell themselves short.

The support and advice that are offered to service leavers is also vital. The Careers Transition Partnership and Skills Development Scotland play their part, but we also need to play ours.

As it stands, and as the veterans commissioner has acknowledged, a number of veterans and their families are unaware of the services that are available to them. She says that the available

support needs to be flagged up so that those leaving the armed forces can consider all the services that they are entitled to and all the potential careers that they might wish to pursue.

Career pathways include self-employment. Many veterans do not consider that pathway, but there are lots of opportunities in it. As we have heard, there are businesses—big and small—that are happy to support veterans. That support could act as a stepping stone for veterans to set up their own businesses. It is vital that we support all those possibilities to ensure that they get additional help—including, sometimes, added financial support—so that that career pathway can become a reality.

It is also important that access to social security is discussed when we consider how systems work for veterans. We know that the Scottish Government's benefit take-up strategy rightly aims at addressing some of the concerns in that area, but it also acknowledges that veterans as a group are less likely to access all the benefits that they are entitled to. The strategy fails to tailor its approach to veterans, and that has been acknowledged. I hope that the cabinet secretary will speak about that issue during his summing up.

It is clear that Scotland has a real role to play in that regard, and it is good to see that the UK Government has been working with the Scottish Government to manage some of those matters. The reviews that have come out show the very important work that has taken place.

I would like to mention some of the contributions that we have heard this afternoon. The cabinet secretary talked about maximising opportunities. It is vital that we maximise the opportunities for each and every service leaver and that nobody is forgotten about. As the cabinet secretary said, the Scottish Government has a "No one left behind" approach.

General practitioner services and childcare have been mentioned. Those are all part of the jigsaw as we try to ensure that veterans have the support that they need.

My colleague Edward Mountain talked about the support that individuals from the armed forces have and the joint strategy that is in place. However, there are issues when it comes to education, childcare, GPs, housing and homelessness. I echo the sentiment that the armed forces covenant should be enshrined. Those are important issues to take on board.

I was at the event in Parliament that Paul Sweeney hosted on Tuesday, and I acknowledge the fantastic support that Glasgow's Helping Heroes is providing in the Glasgow area. The event was an eye-opener that showed us

parliamentarians what is happening on the ground and what we can do to support that.

In his speech today, Paul Sweeney talked about the good practice that takes place to support veterans. He said that individuals from the veterans community can be "worth their weight in gold" to employers, and it is vital that we get that message across. They are not individuals who are sitting back, not doing things, or sitting on the street, or having issues. They only need opportunities to work for something and achieve it.

My colleague Russell Findlay spoke about the employment issues for veterans who have physical and mental issues to manage. Some come home with trauma, but many do not come home with any of the traumas that have been discussed this afternoon. It is very important to make progress on how we manage benefits, the isolation and the physical and mental healthcare needs of all of them.

Jamie Greene spoke about what is required when it comes to healthcare, which is a vitally important issue. He also spoke about issues that I, too, heard about when I went to Lossiemouth, when families mentioned how hard it is to find employment and to follow up on a job as they had childcare issues and there was not enough support around to allow them to make that transition.

It is important that we try to marry those things together. I know that the cabinet secretary has spoken about that, but I have been to two or three events, during this session of Parliament and the previous one, when I have visited families who have talked about that issue. They continue to talk about it, so there is still a gap there that needs to be looked at.

Homelessness and suicide are also massive issues when it comes to how we manage and support our veterans.

Throughout the debate, we have talked about the importance of veterans within our society, about the unique skill set that many of those individuals have to offer and about their great potential in helping us to have a flourishing labour market.

We have also heard about some of the specific challenges that our veterans still face when transitioning into civilian life. Martin Whitfield spoke about the Forces Life board game and comic book. I have had the privilege of being involved in that process from its inception, when youngsters came and spoke about it. We then went to a university art class, which decided to do the designs. I hope that, later this year, we will have the opportunity to launch the board game and comic book. It did not happen as planned due to a delay by us, in Parliament, one night, resulting

in the youngsters not being able to come, but I am sure that it will take place in the future.

Without question, there is a lot of consensus around what is taking place. We all want to support as many individuals as we can through the transition into civilian life, so that veterans can enjoy the productive life that they deserve, given the contributions and the sacrifices that they have made. We owe it to them to ensure that they get the best start, which we all enjoy, when they leave service and join society.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Keith Brown to wind up the debate. Cabinet secretary, I would be grateful if you could take us up to just before decision time.

16:47

**Keith Brown:** I agree with the last point that was made: it has been a very good debate. There has been a substantial degree of consensus, although that was not actually my intention in agreeing to hold the debate. I did so not because anybody asked me to, but because, as members may remember, I said in our last veterans debate that it would be good to have another opportunity, outwith remembrance, when people feel constrained in making any criticism or challenge that they might want to make. That is the purpose behind holding this debate. Perhaps, in the future, we will get even more challenge.

I also hope that all parties in the chamber will have more members in attendance when we discuss the future of veterans. Perhaps we can attract more people to the public gallery if we make sure that such debates are worthy of their attendance, too. I think that the subject of the future of our veterans merits more interest.

The debate has been generally consensual, but I am afraid that I will reluctantly have to break that consensus to the extent that I cannot accept the Labour amendment, because of its implications. I have visited Glasgow's Helping Heroes a number of times. It is a fantastic organisation and there are many other fantastic organisations across the country. However, the work that is done by those and other organisations is done through local authorities, the third sector or voluntary or charitable bodies. It is not practicable that the Scottish Government could insist on taking, from across the country, every example of good practice to put them in a framework—indeed, a statutory framework was suggested. I have a great deal of sympathy with the aims behind the amendment and, from the many times that I have visited the project, everything that I could say about the Glasgow's Helping Heroes would be positive. However, there are many other projects across the country that we rely on in this work—

about 400 charities in Scotland are concerned with veterans—and we rely on local authorities and others, too.

To try to soften that blow, if it is a blow, I welcome some of the speeches that we heard from Labour members. In particular, Carol Mochan raised the issue of social inequality, which is very rarely raised in these debates.

Recruiting grounds, especially for infantry and the Army, have often been in areas of multiple deprivation—I joined the armed forces from such an area. At the very start of the 13 years during which—at various points—I have been doing this job, senior people in the MOD and the armed forces were happy to say, "That's how we found these people and that's how we'll leave them; we have no responsibility to help them in the future." I think that that attitude has changed and that there is now an acknowledgement that an obligation exists—that if we take people at that age in life, who are then trained in the way in which they are and who do the things that they do and make the sacrifices to which Alexander Stewart referred, society has a responsibility.

The armed forces provide educational and other opportunities—

**Carol Mochan:** Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

**Keith Brown:** Yes.

**Carol Mochan:** I thank the cabinet secretary for his words on that important point, which is close to my heart, about inequalities in society.

With regard to the Labour amendment, would the cabinet secretary consider some sort of statement of intent? We are not asking him to do those things specifically; we are just asking for some kind of national standards to which the organisations out there could work.

**Keith Brown:** There has been some confusion. I have heard from Labour members—in fact, I think, from Carol Mochan herself—that we need to have a statutory framework and statutory standards. I am a bit unclear about what is proposed. Does Labour think that the Scottish Parliament should agree those standards, or will they be imposed or brought in by a future UK Government? I know that the Conservatives have said—

**Paul Sweeney rose—**

**Keith Brown:** I will just finish this point.

The Conservatives want to introduce a bill, which I will be happy to consider; I am happy to look at any proposals that the Labour Party has in relation to the matter as well. However, it is not yet clear to me exactly what is intended. How does Labour intend to go beyond the covenant

provisions, which are enshrined in law only in as much as statutory services have to take into account the interests of veterans?

We can perhaps find out what is proposed from Paul Sweeney.

**Paul Sweeney:** It is disappointing that the Government is minded not to support Labour's amendment. I can perhaps reassure the cabinet secretary that we do not propose putting a universal, statutory straitjacket on Government and to dictate how local services should be designed. Instead, it is about advertising or creating national exemplars that can offer inspiration to local authorities when they are designing services that are appropriate to their area. He might perhaps consider supporting the amendment in that spirit, even at this late stage.

**Keith Brown:** Unfortunately, I have to consider the amendments that are in front of me. To respond to the point that Paul Sweeney and Carol Mochan have made, we try to do those things through the veterans fund—we try to ensure that we contribute to areas of good practice. I am willing to continue the discussion about how we can go forward.

The Labour amendment is well intentioned, but its practical implications are perhaps not the ones that were sought when it was drawn up. For that reason, I cannot support it.

As I said, however, I can support the Conservative amendment. I have a couple of points to make about the discussion that we have had about the relationship between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on support for veterans. Just to give more flesh to this, I exempt Annabel Goldie, who has always been keen to work collegiately, from anything that I am about to say. To exemplify the point that I am about to make, the last time that I went to meet her in London, the door of the MOD was essentially shut in my face—the staff had no knowledge of the meeting and would not even recognise my ID card. That is the attitude that I have also had from the secretary of state, who, unlike previous secretaries of state, has continuously refused to meet me. We have had one meeting of the ministerial veterans group in the past two years.

I was assured that I would get a response in relation to the Scottish Government's recent innovation in paying for replacement medals for veterans who have legitimately lost them or had them stolen, but I have had none. I take at face value the suggestion offered by Jamie Greene and other Conservative members that the attitude could change for the reason stated by many Conservative members, which is that if we work

together on these things, we can achieve more. However, that has not been my experience.

Another example is London interbank offered rate—LIBOR—funding. Much has been said about some of the UK Government's good initiatives, but it withdrew LIBOR funding overnight. With no dedicated resources coming to it from the UK Government for veterans funding, the Scottish Government has had to find funding to backfill—for example, Age Scotland was previously funded by the LIBOR funding.

That said, there is scope for more work to be done and there is more that we can achieve together.

I am very appreciative of the remarks that Maggie Chapman made and for the relationship that we have had while working on these and other justice issues. She has been productive and respectful—until today, when she referred to the old men who served in the Falklands war. That is it—the relationship between us is over. [*Laughter.*]

Some very good contributions have been made. In time, I would hope that whoever in the Government is responsible for these matters can build on today's debate, which, if I am honest, has been a bit tentative. People have tried to be consensual, which is good; however, challenges need to be made, both to the Government and to others. The more we can do that, the more we can improve the service that we provide to veterans.

I will respond to Christine Grahame's point about the spouses and families of serving personnel. We both made the point that they are crucial to the morale of serving personnel. She asked about what we do for those families when transition happens. The point that I was trying to make in my opening speech was that we should be supporting them long before a transition happens. If we can make sure that spouses of serving personnel—whether they are nurses, teachers or doctors—are properly employed during the time that their spouse or partner is in service, that transition will become much easier. We have to tackle those challenges at the earliest possible stage.

**Martin Whitfield:** Could the cabinet secretary comment on the paucity of data on the children of armed forces personnel, as well as on the question that was contained in the census?

**Keith Brown:** I was very interested in the point that was made. My constituency is the only one in Scotland that has a school that is dedicated to the children of armed forces personnel, which is the Queen Victoria School in Dunblane, so I am very close to the issue.

Paul Sweeney also asked a question about the census data, which we will have in 2024. In the

meantime, we have worked with the UK Government on a survey that asks more general questions, some of which relate to children, about people's experiences in the armed forces. We are still to work through the treasure trove of information that that will provide.

I am well aware that, during the time that I have been doing this job, one unit was moved from Germany to Edinburgh to Northern Ireland within 18 months. The children of those families had to move with them and went into three different education systems, which is not good for anyone. Maggie Chapman made a point about the way that we treat people in the armed forces, especially if they have families.

There have been a great many valuable contributions in the debate. I hope that this will be the first of many debates about how veterans can be best assured of our support. In this case, we are talking about employability, but the same would be true if we were talking about homelessness and veterans health.

I am not making a point against anyone, but there has been a temptation for many years to try to portray veterans as being "mad, bad and sad"—a horrendous phrase. That portrayal is so far removed from the reality: the vast majority of veterans, manage to come back into society and are productive. Members from all sides of the chamber have said how much veterans can offer employers and society. Veterans are not overrepresented among the homeless, those who have mental health issues or the prison population, although there are some interesting and challenging aspects to the veteran prisoner population in Scotland. The Forces in Mind Trust, which has been mentioned, will look at that, especially in relation to sexual offending. However, the vast majority of veterans come back into society and play a productive role.

Collectively, our challenge is to make sure that that role is commensurate with what veterans have done. As I have said, if someone who leaves the armed forces as a colour sergeant, having spent 20 or 30 years in the armed forces and having accumulated all that experience and training, is asked to feel grateful because they get a job that is way below their level of experience, that is not doing right by veterans. We have to do better by them. I am keen to continue working with the UK Government and I am grateful for Jamie Greene's offer to see what we can do to improve relations.

We have published our refreshed veterans strategy action plan, in which we made several commitments under the theme of employment, education and skills. As I have said, we will follow that through, but it is right that we are challenged. In future, I would hope that whoever is responsible

for this area in the Government continues in that way. Let us have more debates and more people from all parties participating in them. Not enough people were in the chamber to hear some of the very good speeches that were made.

## Decision Time

16:59

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08332.1, in the name of Edward Mountain, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08332, in the name of Keith Brown, on employment support for veterans and their families, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-08332.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08332, in the name of Keith Brown, on employment support for veterans and their families, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

17:00

*Meeting suspended.*

17:02

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to the division on amendment S6M-08332.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. For no obvious reason, my digital voting platform collapsed. I would have voted no.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. We will ensure that that is recorded.

### For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08332.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, is: For 45, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-08332, in the name of Keith Brown, on employment support for veterans and their families, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that it continues to make to Scotland; recognises the challenges that some veterans can face when transitioning out of the military, particularly in relation to employment; notes the work of the Scottish Government to address these issues and improve the employment prospects of veterans and their families; understands that poor mental and physical health may exacerbate barriers to employment for some veterans; agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with other devolved administrations and the UK Government, to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to employability, healthcare and other services across Scotland, and notes the importance of the close working relationships between Armed Forces bases and their respective local authorities, allowing for the potential development of improved social, health, educational and employment opportunities for service families and the communities that they live in.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

*Meeting closed at 17:05.*



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