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Thursday 14 September 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 14 September 2023

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Inverclyde Task Force

1. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what funding it will provide to support the work of the Inverclyde task force, including in relation to investment in facilities at Ferguson Marine. (S6O-02512)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): Ministers participate in the work of the Inverclyde task force to examine new ways of enabling a successful and sustainable wellbeing economy to thrive in the area.

The task force joint chairs have submitted a letter to the Minister for Small Business, Trade and Innovation, setting out a number of investment proposals, which will be given detailed consideration by the Scottish Government. Separately, a formal request for capital investment has been made by Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) and is currently undergoing due diligence. Ministers will update Parliament once that process is concluded, should further investment in Ferguson Marine be agreed.

Neil Bibby: The GMB trade union, supported by parties from across the chamber, has made the Government aware of an impending deadline for placing an order for a new plating line at Ferguson's. Workers and management are clear that the investment is essential to improving efficiency and securing a future for the yard. Failure to do that urgently will result in many more months of delay.

The Inverclyde task force was established because the former finance secretary believed that it could make the case for leveraging in funding to Inverclyde. Recent job losses make the need even greater. Will the Government commit today to investing in facilities at Ferguson's and to providing additional cash to kick-start the Inverclyde economy? If it will not do that today, when will a decision be made?

Neil Gray: I thank Neil Bibby for that question and his interest in the area. This afternoon, I am due to meet union officials with Stuart McMillan,

who has invited them to Parliament, in order to discuss those issues and others. Mr Bibby will be aware of the state aid and subsidy control issues that are at play with regard to this request, but we continue to scrutinise that and look to do everything we can to ensure that the yard is supported, within the powers and resources that we have. As he would expect, we will continue to engage with both management and trade unions.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): As co-chair of the Inverclyde task force, I want to be clear that the recent funding asks from the task force and the funding ask from a cross-party group of politicians regarding Ferguson Marine are two separate matters.

The task force has outlined several ambitious projects for Inverclyde. There is an extremely urgent and important need for investment in Ferguson Marine, so I ask the cabinet secretary to update members as quickly as possible after the due diligence process has been completed.

Neil Gray: I thank Stuart McMillan for his consistent and diligent work for his constituents, with regard to both the task force and Ferguson Marine. I give him an undertaking that we will consider the issue of Ferguson Marine as quickly as possible and will update him and other colleagues as quickly as we can once the due diligence process has been completed.

As the Minister for Small Business, Trade and Innovation confirmed in his reply to the letter from Stuart McMillan and the leader of Inverclyde Council, the Scottish Government will scrutinise the proposals assembled by the task force and will continue to participate in its work, offering feedback on the proposals and working with United Kingdom Government colleagues who also have a stake in the matter.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The Inverclyde task force has a wider remit to ensure that the region makes best use of all its maritime assets to achieve improved economic prosperity. To that end, is the cabinet secretary aware that local campaigners believe that its port facilities, including Inchgreen dry dock, are being vastly underutilised? Would he be willing to come to Greenock to meet those campaigners?

Neil Gray: I would be more than happy to engage with the work that Jamie Greene speaks of to ensure that we see the maximum benefit of the port infrastructure in place in Inverclyde, around Greenock, and across Scotland, so that the benefits of the work that I believe that we will be able to enjoy going forward can be enjoyed by as many communities as possible.

Glasgow (Golden Z Regeneration)

2. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the regeneration plans for Glasgow's golden Z will deliver the jobs and opportunities needed to grow the city's economy. (S6O-02513)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

The Scottish Government supports Glasgow City Council's golden Z regeneration plans as they align fully with our commitment in the programme for government to drive regional growth and empowerment. The programme for government also acknowledges Glasgow's pivotal role as a key economic driver in the region and for the rest of Scotland, and the plans will be crucial in fostering growth, generating employment opportunities, and enhancing prospects, not only for Glasgow but for the wider region.

Pauline McNeill: I also welcome the investment that has been secured to put Glasgow back on the map as the number 2 in the United Kingdom list of retail centres, a position that it has enjoyed for the past two decades. However, we are already losing shoppers because of the current state of Glasgow city centre. Significant concerns have been expressed about parts of Sauchiehall Street since the ABC went down in the Glasgow School of Art fire. Will the Scottish Government support my call for a robust economic impact assessment to ensure that there is a viable plan for the golden Z, with a delivery team in place? Without delivery, we will not see the result that we want.

Neil Gray: I thank Pauline McNeill for her question and her work to engage with Glasgow City Council and the work that it is doing. I recognise the importance of getting this right and making sure that Glasgow city centre has an offering that is relevant to what people are looking for in city centre locations.

I understand that the golden Z regeneration plans are already based on extensive research and economic analysis and, although all investment involves an element of risk, I am sure that, once they have been implemented, the plans will have a significant impact on the city's ability to attract and retain jobs. I am more than happy to furnish Pauline McNeill with more details in collaboration with colleagues in Glasgow City Council to make sure that we can realise the city centre's potential.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Many shops and restaurants in Glasgow city centre have been forced to close in recent years. The British Retail Consortium recently found that footfall in Glasgow was down more than it is in 10 other large UK cities. Another report revealed that footfall was 19 per cent lower than it was pre-Covid. Does the

minister recognise that the Scottish National Party council's low-emission zone might be forcing people away from Glasgow city centre?

Neil Gray: No, I do not. The member helps to make the case for the need for the regeneration work. I also point her to the clear evidence from businesses that I have engaged with and those that return business surveys on areas of key concern for them. Those concerns are energy costs, the impact of Brexit on the labour market, the cost of living crisis and the impossible impact that inflationary interest rate rises are having on their trading environment. I therefore encourage the member to direct her focus to the UK Government to ensure that her questions are being answered.

Gas Safety

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of gas safety week taking place this week, what engagement it has had with community safety organisations regarding action to improve gas safety awareness. (S6O-02514)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): We provide Scottish Government grant funding and work with our partner the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which has supported and promoted gas safety week for many years.

RoSPA is active in the promotion of gas and carbon monoxide safety, and it represents the Scottish Government's interests in the stakeholder forum of the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group. RoSPA is also working with a gas distribution network to develop a new web hub on carbon monoxide and it has just launched two surveys to assess people's awareness of the prevention of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Clare Adamson: We know that unchecked gas appliances run the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning or explosion, so it is crucial that appliances are checked regularly by Gas Safe Register engineers. What action is the Scottish Government taking to encourage people to arrange their annual gas safety check? What help might be available to those who find themselves in fuel poverty and unable to do that?

Siobhian Brown: Duties relating to the maintenance of appliances that are applicable to landlords are set out in United Kingdom legislation. Through our partners, RoSPA, we have promoted via social media and newsletters the Gas Safe Register's advice to check gas appliances every year and to check that an engineer is Gas Safe registered.

Going forward, RoSPA is developing two surveys aimed at private landlords and the general

public respectively to assess their awareness of carbon monoxide poisoning and what they should do to prevent it. The web hub will be developed to address the shortfall of information covering safety and responsibility.

Investment Zones

4. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it agreed the investment zones selection method with the United Kingdom Government. (S6O-02515)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): Scottish and UK Government officials developed a joint approach to place selection over the period from April to June, with regular updates being provided to ministers throughout that period. Scottish and UK ministers formally confirmed their agreement to the approach and selected the two regions on 22 June, and a formal note on the selection method was published on 18 August to fulfil a commitment that was made to Dundee City Council leader, John Alexander.

Michael Marra: I am afraid that the cabinet secretary needs to get the story straight. On 18 July, he told me, in an answer to a written question:

“The invitation to host an Investment Zone was not subject to a bidding or application process”.—[*Written Answers*, 20 July 2023; S6W-19604.]

Then, as he said, on 18 August, a document entitled “Investment Zones Place Selection in Scotland” appeared on the UK Government’s website. However, the decision to award the investment zones to Glasgow and Aberdeen featured on page 1 of the document. Does the cabinet secretary agree with his ministerial colleague Tom Arthur, who told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that having transparency on the application process was very important? In my view, it is very important indeed, given that Dundee now has neither a green freeport nor an investment zone. The investment zone process was nothing more than a political fix.

Neil Gray: Given that one of the investment zones that were chosen was in his region, I am sure that Michael Marra has no interest in pitting community against community, as he appeared to try to do in that question.

In response to a request from John Alexander, the Scottish and UK Governments have committed to engage on what further help might be available for Dundee and the Tay city region to ensure that we take full advantage of the economic opportunities that undoubtedly exist in those communities. I am committed to engaging on that, and I believe that UK Government colleagues are, too.

Restraint of Children (UNCRC Recommendation)

5. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the recommendation by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to

“develop statutory guidance on the use of restraint on children to ensure that it is used only as a measure of last resort and exclusively to prevent harm to the child or others and monitor its implementation”. (S6O-02516)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am aware of Mr Johnson’s long-standing interest in the subject, and I know that he will agree that all children and young people have the right to be treated with respect and to be safe, as do the staff who work with them. Any use of restraint must be carried out with regard to the welfare of the child. That is provided for in the guidance that is already in place in education, custody, mental health and care settings that is aimed at controlling and limiting the use of restraint.

As Mr Johnson will know, we consulted on draft guidance on physical intervention in schools, and I intend to publish revised guidance in due course. We are also exploring options to strengthen the legal framework in this area, including by placing the guidance on a statutory footing. I will be happy to discuss that with him when we meet next week.

Daniel Johnson: I thank the cabinet secretary for her very welcome remarks. She will be aware that I have a consultation open on a member’s bill on the subject. Does she agree that the UN committee’s comments, and the fact that Northern Ireland is now consulting on the issue, change the context? Does she also agree that we need to have robust reporting standards, as well as training standards for teachers, rather than just guidance, if we are to make progress in this area?

Jenny Gilruth: I am aware of the consultation that Daniel Johnson is engaged in on a possible member’s bill on use of restraint and seclusion in schools. His point about the context changing in other parts of the UK, which are looking at what more they might be able to do, is valid. I look forward to considering in further detail his proposed member’s bill. I will meet Mr Johnson next week to discuss some of the detail.

Mr Johnson mentioned reporting standards and training standards, particularly in relation to teacher education. I am keen to discuss both those topics in more detail with him when we meet next week.

Business (Fraser of Allander Institute Survey)

6. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its

response is to the Fraser of Allander survey that found that only 9 per cent of businesses felt that the Scottish Government understands the business landscape in Scotland. (S6O-02517)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

We are grateful to the Fraser of Allander Institute—which I met yesterday to discuss the survey and other issues to do with the Scottish economy—for carrying out its survey of 400 businesses. There is no doubt that the results are disappointing, which is why the new deal for business group's role of building trust with business and driving meaningful, tangible change is important.

Although the indicators from the survey could help to track progress over time, a broader set of indicators should be developed to more fully measure progress and impact. Those could include broader impact indicators such as business confidence and business investment. That will be further considered by the new deal for business group.

The new deal for business group is just part of a process to ensure that, collaboratively, we create the conditions to support business, which in turn will drive fair green economic growth, with the purpose of feeding into strong and sustainable finances to tackle poverty and support our public services in communities.

Alexander Stewart: The business community has clearly delivered a vote of no confidence in the Scottish National Party's economic management. Will the cabinet secretary take decisive action to ensure that every minister in the Scottish Government is 100 per cent committed to the key objective of economic growth?

Neil Gray: Yes. I have been doing work, on which the First Minister has been leading, across Government to ensure that we are responsive to business needs.

However, we must recognise that not all the levers of the economy are under the control of the Scottish Government. I know—I am sure that colleagues in the Conservative Party must know, unless they have been hiding behind a bush all summer—that the main drivers of concern for people in business in Scotland are areas around the impact of Brexit on labour supply, the impact of high interest rates on their tradeable environment, and how to ensure that they can achieve economic growth. Further action is needed in all those areas from the United Kingdom Government, which has wrecked the economy with the disastrous Truss-Kwarteng budget.

Modern Studies (Attainment in Renfrewshire)

7. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is regarding levels of attainment in modern studies in the most recent Scottish Quality Authority exam results in Renfrewshire. (S6O-02518)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): As Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and as a former modern studies teacher, I congratulate the ambition, hard work and resilience of the young people in Renfrewshire who achieved a strong set of results in modern studies.

In 2023, pass rates in Renfrewshire for modern studies were above the national average at national 5, and at higher level were the same as the national average. The achievements of those young people should be celebrated.

Paul O'Kane: I am glad to hear the cabinet secretary's answer; she knows how important modern studies is in teaching good citizenship and respectful debate. Young people and their teachers across Renfrewshire work extremely hard to achieve their results in the subject.

What would the cabinet secretary say to a colleague who was encouraging the denigration of young people's exam results in order to attack a political opponent? Will she join me in condemning the actions of her colleagues in local Scottish National Party branches, council groups and even the Scottish Parliament who seem to believe that the life chances of pupils at Park Mains high school, which is an excellent school in my region, are fair game in desperate political attacks?

Jenny Gilruth: We could all learn to be a little more circumspect and thoughtful in our use of social media. In particular, how and what adults say and do impacts on our children and young people. I understand that the tweets that Paul O'Kane alludes to have since been deleted, and that the member apologised at the time.

I am intrigued by the care that Paul O'Kane appears to attach to one tweet from an SNP back bencher. The Scottish Labour Party has, of course, attached no such care to the 1,620 children in Rutherglen and Hamilton West who have been affected by the two-child benefit cap under the Tories' heinous rape clause, which is harming children and their outcomes the length and breadth of the country. Instead of coming to the chamber today with a backbone, Paul O'Kane comes to bemoan a tweet on social media.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Schools work hard to deliver diverse academic and vocational journeys for students. For example, Bearsden academy in my constituency achieved a gold ambassador award

for its work to promote academic and vocational career pathways equally. What is the Scottish Government doing to support schools in the delivery of those routes?

Jenny Gilruth: Marie McNair raises an important point. This year, a record number of vocational and technical qualifications have been achieved. The breadth of pathways is hugely important in relation to the qualifications that are on offer to our young people. She mentions Bearsden academy in her constituency; I would be more than happy to visit the school with her to hear more about the work that is being undertaken there.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. Before we move on to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Abby Taylor, Presiding Officer of the Tobago House of Assembly. [*Applause.*]

I also invite members to join me in welcoming His Excellency Dr Róbert Ondrejcsák, Ambassador of Slovakia to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

Police Scotland Budget (Body-Worn Cameras)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind the chamber that my wife is a serving police officer with Police Scotland.

Body-worn cameras are vital for police officer safety and to increase public trust. The Scottish National Party has left Police Scotland as the last force in the United Kingdom to roll out body-worn cameras. Yesterday, Police Scotland said that it could not

“guarantee that body-worn cameras ... would be rolled out next year.”

Humza Yousaf did not deliver them when he was justice secretary. As First Minister, will he let police officers down again?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First and foremost, we have increased the budget for Police Scotland. I am pleased that, after last week, Douglas Ross seems to have accepted the point that the Scottish Government has increased the budget for Police Scotland by 6.3 per cent, which is an additional £80 million. I quote directly from Deputy Chief Officer David Page, who said that Police Scotland's current plans are actually that it

“will continue to roll out ... national body-worn video cameras, as outlined in previous plans.”

When I was justice secretary, I ensured that we had the capital budget so that the roll-out could begin. I am pleased to say that the facts remain that not only has the Scottish Government increased the budget for Police Scotland but, much like Deputy Chief Officer David Page said yesterday, the plans are to roll out national body-worn video cameras for our police officers, who are the ones who should be credited for the fact that we have seen one of the lowest crime rates in Scotland for almost 50 years.

Douglas Ross: The evidence was clear that those cameras will not be fully rolled out. Humza Yousaf said in his programme for government last week that they were a priority, but Police Scotland has said that it “cannot guarantee” their roll-out because there is a £300 million black hole in the capital budget.

The First Minister likes to quote from Police Scotland, so I quote a submission that it put to Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee for yesterday's session, which states that its

“current capital allocation is among the lowest in UK policing ... This is significantly short of the funding required to improve conditions and equipment for the wellbeing of officers and staff.”

If this really is a priority for Humza Yousaf, will he now treat it like one?

The First Minister: Let us deal with the facts. The fact is that the UK Government has cut our capital budget by more than 6.5 per cent. Here are some more facts for Douglas Ross: the Scottish Government has increased Police Scotland's budget by £80 million this year—fact. We have more police officers per head in Scotland than in England—fact. Recorded crime is at one of its lowest levels in Scotland in almost 50 years—fact. In fact, recorded crime has fallen by 42 per cent since the SNP came into power—that is a fact. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members.

The First Minister: When it comes to looking at whether Scotland is safer under the SNP, there is no denying that it is undoubtedly safer under the SNP Government—that is a fact.

Douglas Ross: Budgets are so stretched that the police say that officer redundancies are now on the table.

Let us look at the facts that the First Minister wants to reiterate. There is a £300 million black hole in Police Scotland's capital budget—fact. Officer numbers in Scotland are at their lowest level in 14 years—fact. Officer numbers started to slip when he was justice secretary and they are in free fall now that he is First Minister. Without further funding, Police Scotland warned yesterday that

"2,000 police officers could be let go in the next five years and 600 could be off our streets by April next year".

Why is the Government even considering those cuts, which will stretch policing in Scotland to breaking point?

The First Minister: I remind Douglas Ross once again that, this year, Police Scotland has had a significant increase to its budget, which we are providing in the face of a UK Government that has cut our capital budget—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Let us look at how we are spending that money. Not only are we ensuring that we have more police officers on the beat per head than there are England but we have just concluded a deal with our police officers for a generous and fair pay increase to them. That means that the minimum and maximum salaries are now higher for police officers in all ranks in Scotland compared with their counterparts in England and Wales.

When it comes to the budget, we will of course negotiate and engage with all political parties right across the chamber. What Douglas Ross cannot do is demand that more money be spent and, at

the same time, demand that we cut taxes. That is simply not a credible position.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister is getting angry again. Either a civil servant has not put this statistic in his briefing pack or he is not reading it. Police officer numbers in Scotland under the SNP are now at their lowest level in 14 years. I say to the First Minister that that is a fact, and that is what we are facing on the streets of Scotland right now.

Police Scotland will be the last force in the UK to roll out body-worn cameras. Officers no longer have the resources to investigate every crime. Their workplaces are not fit for purpose, and now the number of officers could be cut by 2,000. The thin blue line is barely visible at this rate. Does the First Minister accept that, with falling officer numbers, communities in Scotland will feel less safe?

The First Minister: I do not accept that in the slightest. Around 1,280 new recruits have joined Police Scotland in the past 18 months.

Douglas Ross: The lowest level in 14 years.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

The First Minister: There are over 350 more police officers than when we took office in 2007.

When it comes to real-terms increases in Police Scotland's budget, that is a fair-enough call for any political party to make, and we will of course give that consideration when it comes to the budget. However, has Douglas Ross ever asked himself why a real-terms increase was difficult this year? Of course, it was difficult because inflation is sky high, and inflation is sky high because of his party's complete economic mismanagement of the public finances. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: When it comes to real-terms increases, of course we will give that consideration, but it was Douglas Ross, a year ago, who stood here and demanded that the Scottish Government copy Liz Truss's disastrous mini-budget. If we had done that, we would not have money to spend on our police service or indeed any of our public services. Thank goodness that Douglas Ross is nowhere near the public finances of Scotland.

National Health Service Waiting Lists

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Last year, the then health secretary promised that no one would be waiting more than 18 months for a national health service procedure by September 2023, but the most recent figures show that there are still 17,200 people on an NHS waiting list who have already waited over 18 months for hospital

procedures. That is yet another broken promise from a health secretary who has failed upwards. The result is people turning to private care. Figures that are out this week show that 40 per cent of all knee and hip replacements that are being carried out in Scotland are being self-funded by patients. Why does Humza Yousaf think that it is acceptable that almost 5,000 patients last year were forced to cover the costs of their hip or knee replacements because of his failures?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First of all, Anas Sarwar has every right, of course, to ask about the waiting times that our NHS is experiencing, but I say to him that, every time he asks the question, he fails to mention the biggest shock that our NHS has faced in its 75-year existence. Health services right across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland, are of course ensuring that we recover.

When it comes to the longest waits, again just to inject some facts into this exchange, I note that the number waiting over two years for a new out-patient appointment is down 59 per cent in Scotland, the number waiting over 18 months has reduced by 40.6 per cent and 34 per cent of specialties have fewer than 10 patients waiting over 52 weeks.

There is progress and there is recovery. Of course that recovery is going to take time, and what helps with it is making sure that we have NHS staffing near record levels, as it is under this Government, but also making sure that we do not lose a single day in the NHS to industrial action. I am pleased that this Scottish Government has ensured that our NHS staff remain the best paid in the entire UK.

Anas Sarwar: Surely the First Minister knew about Covid when he made the promise, last year, that the waits that I mentioned would be eradicated by this time this year. The First Minister may not like it, but this is happening on his watch. In the past financial year alone, 43,000 patients were treated privately in Scotland, which is an 8 per cent increase over the previous year. A total of 4,739 hip and knee replacements were paid for privately by patients, as were 7,805 cataract surgeries, 1,980 colonoscopies, 2,055 endoscopies, 995 hernia repairs and, most shockingly of all, 1,745 rounds of chemotherapy. Healthcare free at the point of need is a founding principle of our NHS. How can the Scottish National Party have let things get so bad that patients have to find cash to pay for life-saving cancer treatment?

The First Minister: Of course we do not want people to have to fund care out of their own pockets. We know the impact that the pandemic has had on our health service, including on those waiting lists. However, I go back to the point that

Anas Sarwar made: this is being seen in health systems right across the globe, let alone across the United Kingdom, as well as happening here in Scotland.

The figures from the Private Healthcare Information Network over the first quarter of 2023 show worrying trends, of course, in relation to those who access private healthcare, but they also show that Scotland has a lower rate of take-up of private healthcare compared with England and Wales. The rate of people who are self-funding for private in-patient day care is 16 per cent higher in England. In Wales—where the Labour Party is in charge—it is 51 per cent higher. That will be cold comfort for people who have to dig deep into their own pockets to pay for healthcare, but it is not unique to Scotland.

We will continue to see that recovery, to reduce waiting lists and to make sure that our NHS staff are the best paid in the UK, so that they continue to provide what is an excellent service to patients up and down Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: The number of people who go private each year is going up, and the First Minister's answers will be no comfort to the 43,000 patients who are being forced to pay privately. One person I spoke to in Cambuslang just a few weeks ago paid £15,000 for a hip replacement because the wait was three years. That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

In the middle of a cost of living crisis, when people are struggling to pay the bills, they should not also have to worry about the cost of getting sick. However, on the SNP's watch, 43,000 Scots are being forced to find £15,000 for a hip or knee replacement, £3,000 for cataract surgery, £3,000 for a colonoscopy or £4,000 for a hernia repair—and even cancer patients are being forced to find thousands of pounds for their chemotherapy. Those are patients in pain and heartbroken families who are trying to scrape together the cash. Some are even forced to remortgage their homes to pay for the care that they should be getting on the NHS. Why are more and more Scots being forced to pay the price for SNP incompetence and failure?

The First Minister: We are seeing the impacts of the global pandemic, which has impacted on every single health service, including the health service here in Scotland. If Anas Sarwar wants evidence of the recovery, there is more and more activity in the NHS. In quarter 2, in-patient day care activity was at its highest since the start of the pandemic. That is not the first, nor the second, but the sixth quarterly increase in a row, with 58,813 patients being seen in Q2. More and more in-patients and day care patients are being seen.

I am pleased that Anas Sarwar mentioned the cost of living crisis, because we are taking action to tackle that. Because of our action, it is estimated that 90,000 fewer children will be in absolute or relative poverty. That is in stark contrast to Anas Sarwar's summer of U-turns, in which he has aligned himself with cruel Tory policy after cruel Tory policy. We are unashamedly anti-poverty and unashamedly pro-growth. Anas Sarwar is unashamedly only pro-Starmer.

Paris Climate Agreement (UN Global Stocktake Report)

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking in response to the first United Nations global stocktake report on the Paris climate agreement. (S6F-02368)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There is simply no denying that the conclusions of the global stocktake report are deeply concerning and that all countries, including Scotland, must seek to do more. The report found that nothing less than radical decarbonisation and systemic transformation will do.

Scotland will, of course, play her part. Internationally, we will continue to urge greater ambition and action towards a just transition to net zero through our co-chairmanship of the Under2 Coalition. I will highlight the issue as a matter of urgency while at New York climate week, and we, of course, look forward to the 28th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP28. Clear decisions on fossil fuels, renewable energy and climate finance must be progressed with urgency.

At home, Scotland has made progress on our net zero journey, although we know that more has to be done. We will continue to work with communities, businesses and international partners towards a net zero future.

Ross Greer: As the First Minister said, Scotland has a deserved international reputation as a leader on climate action, but our domestic record needs to match up to that reputation. With Scottish Green policies such as removing peak-time rail fares, which will be introduced a few weeks from now, we are taking action to reduce emissions.

The First Minister said that he is about to join other world leaders at climate week and then at COP. What new actions is he bringing to the table to demonstrate Scotland's commitment to tackling this global emergency?

The First Minister: Ross Greer is absolutely right that it is incumbent on Governments right across the world to ensure that they bring urgency, pace and initiative to tackling the climate emergency. Scotland has already had a big impact on the global stage, particularly through our

pioneering commitment to addressing loss and damage. I am determined to keep building on that.

On new initiatives, that is why my programme for government committed to serious climate action: cheaper public transport through free bus travel, trialling the scrapping of peak rail fares on ScotRail—as Ross Greer mentioned—investing almost £5 billion in the net zero energy economy, a new climate change adaptation programme, the heat in buildings bill and the natural environment bill. On top of that, there is much more that we will continue to build on as we develop our new climate plan.

I look forward to hosting all party leaders so that we can get some consensus on the urgency that is required to tackle the climate emergency.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The Scottish Government has consistently failed to live up to our climate targets, which is bad news for the 38 per cent of households living in fuel poverty whose energy bills have increased. What does the First Minister say to the millions of people across the world, and here in Edinburgh, who will be campaigning on the streets this weekend to demand a just transition, given that his Government has flip-flopped on oil and gas—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the member.

Sarah Boyack: —and failed to deliver—*[Interruption.]* I am referring to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee meeting this week.

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Sarah Boyack: What does he say, given that the Government has failed to deliver the retrofitting of the homes of people who are living in fuel poverty?

The First Minister: Sarah Boyack would have more credibility on the issue if her party had not U-turned on its support for low-emission zones or, indeed, dumped its £28 billion green prosperity fund. That is the very point here. Time and again, the Scottish Government does not just talk the talk; it is prepared to walk the walk. We will take serious action to tackle the climate emergency, but it would really help if those parties that demand that we meet our targets do not then oppose every single measure that we bring to the chamber.

If Sarah Boyack and the Labour Party are serious about tackling the climate emergency, they should join us, support us and bring forward ideas that will help us to collectively tackle it. Do not simply dump the policies that you had and oppose the policies that we bring forward; support us, because collective action is needed to tackle the climate emergency.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the First Minister update the chamber on when we should expect to see the published update to the climate change plan?

The First Minister: The end of this year.

Offshore Wind

4. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of reports that no bids were received for offshore wind projects in the United Kingdom Government's latest contract for difference round, what action the Scottish Government is taking to encourage investment in offshore wind and hydrogen power in Scotland. (S6F-02358)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Jackie Dunbar exposes the UK Government's complete failure to capture one of the greatest opportunities for Scotland's net zero economy. Its inexplicable stance is anti-climate and anti-growth. Industry has sent the UK Government a clear signal that the strike price must increase, and we back those calls 100 per cent.

To ensure that we seize that opportunity, the Scottish Government supports the strategic investment model with public and private sector partners that is specifically aimed at enabling a move from project-led investment to sector-level investment. Later this year, we will launch the next tranche of hydrogen funding, in the form of the green hydrogen fund. That flagship fund will focus on supporting renewable hydrogen production from Scotland's abundant renewable energy resources, thereby seeking to give us first-mover advantage.

I hope that the UK Government will listen to the calls of UK industry and that we will have a successful future round.

Jackie Dunbar: A new report from Aberdeen's Robert Gordon University, published just this week, further reinforces that we cannot afford to get this wrong. We must see investment in renewable technologies gather pace. The Scottish National Party Scottish Government has shown its ambition by committing £500 million to a just transition fund, but that has to be matched by Westminster. Will the First Minister provide his response to the new report and an update on discussions with the UK Government on its matching the Scottish Government's just transition fund?

The First Minister: I welcome the report from Robert Gordon University. Jackie Dunbar is absolutely right. Successive UK Governments have taken billions and billions from our north-east and have not been prepared to put a fraction back in. The very least that the UK Government should do is match our £500 million just transition fund.

The latest auction round represents an abject failure to capitalise on Scotland's vast renewables potential.

I say to the UK Government that that not only harms our economy but seriously harms our planet. Over the summer, we have seen the disastrous visual impacts of the climate emergency. This is a time for climate leadership, but what we are getting from the UK Government is complete political abdication.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The fact that no bids were received should be a wake-up call for the Scottish Government. Offshore wind should be part of an energy mix; instead, the Scottish Government is putting all its eggs in one basket, and one that is considerably more expensive than it had predicted. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the member.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the First Minister look again at having a more balanced energy mix that includes nuclear energy?

The First Minister: The member rightly looks embarrassed—as he should be. To suggest that the Scottish Government is somehow responsible for the failure of the contract for difference auction, which the UK Government controls, is a seriously desperate response from the member. [Interruption.] If he does not want to listen to me, he should listen to the likes of Keith Anderson, who has said:

"This is a multi-billion pound lost opportunity to deliver low-cost energy for consumers and a wake-up call for Government."

Let us also listen to what Dan McGrail, the chief executive officer of RenewableUK, has said:

"These results should set alarm bells ringing in Government, as the UK's energy security and net zero goals can only be met if we have offshore wind as the backbone of our future energy system."

I agree with Dan McGrail and Keith Anderson. If the Conservatives had any influence in that regard, they would ensure that the UK Government listened to the industry, as opposed to listening to those who back fossil fuels alone.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Offshore wind is a sustainable source of energy and a key part of the Scottish Government's plans to reach its net zero targets. However, its first round of leasing sold our natural environment short, with a capped price per square kilometre. Will the Scottish Government ensure that any future leasing rounds are not undersold, in order to get the maximum amount possible to reinvest in public services?

The First Minister: Scotland has had the first devolved leasing round for offshore wind, which was for development in Scottish waters. It is the first leasing round in Scotland in a decade and will make a significant contribution to our public finances—not only the £750 million in revenue that it will bring to the public purse but the billions of pounds that it will create in opportunities for the supply chain. The cabinet secretary and I will be more than happy to speak to the member about what more we can do to improve future leasing rounds.

The point is that the Scottish Government believes in the vast potential of our renewables industry, in the face of a United Kingdom Government that has turned its back on Scotland's renewables potential. I hope that Beatrice Wishart and members of all political parties will join the SNP-led Scottish Government in putting pressure on the UK Government to do more to unlock Scotland's huge renewables potential.

Social Security Scotland (Complaints)

5. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to statistics reportedly showing that the number of complaints against Social Security Scotland has increased by 350 per cent in one year. (S6F-02371)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Social Security Scotland has introduced 13 Scottish Government benefits, seven of which are available only in Scotland, thanks to a total investment of £12 billion to support people who need assistance. In 2022-23, the agency received almost 370,000 applications, along with hundreds of thousands of phone calls and web chats.

Social security is a fundamental human right, which is why we have established a radically different benefit system that is built on dignity, fairness and respect. Our system vigorously promotes benefit take-up to ensure that as many people as possible get what they are entitled to, while, of course, mitigating the austerity impact of United Kingdom Government policies, within our fixed budgets.

In 2022-23, there were a total of 1,790 complaints, so complaint numbers remain low. In fact, in relation to total applications, that figure is less than 0.5 per cent.

Miles Briggs: I am sure that the First Minister must agree, though, that the situation is not acceptable. MSPs across the chamber will be aware of increasing costs being experienced by our constituents and of a rise in complaints. SNP ministers have said that all is well, but we are seeing increased processing times, delays in benefit roll-out and the possibility of the full

devolution of all benefits not happening until 2026. Therefore, my question to the First Minister is: when does he expect all benefits to be devolved to Social Security Scotland?

The First Minister: I am more than happy to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice to write in detail to Miles Briggs not only on the specific question that he has asked but on the significant improvements that we are making in relation to application processing times.

Social Security Scotland is a success story. Because of the existence of the agency and the actions that we have taken in relation to social security and taxation, an estimated 90,000 children will be lifted out of absolute and relative poverty this year. Poverty levels in Scotland are still too high, but, while we have seen rises in poverty across the UK, the situation in Scotland has stabilised—of course, we want to make sure that those levels reduce.

The final thing that I would say to Miles Briggs relates to the agency's satisfaction levels—we will furnish him with details of those. Of those who interact with Social Security Scotland, 81 per cent, which is more than eight out of 10, agreed that it was easy to contact Social Security Scotland, and 94 per cent, which is more than nine out of 10, agreed that Social Security Scotland staff treated them with kindness. I suspect that that is in stark contrast to the situation with regard to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Can the First Minister confirm that user survey results demonstrate that Scotland's social security system is adhering to the founding principles of dignity, fairness and respect, which demonstrates that people are benefiting from the powers over social security being in the hands of this Parliament?

The First Minister: Collette Stevenson is absolutely right. The survey shows just that. In fact, again, with regard to satisfaction levels, 89 per cent of respondents—almost nine out of 10 people—said that Social Security Scotland staff were able to help them, and the same number said that Social Security Scotland staff are knowledgeable about benefits.

As I have already said, through the actions that this Government has taken and the hard work of the excellent team of Social Security Scotland, we have seen significant results when it comes to tackling poverty, and child poverty in particular. That would have been impossible if not for the hard work of the excellent staff at Social Security Scotland and, of course, the ethos that we have had from the very beginning around dignity, fairness and respect.

Repeat Offending

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to tackle repeat offending, in light of a recent report that found that people who experience frequent and serious repeat violence often do not bring this to the attention of the authorities. (S6F-02369)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government commissioned the report that the member refers to precisely because we knew that victims of repeat violence often do not report their experiences, and it is important for us to understand the reasons why they do not and how we can help them to access that support.

Although there are fewer crimes and fewer victims than there were more than a decade ago, the impact on victims, particularly of sexual and violent crime, can be absolutely devastating. That is why we are investing in law enforcement, crime prevention and the reduction of offending and reoffending through a range of activity, including our violence prevention framework. We are also putting victims of crime at the heart of our justice system through our Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, and we have invested £93 million over the past five years to support victims.

Pauline McNeill: I welcome the report by the Scottish Government, which seeks to better understand repeat violent victimisation. It found that men who experience repeat physical violence in Scotland live in deprived areas, have experienced homelessness or live in supported accommodation and are in recovery from addiction, whereas intimate partner abuse was highest among women aged 16 to 24 who live in deprived areas. The report talks about local communities led by peer mentors and those with lived experience, who are uniquely positioned to support people who are experiencing repeat violence. That is a slightly different perspective on crime. With that in mind, what can be done to support grass-roots organisations, which the research found are quite limited by insecure funding?

The First Minister: Pauline McNeill has made some very important points. Her points are exactly why we will continue to support programmes such as the Medics Against Violence programme and, of course, the delivery of the excellent navigator programme. That is why we have invested and continue to invest in the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, which has been hailed as a great exemplar globally.

I could not agree more with Pauline McNeill on supporting grass-roots organisations. The investment in third sector partners is absolutely

crucial. That is why more than 20 organisations have received awards from our victim-centred approach fund, including Victim Support Scotland, which was awarded more than £18 million to support the families bereaved by crime service. We will continue to invest in those grass-roots interventions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will, of course, be more than happy to continue the conversation with Pauline McNeill. We have received that excellent report, and it is really important that we act on what it tells us.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

Motherwell Concert Hall and Theatre (Closure)

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Does the First Minister share my dismay that Motherwell concert hall and theatre was closed with immediate effect until further notice due to the discovery of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the roof of the building? Of course, safety is absolutely paramount. Motherwell civic theatre and concert hall is a venue beloved by professional and amateur performers, not least the cast of the acclaimed Christmas panto. Will the Scottish Government engage with the local authority on the challenges faced by that important local cultural venue?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Yes, we will continue to engage with local authorities, as we have done throughout not just the past few weeks but the past few months, and I am more than happy for the cabinet secretary to speak directly to Clare Adamson.

Clare Adamson is right. These are difficult issues, and it is really important that local authorities and others continue to align themselves with the Institution of Structural Engineers guidance. That is what partners seek to do and that, of course, empowers them to take the appropriate mitigations, which can, unfortunately, include at times having to close down buildings where it is felt that that is necessary.

I am more than happy to ensure that the cabinet secretary writes to Clare Adamson, and I am sure that she will be happy to engage with her on that very important issue.

Currie Primary School (Before and After-school Clubs)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Childcare formed the cornerstone of the First Minister's programme for government. It is also central to child development and allowing parents and carers to get back to work.

Yesterday, out of the blue, Currie primary school families lost their before and after-school clubs. Parents have contacted me desperate for help, with one unsure about how they can balance childcare and their job as a teacher in Dalkeith. Will the First Minister meet me to discuss solutions to that very pressing local issue?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I would be more than happy for Sue Webber to furnish the Government with the full details of that. Obviously, she has given a synopsis of the situation. The cabinet secretary will, of course, be more than happy to meet her.

Sue Webber is right. Childcare is not only a cornerstone of my programme for government; it has been a cornerstone of the Government's approach since 2007. We now have, of course, a very generous childcare offer, which I am very keen to build on. I will ensure that the funds are available to pay the staff in the private, voluntary and independent sector, who do a phenomenal job in providing childcare, £12 an hour.

If Sue Webber can furnish the Government with the full details, I will ensure that the cabinet secretary engages with her on the issue.

Disabled People in Poverty

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): This week, disabled people in Glasgow have written to all MSPs in the region, including the First Minister, to say:

"Despite our large numbers, disabled people have never been a priority for the Scottish Government."

The Glasgow Centre for Population Health has described the situation as a "human catastrophe", and the chief executive officer of the Glasgow Disability Alliance has said that the result is that

"Disabled people are dying of poverty, and nobody knows and nobody cares".

Does the First Minister know that it is this bad for disabled people in the city that he represents, and does he care enough to commit to taking action to address it, including action to end non-residential care charges?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I do understand, because I met the Glasgow Disability Alliance just a matter of weeks ago. I heard from the members of the board of the Glasgow Disability Alliance and from Tressa Burke, who very powerfully, over the years, has articulated the concerns of disabled people living in Scotland.

That is why my programme for government committed to reopening the independent living fund, which was an ask from disabled people's organisations, and that is why we will continue to work with those organisations to see what more we can do. That will include ending non-residential

care charges, which we are still committed to doing by the end of this parliamentary session.

However, I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that that will come at a significant cost. Therefore, it is really important that when Labour engages with us, it does not turn its back on progressive taxation, as Anas Sarwar seems to have done, or turn its back on any ability for us to raise revenue. All of these well-intentioned initiatives can make a difference, but they will cost money. It is so important that we engage in a credible discussion around how we raise that revenue.

Female Medical Students in Afghanistan (Visas)

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Linda Norgrove Foundation in my constituency has been desperately trying to get 20 female medical students out of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and into medical schools in Scotland. However, they are being stymied by United Kingdom visa issues. The foundation was extremely appreciative of the help of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills when they met with her last month. Is there anything further the Scottish Government can do to help these inspirational women?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I hope that all of us in the Parliament can unite to back this particular cause. I pay tribute to the excellent work that the Linda Norgrove Foundation does. I think that it is incumbent on all of us to put pressure on the UK Government and the Home Office to help, given that we all know how difficult the plight is of women in Afghanistan.

The cabinet secretary, Jenny Gilruth, has engaged with the foundation. My understanding is that we have also engaged with and written to the UK Government and the Home Office on the matter. I will see if there is anything more that the Scottish Government can possibly do, but I hope that we as a Parliament can join together to say collectively to the UK Government that its response—its foot dragging—on this particular issue is, I am afraid, simply not good enough, and it is letting down women and girls in Afghanistan.

Ferries (Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa)

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cost of building the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa is an on-going scandal. We do not know when they will be finished, what the final bill will be and what has happened to all the money. The Auditor General says he needs extra powers in order to find out what has happened to £128 million of money that was spent by Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd—FMEL. Will the First Minister grant those powers?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There have been a number of inquiries with which the Scottish Government and those at Ferguson's have co-operated fully. Hundreds of documents on what is happening at Ferguson's have been published and put into the public domain.

I will not hesitate in apologising to our island communities for the fact that they are still waiting on the completion of hulls 801 and 802. What I will not do is apologise for the fact that the Scottish Government stepped in and made sure that we secured and saved hundreds of jobs in Inverclyde.

Police Scotland (Funding)

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Police Scotland recently released a report highlighting that this year's funding allocation represents a real-terms reduction. As a result, the number of police officers has been reduced to 16,600 in Scotland. At the same time, the number of calls being made to Police Scotland is reportedly only increasing. Can the First Minister advise what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that Police Scotland is suitably funded to deal with this demand?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I say to the member that we are funding Police Scotland suitably. It has received an increase of 6.3 per cent—an £80 million increase—and not only has it had an increase to its budget, but recorded crime is at one of its lowest levels in almost 50 years. When we look at Police Scotland officers' pay, we see that they are the best-paid police officers in the United Kingdom. Therefore, we are making sure that Police Scotland is appropriately funded.

If Foysoyl Choudhury thinks that there should be an increase to that budget, his party cannot turn its back on progressive taxation or on any way in which we can raise revenue to ensure that our public services are appropriately funded.

AquafilUK Factory (Closure)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The AquafilUK factory in Kilbirnie, which carries out interlacing and twisting for the carpet yarn industry, has been unexpectedly earmarked for closure as early as next month, with the loss of up to 40 jobs. That will be a devastating blow to the workers and the wider community. The company blamed "Covid and Brexit" for the

"challenging ... conditions in the UK",

as well as a doubling of energy costs. I will meet with the company on site tomorrow. What steps can the Scottish Government take to assist the company and the workforce and lessen the impact of any proposed redundancies?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Neil Gray will be happy to meet with the member about Aquafil and we will see what can be done, where necessary, to prevent job losses. If that unfortunately becomes a material reality, we will see where we can help people affected into alternative employment. It is interesting that Kenny Gibson says that three factors have contributed: Covid, Brexit and high energy costs. Covid affected businesses across the globe, but the other two factors are unique to the United Kingdom Government and to the UK—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The self-inflicted damage that Brexit has done and, indeed, the utter mismanagement of the UK public finances, are why we are seeing high energy costs and high inflation, which are damaging businesses across Scotland.

Scottish Government (Freedom of Information Request)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): During First Minister's question time on 22 June, I raised a point of order that the First Minister had misled the chamber. On 29 August, the First Minister wrote to tell me what he had intended to say, but what he has stated to me in writing is not true. A freedom of information request reveals that weeks of civil service time and effort were spent in trying to engineer a face-saving response, rather than the First Minister simply admitting that he had misled us all. Does the First Minister share people's concern that the Scottish civil service appears to be increasingly politicised, which could destroy public trust? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the member.

Liam Kerr: What will he do to prevent such partisan protection for ministers who intentionally mislead in the future?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is incredible that I have a member who is telling me what I was meaning to say and think. It is incredible that we have Liam Kerr talking about disrespecting the Parliament. I am meant to take a lecture from the Conservatives about disrespecting Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us treat one another with courtesy and respect. Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Do not worry, Presiding Officer, I will get to them about courtesy and respect, because I am meant to take a lecture about disrespecting Parliament from the

Conservatives, who illegally shut down the Parliament. I am meant to take lectures about truth and honesty from the party that gave us Boris Johnson. The difference between myself and Liam Kerr, and between the Scottish National Party and the Conservatives, is that the SNP wants to power our just transition and our offshore renewables sector. The Tories, I am afraid, just want to hold us back.

United Kingdom Immigration Policy

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): New data released this morning shows that the vast majority of Scots view immigration as a positive benefit that enriches Scotland culturally and economically. Can the First Minister update the chamber on his interactions with the United Kingdom Government about labour shortages in key sectors as a result of the UK's archaic immigration policies?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Audrey Nicoll articulates very well the positive benefits of migration. In fact, virtually every study under the sun shows that migrants who have come to the UK have contributed more than they have taken from it. I have to say that the hostile environment that has been created by successive UK Governments is woeful. The UK has become a pathetically insular country. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: Not only is it morally wrong but, undoubtedly, it cuts our nose to spite our face in terms of the economic potential that migrants could bring to Scotland and, indeed, the rest of the UK. Frankly, I have lost hope for the Conservative UK Government when it comes to migration, but I would plead with Anas Sarwar to use any influence that he has with Keir Starmer in the UK Labour Party, as it seems to be engaged in a race to the bottom on the issue of migration. That will not help the UK and it certainly will not help Scotland.

Trains (Short Running)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A persistent issue for many years has been the short running of trains on the Fife to Edinburgh service, which is well used by my constituents. When I raised that with ScotRail and the previous Minister for Transport, I was assured that it would be resolved, but it continues. Today, for example, the 08:11 service from Inverkeithing—a busy service—had just two carriages, which left passengers stranded on the platform and having to wait 20 minutes for the next service, which would mean that they arrived late at their place of work.

The reduction in peak-time fares is welcome, but it is no use to people if they cannot get on a train in the first place. When will that practice finally end?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): In the time that we have been in office, we have invested significantly in the rolling stock in Scotland. I know that the previous Minister for Transport held a meeting with Fife MSPs in the spring to discuss the issues that Murdo Fraser mentioned.

I am more than happy for the cabinet secretary to write to Murdo Fraser and, where appropriate, to meet Fife MSPs so that we ensure that the people of Fife get the service that they absolutely require.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Single-use Vapes (Environmental Impact)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10284, in the name of Gillian Mackay, on the environmental impact of single-use vapes.

The debate will be concluded without any question being put. It is heavily subscribed, so members will have to stick to their speaking allocations. I have already spoken to those who will speak later in the debate, as they will be required to speak to a slightly tighter schedule.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes reported concerns regarding the environmental impact of single-use vapes, including in the Central Scotland region; recognises that, in the year ending January 2023, there were reportedly an estimated 543,000 vapers in Scotland, of which, 9% were under 16 and 14% were under 18 years of age; understands that most under-18 e-cigarette users prefer single-use vapes; welcomes the publication of a review that the Scottish Government commissioned Zero Waste Scotland to carry out into the environmental impact of single-use e-cigarettes; understands that, according to Zero Waste Scotland, the total emissions associated with disposable vapes in 2022 were estimated to have been up to 4,292 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e), or the equivalent of around 2,100 cars on Scotland's roads; further understands that, in the 52 weeks to early April 2023, the number of disposable vapes consumed in Scotland was estimated to be between 21 and 26 million units; understands that the weight of packaging and materials discarded as a result of single-use e-cigarette consumption in Scotland is currently between 800 and 1,000 tonnes per year; applauds the work of campaigners and organisations such as Laura Young and ASH Scotland to raise awareness of this issue; considers that the environmental and health impacts of vaping products are rising, and notes the view that action to tackle this is required from retailers, manufacturers and the Scottish Government.

12:47

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I recognise the strength of feeling on the issue in the Parliament and I thank everyone who will contribute today. The fact that we are so tight on time is heartening and points to how seriously the Parliament takes the issue.

I know that work is going on in many offices across the Parliament to tackle the issue, and I thank those who attended one or both of the round tables that I have chaired. I thank campaigners such as Laura Young, the Marine Conservation Society, ASH Scotland, Asthma + Lung UK, the British Heart Foundation, the Royal College of

Paediatrics and Child Health, the *Daily Record*, *The Inverness Courier* and the many others who have helped and contributed to the campaign so far. There is more to do and more round tables to come, and I encourage everyone to join the discussion.

I thank the Scottish Government—particularly my colleague Lorna Slater—and Zero Waste Scotland for the work that was commissioned on the environmental impact of single-use vapes, which my motion mentions. The review estimated that the total emissions that were associated with single-use vapes in 2022 were between 3,375 and 4,292 tonnes of CO₂. That is the equivalent of the emissions from 2,100 cars on the road. It also showed that the weight of packaging and materials that are discarded as a result of single-use e-cigarette consumption in Scotland is between 800 and 1,000 tonnes a year. Other figures show that 1.3 million single-use vapes were thrown away every week in the United Kingdom last year, although that figure is likely to be far higher now.

This is a looming environmental catastrophe. Local authorities and waste-processing companies are concerned about the fire risk that is associated with the incorrect disposal of such devices. In addition, the devices are difficult to recycle, as they are made of mixed materials, and the lithium batteries are particularly resource intensive to make. Many discarded batteries are ending up on our beaches and in green spaces, as well as in our towns and cities. I have seen discarded batteries between cobbles in Edinburgh and at home in Falkirk. Some of our most iconic streets are being littered by the products, and the sheer number of them being thrown away is astonishing.

In the middle of a climate crisis, the last thing that we need is to have another polluting single-use product, and a ban on disposables is the minimum that we need in order to protect the planet. There are also issues with the packaging for refillable vapes, and we need to address that now to ensure that we are not merely moving the litter problem down the line.

There is an issue with illegal vapes. We do not know if they are any more environmentally damaging than others. Their composition is much more difficult to find, especially when new products come on the market. Preventing their importation by examining the current registration and licensing scheme should be a priority. We will need a four-nation approach to ensure that the importation of vapes is tracked. I will be writing to Scottish Government and United Kingdom Government ministers in the coming days to ask them to work with me on a way forward.

It is essential to consider the health, environmental, trading standards, licensing and regulation issues as a whole when we are dealing

with single-use vapes. To reduce the number of vapes that are discarded, we need to help people to give up nicotine altogether; regulate, tax and license the products better; stop the supply of single-use vapes to young people; and—as I know is crucial for many members—prevent young people from being tempted to take up vaping. We need retailers to step up and do what they can to reduce the environmental and health impact of the products.

I wrote to retailers to ask them to put the products behind cover and to treat all nicotine-based products in the same way. I got very few responses. Those that I did receive said that retailers would wait to comply with whatever regulations were introduced.

We should be using our current regulation-making powers to make retailers put the products behind cover. We need to introduce plain packaging, and ensure that flavours are removed or restricted heavily, so that we do not have blue bubble gum, candyfloss or rainbow unicorn, to name a few. I expect that, in discussing flavours, we will hear the usual cries that adults enjoy colours and flavours, too. This may be coming from me—someone who loves a pick-'n'-mix or two—but I know no adult who would be influenced by the name “Rainbow Unicorn” to try a vape. However, I do know plenty of young children who would be tempted by it. Advertising and the presence of the products in television programmes and social media needs to be taken seriously, and I am grateful to the Advertising Standards Authority for—it wrote to me in the past couple of days detailing this—the action that it is already taking to address that. We need to remain vigilant, however.

We often get branded as killjoys when we try to good things in environmental and public health policy areas, and we may be seen as stopping people from doing things that they enjoy, but the issue is far too important for us to be worried about being seen in that way, and I encourage colleagues from all parties to take a bold stance on the matter. For the sake of the environment and—importantly for all of us—for the sake of the health and wellbeing of today’s children and young people, that has to be done. They should have been the generation with the lowest-ever rate of nicotine addiction. That is still absolutely achievable but only if all of us put their needs at the forefront of our minds.

12:53

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome this important debate, and I thank my colleague Gillian Mackay for bringing it to the chamber. The motion for the debate and Gillian Mackay’s opening speech say it all, and I

will not repeat the shocking statistics contained in the motion on the devastating environmental impact that disposable vapes are having, although I will go on to say a bit more about their impact on children and young people.

I am delighted that, in its programme for government, the Scottish Government has committed to tackle the damage that is done by single-use vapes, and that it is consulting on a proposal to ban their sale. Scotland is leading the way in the UK on this hugely important issue, and it is a perfect example of our Government saying, “No. We will not allow the damage to continue in our country.” Good legislation protects people and the environment, and I am proud that we are leading the way.

The harm that disposable vapes do to our parks, rivers and beaches is incredibly serious. Millions of vapes are littered every year, causing significant and increasing litter clear-up and waste management costs for local authorities. Those vapes contain copper wires and lithium batteries, which are incredibly dangerous to children and animals, and are hugely difficult to dispose of responsibly. It is my understanding that 29 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities, including East Dunbartonshire Council in my constituency, have passed motions supporting a ban.

The surge in vaping by young people, as highlighted by leading health charities such as ASH Scotland and Asthma + Lung UK, is also incredibly concerning and, as Gillian Mackay said, is driven by the popularity of cheap, sweet-flavoured, brightly coloured disposable vapes. Just as alcopops once did, those vapes hook children into a world of addiction. In a previous debate on the topic, I highlighted the supposedly cool online merchandise aimed at kids, which allows them to vape undetected by parents or teachers. Make no mistake: this is an insidious industry. As ASH Scotland has pointed out, most vapes include nicotine, which is highly addictive, and toxic e-liquids that have not been safety tested for inhalation and threaten to damage growing lungs.

The number of primary school children who are vaping has reached epidemic levels, which is a major public health concern. A single disposable vape can last for 600 puffs, which is the equivalent of smoking 20 cigarettes. According to Zero Waste Scotland, the lithium batteries used in the most popular disposable vapes could be recharged up to 500 times, if design allowed.

Single-use vapes cause immense danger to the environment. Let us be clear: they were never a good thing and are produced only to make profits for large companies. An investigation by the *Daily Record* revealed that a school fire in the Borders just before the start of this year’s summer holidays was blamed on the lithium battery of a vape

shorting inside a metal bin in a stairwell. The *Daily Record* has been at the forefront of calls for a ban on single-use vapes, highlighting the health concerns, and I commend it for that. Campaigner Laura Young, known as the vape crusader, told the newspaper:

“Teachers have a hard enough job to do without being on monitoring duties making sure kids don’t have vapes.”

Last month, a survey showed that four out of five Scots back the outlawing of disposable vapes. The YouGov poll found that 77 per cent of Scottish adults either strongly or somewhat support a ban on the products. Figures for the UK as a whole are identical. Earlier this year, Keep Scotland Beautiful called on all Scottish retailers to voluntarily stop displaying single-use vapes, following in the footsteps of Waitrose, which has taken them off its shelves.

Let us get rid of these products, which do nothing but harm to Scotland’s people and environment.

12:57

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to the debate. I congratulate Gillian Mackay on securing the debate and acknowledge her work in this area.

Many members here in the chamber know that I am happy to work alongside my colleague Emma Harper as co-convenor of the cross-party group on lung health, and it is my privilege to continue my role as the parliamentary smoking cessation champion for Asthma + Lung UK.

Vapes, especially single-use disposable vapes, are a ticking time bomb and one of the biggest challenges that we face, which is in no small part due to the age and demographic of those who manufacturers are unashamedly and scandalously targeting.

As Gillian Mackay’s motion recognises,

“in the year ending January 2023, there were ... an estimated 543,000 vapers in Scotland, of which, 9% were under 16 and 14% were under 18”.

Those figures will only get worse unless something dramatic is done.

In the past few months, the Local Government Association in England reported that, for the first time, its members have called for single-use vapes to be banned on environmental and health grounds. The LGA also points out that single-use vapes are designed as a unit and that their batteries cannot be separated from the plastic, making it almost impossible to recycle them without special treatment. The lithium batteries inside the plastic cases can increase sharply in temperature, as we have already heard, becoming

flammable, which is a major concern. They cost the taxpayer millions of pounds in damage to equipment and for the specialist treatment that is needed to deal with hazardous waste.

Research by the non-profit organisation, Material Focus, has shown that up to 5 million single-use vape units are being thrown away in the United Kingdom every year. That is more than four times the figure for 2022. It amounts to eight vapes a second being discarded, with the lithium in the products being enough to create around 5,000 electric car batteries a year. Those are frightening statistics.

I also echo the extreme concerns of groups such as the Scotland wing of Asthma + Lung UK and ASH Scotland, as well as parents, carers and teachers regarding the impact that vaping is having on children and young people. We know from the reports that we have seen and the campaigns that are being conducted how harmful it is becoming.

The phenomenon is deeply worrying, and it is being primarily targeted at young people and children. It appears to be fashionable at the moment and the display of that behaviour is encouraging peer groups to think that vaping is good and cool when it is anything but. We need to manage that situation and challenge it.

Anti-smoking groups and charities, as well as medical professionals, are now especially concerned about vaping. The designs and flavours of products, particularly those with fruity, bubble gum or ice flavours, appear to attract children. Those flavours and how the products are packaged are an attempt to encourage young people to vape. They are often sold at checkouts, which is similar to what happened with sweets and confectionery, and retailers will have to take a strong view on that. Strict new measures to regulate the display and marketing of vapes, such as those that are in place to deal with tobacco, are needed now.

13:01

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin as other members have by congratulating Gillian Mackay on securing this members’ business debate on the environmental impacts of single-use vapes and on the work that she and her team have done to raise the issue in Parliament.

As members of the Scottish Parliament, we are in a unique position to use our platform to amplify the work of campaigners across the country. I therefore hope that everyone in today’s debate will join me in commending the efforts of environmental campaigner Laura Young for her tireless work on the issue. In fact, it was after

hearing about Laura's work that I first became involved in the issue.

Laura was kind enough to take me out on a vape walk, which was an opportunity to go out with her and walk the streets of Dundee to see whether we could find any discarded vapes, while learning more about the issue on the way. As well as giving up her time to tackle the issue and to meet and educate me, Laura encouraged local student activists to get involved. She is inspiring the next generation of environmental campaigners, so I take the opportunity today to put on the record my thanks to Laura for her perseverance and commitment. I say to her that she should keep campaigning—she is getting results.

Back in Dundee, on our vape walk, in just one hour Laura and I found 63 discarded single-use vapes in and around the university campus. Laura explained that that was not unusual, especially following a Friday or Saturday night out, so we decided to make some inquiries on campus and in the local shops that sell disposable vapes to find out what the realistic alternative to littering was. We found that there were no safe disposal points in and around the shops that were selling the products.

The best that we could hope for was that people would dispose of single-use vapes in ordinary waste bins. The problem with simply putting them in the bin is that, although it keeps them off the streets and makes the streets look nicer, it does not make the environment any cleaner because they will eventually end up in landfill or incinerators, still polluting our soil and air.

Worse still, as we have heard, there have been multiple instances of what are known as zombie batteries in vapes that have been improperly disposed of causing fires and hazards at waste processing sites, which puts the workers there at risk. That has led to calls for improved recycling facilities to help to deal with the mounting number of disposable vapes.

However, disposable vapes do not harm the environment only when they are discarded after use; they also have an impact at source. Although they will be used for just one day or night, they use scarce resources. We simply cannot afford to discard things such as the lithium in the batteries that power the vapes after just one use. That lithium could instead be used to power our transition away from fossil fuels.

Therefore, I do not believe that the answer is improved recycling or design regulations. Instead, there must be an outright ban on single-use vapes in Scotland. Since my first vape walk with Laura, support for a ban has grown. Starting with Dundee City Council in the region that I represent—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Ms Villalba.

Mercedes Villalba: Okay. Twenty-six councils now support a ban, along with a range of organisations, so—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask you to stop, Ms Villalba. I indicated at the beginning of the debate that I would rigorously enforce the time limits to give everyone a chance to speak.

13:06

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Gillian Mackay on securing debating time on this vital matter.

Just after the debate began, I received an answer to a written question in which I asked the Scottish Government whether it intended to increase the fines for retailers that sell to under-18s, as has been proposed by the UK Vaping Industry Association. The answer from the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Jenni Minto, was no. I hope that the Scottish Government will reconsider that.

By 2021, the number of Scots who smoked had dropped to 11 per cent following legislative changes, including the banning of smoking in enclosed public places and workplaces and the banning of the sale of packs of 10 cigarettes and menthol cigarettes, but there is still a huge issue in many communities, given that 32 per cent of adults in our poorest income quintile smoke, whereas only 6 per cent in the most prosperous quintile do. It is now evident that one nicotine addiction has been replaced by another.

When they entered the market, vapes were said to deliver nicotine while avoiding many of the harmful ingredients in cigarettes, yet scientists are still unclear about the extent of the damage that vapes cause, particularly to children and young adults.

Gillian Mackay: Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: Sadly, I will not. I would love to but, unfortunately, I have only four minutes.

Given that it is estimated that 76,000 under-18s in Scotland vape and that they use primarily single-use vapes, it is evident that those colourful, fruit-flavoured, cheap devices are no longer only a means of quitting smoking. For as long as we allow single-use vapes to be sold in shops where they are placed next to sweets and often put on special offer, we will encourage younger people to damage their health.

I welcome recent reports that the UK Government will also explore the banning of single-use vapes following consultation on youth

vaping. However, last week, it was reported that the Tories accepted a £350,000 donation from Sandeep Singh Chadha, director of Supreme 8 Ltd, a UK-based company that distributes Elf Bars, which are vapes that are regularly found littered around Scotland. Elf Bar flavours include watermelon, bubble gum and cotton candy ice, which are unequivocally aimed at enticing children and young people.

The UK Government's official briefing on banning free vape samples being distributed to children endorsed Juul Labs, claiming that the company was a leader in combating youth vaping. That same company has received the most complaints of any vape-producing company for fuelling an epidemic of youth vaping in the US, where it agreed to pay out more than \$1 billion to settle claims that it unlawfully promoted products to children. That is highly concerning, and it suggests that the UK Government's policy on youth vaping could be determined by the interests of the industry, rather than on the basis of the evidence.

We know that tobacco companies profit from industry-induced nicotine addiction and that they attract people as young as possible. The UK cigarette market is the largest in western Europe—in 2021, it was worth £2.6 billion. Given that the UK's five top-selling tobacco companies held more than a third of shares in the global e-cigarette market as of 2021, it is clear that the so-called health benefits of vaping are not the driver for further increasing sales.

The World Health Organization has described tobacco industry interests as

“fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed to the aims of public health”.

Those same companies are currently dictating the vaping market that tens of thousands of children and young people buy into. The earlier children and young adults become addicted to nicotine, the higher the likelihood that they will continue to buy vapes for the rest of their lives or switch to cigarettes.

Ten per cent of young vape users admit to throwing the devices on the ground after use, as Laura Young's campaign to ban disposable vapes highlighted through regular litter picks. I am taking part in a litter pick on a beach on Monday, so no doubt I will find some, too.

Almost half of young vapers said that the packaging does not provide any disposal information such as where to send used batteries. In the past year, 13 million disposable vapes were incorrectly disposed of in Scotland, including 2.6 million that were littered.

Given that e-cigarette companies are not taking responsibility for the health impacts of the waste pollution that they cause, it is essential that the Scottish Government acts to ban the devices, which harm the environment and the wellbeing of Scots. With several other European countries considering bans, Scotland taking steps to stop the sale of single-use vapes is a significant opportunity—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: —to re-establish ourselves as a leading public health nation. I support the motion.

13:10

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I join members in thanking Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is an issue that I have spoken about before, and it is one of real concern.

It does not seem that long ago that vaping companies were lobbying me in meetings in my office, trying to get my support. To their surprise, I was strongly against universal access. They thought that I would support them because vapes were being marketed as a tool to quit smoking. Indeed, that is the one area in which I support their use, particularly as a medical intervention recommended by a medical professional.

I well remember asking the representatives of one vaping company about who owned it. Of course, I knew that it was a tobacco company. The question that I put to them was whether they were really suggesting that tobacco companies were producing vaping products to help their customers to stop using their products, thereby putting themselves out of business. By that logic, once they had helped every smoker to quit, there would be no need for any of their products. If vapes were solely for the purpose of smoking cessation, why were there so many flavours and additives to draw in users and potential users? I informed them that I was not that gullible. Stephanie Callaghan and I attended one of those meetings together, and she saw my frustration with that particular vaping company.

One thing that concerns me is that people can go into significant high street confectionery stores and find walls of single-use vaping products. Everything that I was concerned about back when I was in those meetings has manifested and then some.

I have a daughter in secondary school, and I am shocked at the level of vaping among pupils. There is anecdotal evidence—and my daughter thinks—that as much as half the student

population has tried or regularly uses vaping products. Moreover, there is a whole microindustry around students buying and selling the products in schools, which is evidenced by the quantity of products confiscated daily by campus policemen. More significantly, the number of students smoking tobacco, marijuana or worse remains high and is climbing. Vaping is a door to addiction and a step towards using more harmful products; it is not just about smoking cessation, as the marketing says.

Single-use vapes are a health hazard in and of themselves, as Gillian Mackay said, because so many of them are found on our beaches and in public spaces, and recycling lithium is incredibly difficult, especially from vapes.

I know that we are short of time, Deputy Presiding Officer, so I will be brief to try to give you some time back.

We need to regulate vapes much more effectively and keep them out of the hands of schoolchildren. The marketing budgets of tobacco firms have been used to entice entirely new customers, which will lead to the use of even more harmful products. The use of vapes is a habit, as well as a social statement. Peer pressure is a key driver; after all, it is not really smoking, is it? As to the wonderful flavour of bubble gum, for goodness' sake—yeah, that is really aimed at adults wanting to quit. It is too easy for pupils to be drawn in, making the step to the next level of substance use a bit easier.

As a Parliament, we can surely come together. There are things that we could do and steps that we could—and have to—take to ensure that we stamp out the use of single-use vapes. I thank Gillian Mackay for giving me the opportunity to raise the issue once again.

13:14

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I, too, thank Gillian Mackay for securing the debate, and I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions, which have covered many aspects of the issue.

I chair the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness; I will try to limit myself to the work that we have done on those areas and I will highlight areas that have not been mentioned.

The Child Accident Prevention Trust has recently issued a warning about the fact that hospitals are reporting growing numbers of children accidentally swallowing liquid nicotine from e-cigarette refills and disposables. There is a risk of poisoning from swallowing e-cigarette liquid; the symptoms are usually mild and include

nausea and vomiting, but serious poisoning can happen after swallowing larger amounts. As with medicines or cleaning products, e-cigarettes should be kept away from children and toddlers. Although no deaths have been reported in the UK, a two-year-old girl from Israel was fatally poisoned from swallowing an e-cigarette refill, which reminds us to keep nicotine products of all kinds away from children and toddlers. As Katrina Phillips from CAPT has said,

“Babies put everything in their mouths – it’s how they explore the world around them. Toddlers are intensely curious – if you leave your bag on the floor, they’ll be in there like a shot. So remember to keep harmful things like e-cigarette refills where small children can’t find them.”

That is the tip of the iceberg. As we know, disposable vapes and refillables contain lithium iron batteries. The cross-party group has returned to that issue many times because of the danger of ingestion of lithium iron batteries for babies and toddlers. Yet, we are discarding those batteries into our environment where, as Gillian Mackay has said, they can easily be picked up—these things break up when they are disposed of, so you get the plastics and the broken bits of copper, which is both an environmental issue and a serious issue for children.

The cross-party group also worked closely with the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland, which has talked about the complexity of the regulatory landscape with regard to those products. The products that are bought online often do not come from reputable production sources—I use the word “reputable” ironically, because I do not think that any of them are particularly reputable. SCOTSS has identified that products that come from the internet and are delivered directly to homes contain more nicotine than is recommended under the European Union and British standards as well as more complex chemicals, which have not been tested for human use, and in greater volumes. They are poorly designed products that are more likely to lead to the other issue that has been of concern to the cross-party group, namely zombie batteries, which have already been mentioned.

Thermal runaway can happen in any lithium battery. If people want to know how important that issue is, they should consider that people who go through an airport to go on holiday are asked whether they have any lithium iron battery products in their luggage—that is because it is too dangerous for them to go in the hold in case a thermal runaway happens during a flight. Yet, we are discarding these products in the volumes that Alexander Stewart mentioned when he quoted the report, which I was going to use, too.

There is complete consensus that we have to do something about the issue. I welcome the Scottish

Government's consulting on the ban of disposable vapes and I hope that it can lead to greater regulation of the product throughout the UK.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious that a large number of members still wish to participate in the debate. I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 8.14.3 to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With the discipline that members have shown in speaking, I should be able to protect the four minutes of the remaining members. I call Colin Smyth for up to four minutes.

13:18

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Gillian Mackay for introducing her motion.

The great vape debate is often, "Are e-cigarettes saving smokers or creating new addicts?" The reality is that it is probably a bit of both. We have seen a welcome decrease in smoking rates in Scotland from 28 per cent of adults in 2003 to 11 per cent in 2021, thanks to policy interventions such as the ban on smoking in public places. Given that vaping is clearly dangerous but appears less damaging than smoking, I am prepared to accept that e-cigarettes can help people quit smoking tobacco and, hopefully, continue that trend.

Gillian Mackay: The paediatrician who we heard from at the round table on Monday raised the concern that we are trading two health-harming products off against each other, rather than recognising the health-harming nature of vapes. Does the member agree that we need to recognise this health-harming product and treat it on its own, rather than trading it off against cigarettes?

Colin Smyth: I absolutely accept that and, as we have heard from a number of members, it is also important to note that we face a growing avalanche of children and young people who never smoke—and never had any intention of smoking—but are now choosing to vape.

As ASH Scotland highlighted in March, using the Government's figures, regular e-cigarette use by 15-year-olds has tripled in the past five years and has more than doubled for 13-year-olds, with single-use vapes being the product choice for the vast majority of young people.

That is not surprising. As we have heard, the brightly coloured, fruit-flavoured, cheap vapes are

obscenely marketed in shop displays and on social media platforms clearly and specifically to target young people. The gangsters behind many of those products are no better than the people in big tobacco firms who glamorised smoking in the 1960s and 1970s, when they knew that they were killing people.

I am frustrated that the Government has not yet listened to the long-standing calls from Asthma + Lung UK Scotland and ASH Scotland to fully enact the remaining regulations from the Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc and Care) (Scotland) Act 2016 to restrict the marketing and promotion of vaping products. I hope that we see that happen soon, but we need to go further. As this debate has shown, alongside the health impact of e-cigarettes, the toxic and single-use plastic waste that is caused by disposable vapes has become a new environmental crisis.

Last week, stark figures from Material Focus showed that the number of disposable vapes thrown away in the UK has quadrupled to 5 million a week in the past year. More than 7 million are bought every week and just 17 per cent of users recycle those vapes in a shop or local recycling centre. Inspirational campaigners such as Laura Young have highlighted that people often choose to dispose of their vapes on Scotland's streets and in our play parks. The industry has failed to show responsibility by providing proper information on its products about how and where to dispose of vapes in a safe, sustainable way and it has failed to put in place a proper network of take-back schemes.

Calling for a bit more recycling is not the answer. There are already alternatives, which also need to be better regulated, but disposable vapes are an unnecessary evil that could and should be banned. Yes—we need to get the detail right. Any laws need to be future proof, so that they can be easily adapted through regulations if new products are developed.

The upcoming Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill is an opportunity to follow the lead that Wales is showing, as well, it seems, as England this week—possibly under the current Government, but certainly under the next Labour Government.

If the Scottish Government does not include in its Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill a ban on the sale of disposable vapes, Labour MSPs will amend that bill, to try and take disposable vapes off our shelves and away from littering our streets.

13:22

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Presiding Officer, thank you for doing your absolute best to make sure that we all get to make a contribution today. I also thank

Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber and I certainly back up what my colleague Brian Whittle was saying earlier.

The fact that we are so pushed for time today is a testament to how seriously we all take the environmental health impact of vaping. First, I welcome the consultation. There really is no place for single-use vapes in a zero waste Scotland, and the array of discarded shiny, coloured, used vapes that are scattered everywhere is a hot topic at the moment when I am out and about dog walking.

The meteoric rise in vaping among young people has rocked all of us, and the Scottish Youth Parliament report “Single Use, Many Voices”, which was released earlier this month, highlights that 84 per cent of young respondents have seen no information on where and how to dispose of single-use vapes. We must take that seriously. It is our responsibility to provide good information on disposal by using the same platforms that the tobacco industry uses to glamourise vaping, which young people use every day.

We have heard plenty about the health and wellbeing impacts of vaping and none of us wants to imagine how that could affect families across Scotland in the future. Let us make no mistake—the tobacco industry will continue to promote misinformation and sell vaping as a positive lifestyle choice to young people, so we need to help them fight back, and that will be the focus of my speech today.

I recently spoke to a young constituent, in her early 20s, who talked of the shock that she felt when she realised the high levels of nicotine and the range of chemicals that are in e-liquids. She told me that pubs and clubs are full of young people openly vaping, and that they believe that social vaping on weekends is pretty much harmless, that vapes merely contain water vapour and that using them has no real consequences. Since finding out the facts, she has stopped vaping completely. She is now aware that high nicotine intake impacts brain development and that her age group has an increased vulnerability to nicotine addiction. She rightly sees herself and her friends as victims of a targeted marketing campaign. Trust me, she is really angry and is setting all her friends straight on what she sees as the dangers.

As my young constituent demonstrates, arming our young people with the facts is the biggest weapon that we have in the fight against tobacco industry propaganda. Unfortunately, the large sums that big tobacco spends on influencing social perceptions often work. The report that I mentioned tells us that young people’s vaping consumption makes them feel anxious and trapped, which is incredibly sad. Frankly, it is

devastating to think that what we once used as a smoking cessation tool has been used to peddle a lifestyle con.

I could say much more about the amazing work that is being done across my constituency by Public Health Lanarkshire and organisations such as Landed, which has worked tirelessly to educate and inform people over the past six years. However, I am aware that we are very short of time today, so I finish with this. We already know enough to take action on vaping. We must not delay. We must use the legislation that we have. Let us not repeat the mistakes of the 1950s, when emerging dangers around smoking first arose. Let us act now.

13:26

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join others in thanking Gillian Mackay for her leadership on the issue inside and outside of Parliament. She has worked with tireless campaigners such as Laura Young and the many health and environmental groups and organisations that back the call for a ban on disposable vapes.

Whenever change is proposed in this Parliament, particularly on increased regulation, we often get calls of “Catastrophe!” from whatever vested interest is resistant to the change. However, what is really striking about the call to restrict vapes is that there is not much of a debate at all; there is a lot of unanimity on the issue. I am the 10th speaker in the debate, and every speech so far has backed the call for a ban on disposable vapes. I am sure that that point will not be lost on the minister in closing the debate.

That unanimity is all the more remarkable because there has been a huge lobbying effort from the vaping industry over the past five years in this Parliament. Brian Whittle talked about his experiences of how that has played out, and I, too, went through several years of seeing constant requests in my inbox from public relations firms fronting up vaping companies that wanted to meet me.

It is probably because vape products are so uniquely problematic that we have that unanimity of concern. That is why 29 out of the 32 local authorities across Scotland have passed motions calling for vapes to be banned or controlled. If you wanted to sit down and design a cheap disposable product that litters the countryside with plastics, electronics and batteries, causes a fire risk, cannot be recycled or reused and puts young people at risk of bronchitis, breathing problems and nicotine addiction, it would be the perfect target for a ban, but that is exactly what disposable vapes are. As

lawmakers, we are still catching up with the reality of that.

It is clear that communities are seeing the impact everywhere—for example, Fife Street Champions picked up 664 disposable vapes in one month this spring. A Keep Scotland Beautiful survey shows that 44 per cent of people see disposable vapes littering their communities far more often. I am sure that many of the coastal communities that will be involved in the Marine Conservation Society beach cleans in the next week will see increasing numbers of vapes on their beaches.

All that builds up to the staggering national picture that we have heard about in the debate. Zero Waste Scotland estimate that 2.7 million vapes were littered in Scotland last year alone. That is hardly surprising, given that there has been an 18-fold increase in the use of disposable vapes from one year to the next.

The health impacts on young people are truly concerning, precisely because we do not know what kind of ticking time bomb exists here—a point that was made very well by Rona Mackay. This is yet another example of why following the precautionary principle is so important. Corporate interests should not be allowed to mess around with the unknown long-term health of our children, just because there is a big short-term market opportunity.

I again thank Gillian Mackay for leading this debate, and I certainly look forward to the minister's response on what the next steps in banning vapes in Scotland and across the rest of the UK will be.

13:30

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague Gillian Mackay on securing what is obviously a hugely important debate, given the number of MSPs who are speaking in it.

I also thank Asthma + Lung UK Scotland, the British Lung Foundation and ASH Scotland for their engagement and very helpful briefings ahead of the debate.

I also need to give a shout out to a couple of people in the youth work department of Dumfries and Galloway Council—Kelly Ross and Mark Molloy. We have met and are starting to work together to highlight and tackle vaping among our young people across Dumfries and Galloway.

As co-convenor of the cross-party group on lung health and a registered nurse, I am really interested in the impact of vaping on lung health, especially in the light of the very serious health concerns that medical experts have expressed,

but I am also interested in the issue that is raised in Gillian Mackay's motion—the environmental impact of single-use vapes and the safety of the devices.

I know that we are a bit challenged for time today, so I will just pick up on a couple of points. The materials that are used in disposable vapes make them a potential hazard to humans, wildlife and the environment when they are thrown away, and the lithium that is used for the batteries is a precious metal of which we are already facing a global shortage. In the past year in the UK, more than 10 tonnes of lithium has been thrown out with disposable vapes—enough to make batteries for 1,200 electric cars. If we are to address the climate emergency and enable a green transition, we need to make the best use of scarce materials such as lithium. If disposable vapes were rechargeable, for example, they could be reused up to 300 times, which would drastically reduce the number of vapes that end up in landfill every day.

Vaping can reduce lung function, due to gas-exchange disturbance and inflammation of tissue. In my career as a nurse in the operating room, I have worked laparoscopically on people's lungs, and I have seen directly the lung damage that is caused by cigarette smoking. We are, however, now starting to see e-cigarette or vaping-associated lung injury—or EVALI. A public health investigation in Illinois and Wisconsin in the United States found that the median age of patients suffering from EVALI was 21—21 years old, Presiding Officer. Despite what the industry might say, nicotine has a detrimental health effect, adolescents are more vulnerable to nicotine dependency than adults are and chronic nicotine exposure can impact on brain development.

At Gillian Mackay's round-table event on Monday, we heard from Dr Jonathan Coutts, who also presented at a lung health cross-party group meeting that my colleague Alexander Stewart and I attended a few months ago. He presented the facts on the harm that vaping does to young people's brains. We know that it has an impact on brain development; it can contribute to cognitive and attention-deficit conditions and worsen mood disorders, including depression and suicidal thoughts.

It is a huge issue and it is clear that something needs to be done. For example, one of the statistics that I found is that using one vape is like smoking 52 cigarettes, so clearly we need to be concerned about the matter.

I would like to know from the minister whether the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 will need to be considered if we are proposing changes to regulation, and I would be interested to find out whether there will need to be some kind of

exclusion from that act to allow regulations to be taken forward.

In closing—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Ms Harper.

Emma Harper: I am on my last sentence, Presiding Officer. I was just going to thank Gillian Mackay again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan is the last speaker in the open debate. You have up to four minutes, Ms Mochan.

13:34

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): As others have done, I take the opportunity to thank Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is a really important issue, as members have mentioned.

As we have heard today, there is willingness across the chamber to make progress on a response to the issue, with purpose. I therefore hope that the Government will outline soon how it will do that, and that it will consider using some Government time for a debate on the matter so that we can have a more in-depth discussion.

It is right that we talk of the serious environmental impacts of single-use vapes. They have created a throwaway culture, which, as we have heard, is damaging our environment and our efforts to tackle the climate emergency.

I will not restate all the effects that members have put across so well so far today, as I know that time is marching towards the start of the chamber's afternoon sitting. I will, however, use a small amount of the time that we have to talk about something that has been mentioned, including in the motion; the concerningly high rate of use among our young people. Sheila Duffy of ASH Scotland has said that single-use vapes are

"creating addiction among young people, including very young children in primary and lower secondary schools, where we haven't seen much of an issue with tobacco."

That is a really concerning statement.

The content of vapes is such that they are becoming addictive for people of an age at which tobacco addiction is generally unheard of. That has been exacerbated by the facts that the products are easy to access, are bright, colourful and catch the eye—as we have heard from other members—and, compared with similar products, can be cheap. That brings together the health and environmental impacts of single-use vapes.

I have been trying to ascertain the number of people presenting to hospital addiction services or other health services with complications that are

linked to vaping. It has become very apparent that there might need to be some discussion between Government and the health boards to consider having a separate logging option for health concerns or complications relating to vapes, because it is really difficult to find out what the figures for that are. It would be useful for us to separate smoking from vapes, as other members have mentioned.

I know that we are tight for time, so I will conclude. It has been a very worthwhile debate, and there have been many reasonable suggestions from members of the various parties across the chamber. It is clear that we need to deal with the environmental impact. I look forward to the minister's contribution. I understand that we are having an environment debate and that she has responsibility for the environmental impacts. However—to pick up on Stephanie Callaghan's point—I would like to know what the Government will do now and how we can work across the UK, because some commitments have been made by the UK Government. Will the minister work on a cross-portfolio basis to see whether there is something that we can do about recording the damage from and impacts of vaping and e-cigarettes, particularly in respect of single-use vapes?

13:38

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I join my fellow members in congratulating Gillian Mackay on securing the debate and in thanking her for her on-going campaigning on the issue.

In the contributions to the debate we have heard about the energy that has been generated and the focus of communities and councils across Scotland on this serious matter. I am comforted that we all understand the issues well and that we all agree on the seriousness of the concerns that are being raised.

I also thank the members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who have spoken to me about single-use vapes on more than one occasion, and who really wanted to emphasise their concerns for their peers' health and for the environment. It is a matter that concerns young people very much.

Carol Mochan, Alexander Stewart, Colin Smyth and others flagged up their concerns about young people's health. Single-use vapes have, perhaps, become more of a pathway into smoking than a pathway out of smoking. With 5 million single-use vapes being discarded every week in the UK, it is hard to imagine that they are primarily being used by people who are trying to quit. I imagine that parents must be terrified that their children are

becoming the next generation that will be addicted to nicotine.

Carol Mochan made a good point on data collection. Members should, please, be assured that I am working closely with the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health on the matter, so it is absolutely a cross-portfolio matter.

On the environmental side, Rona Mackay made good points about litter, and Emma Harper highlighted the waste of valuable lithium, which we know is so important for the transition to net zero, but is also potentially so dangerous if it is discarded irresponsibly. Last week, I met managers of waste facilities who made an emotional plea about the safety of their workers. Batteries have been implicated in 700 fires in bin lorries and recycling centres in the UK, which poses a serious danger to workers in the industry. The plea from those managers was that we take urgent action to protect workers' safety.

Mercedes Villalba made excellent points about the litter on our streets. I see in my streets the same thing as Mercedes has observed in Dundee. Retailers are obliged to provide facilities for people who buy the vapes to return them to those retailers, or they must pay into a fund to provide recycling facilities for them. It is clear that retailers are not doing that—that work is not being undertaken—so, in addition to considering a consultation on a ban, we must look urgently at enforcement of the rules. Retailers need to be responsible and to ensure that vaping products are not ending up in the hands of children, and they need to ensure that they are meeting their obligations to provide adequate recycling.

Many members have highlighted the difficulty of recycling the materials when there is a battery embedded in a single-use plastic product. Single-use electronics are even worse than single-use plastics. We are too far along in the climate emergency to have new single-use plastic products. We have been working very hard to remove single-use plastics; many industries are working to do that, so this industry's having created a whole new single-use plastic product, the numbers of which have tripled over the past couple of years, with serious environmental and human health issues, is a great concern to us.

I thank Stephanie Callaghan, Brian Whittle and Kenneth Gibson for highlighting the nature of some of the companies that are involved in the marketing, and the danger that the products pose to our children by those companies putting profits ahead of human and environmental health.

I want to reassure members that we are taking serious action on the matter. On Colin Smyth's comments about the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill, the bill is not actually required for us to take

action on the matter; we already have the powers. We are looking at a range of options, but under our existing powers we can ban problematic single-use products if there is sufficient evidence of environmental harm. The enormous growth of single-use vaping products in recent years absolutely provides that evidence, so we can use those powers.

As Emma Harper pointed out, implementation of the powers could come into conflict with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. However, yesterday I had a constructive meeting with my counterparts in the Welsh and UK Governments. We have agreed to work together on our approach, up to and including a ban. All the nations of the UK have in common the agreement to work together; of course, a common approach will be the most effective.

If a ban is where we are heading, it will take some time to work towards that, so we need in the meantime—as members have highlighted—to take other actions on enforcement, product design and marketing. I will be working with my counterparts in the other nations of the UK on that matter.

Brian Whittle: It occurs to me that, if we get to where we want to be with a ban, we will have a problem with children who are already addicted to nicotine. What can we do, perhaps working with the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, to address that issue?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you the time back.

Lorna Slater: I take on board that point that we potentially have a serious public health problem of young people being addicted to nicotine. Let us work together—I hope cross-party, but certainly with my ministerial colleagues—on how we can address the issue. None of us wants a new generation who are addicted to nicotine or, potentially, to see numbers of smokers increasing, having reduced them so successfully, with the human health cost that that would bring.

The Scottish Government is committed to taking the necessary action as a priority, and I am encouraged by the debate that the actions that we take forward on the matter will be widely supported by colleagues across the chamber.

Again, I thank everyone who has participated in the debate today. I look forward to working with everyone on options up to and including a ban.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate. I suspend this meeting of Parliament until 2 o'clock.

13:45

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio questions, on social justice. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question that they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters RTS in the chat function during the relevant question.

Children in Temporary Accommodation (Dumfries and Galloway)

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent statistics showing that the number of children in Dumfries and Galloway living in temporary accommodation rose by 67 per cent between 2022 and 2023. (S6O-02504)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The number of households, and particularly children, in temporary accommodation in Scotland is too high. It is unacceptable and we are firmly committed to reducing it. In our response to the temporary accommodation task and finish group recommendations, which were published on 19 July, we said that we would work with councils to support the development of targeted plans to reduce temporary accommodation pressures. We provide councils with annual allocations of £8 million of rapid rehousing transition plan funding to support people into settled accommodation and £30.5 million for their work to prevent homelessness, with Dumfries and Galloway Council receiving over £950,000 in 2023-24.

Colin Smyth: We have seen an increase of over 90 per cent in the number of open homelessness cases in Dumfries and Galloway, compared with 2019-20. The crisis is so bad that housing officers are placing people in caravans and 50 bed and breakfasts across the region. Why was the number of homes that were given grant funding in the year to the end of June as part of the affordable housing supply programme down by 22 per cent? Why is the number of affordable homes started in the region at its lowest level since 2016, when we have this crisis facing the region? Surely that is going to make it worse.

Paul McLennan: There are a series of measures. I will come back to the task and finish group recommendations, but one of the recommendations that came through, which we have responded to, was about acquisitions. We

will be working in Dumfries and Galloway in that regard, and we will also be looking at allocation policies.

This morning, I had a meeting with the task and finish group on prevention. We are talking about what we can do in that regard. There are things that we do at the moment, working in Dumfries and Galloway, on prevention. In addition, resource planning assumptions of £106.148 million over five years have been allocated to Dumfries and Galloway. Some of the issues are about how we can maximise the spend on that, and there is flexibility in the programme to look at temporary accommodation in that regard. I am happy to meet Mr Smyth to discuss that further if needed.

Affordable Housing Supply Programme

2. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact its programme for government 2023-24 will have on the affordable housing supply programme. (S6O-02505)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The number of affordable homes that were completed in the latest year, to the end of March 2023, is the highest annual figure in more than two decades. The programme for government for 2023-24 reaffirms our commitment to invest £752 million this year towards the affordable housing supply programme. Since 2007, Scotland has seen over 40 per cent more affordable homes delivered per head of population than in England, and over 70 per cent more than in Wales. We will shortly publish a rural and islands housing action plan that is aimed at helping to retain and attract people in rural and island communities.

Evelyn Tweed: Thanks to the SNP Government, Scotland builds 13.9 affordable and social homes per 10,000 people annually, compared with 9.7 in England and eight in Labour-run Wales. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said, affordable housing contributes to Scotland having the lowest poverty rates in Britain. With the Tory cost of living crisis and Brexit pushing up the costs of materials and borrowing, how can the minister ensure that we continue to meet our challenging investment targets?

Paul McLennan: The member is right. The current position is extremely difficult. The hard Brexit added to it and the economic mismanagement of the UK Government has obviously not helped the situation. We have seen construction inflation of around 15 to 20 per cent, including in the Stirling constituency, and that has caused soaring construction costs.

Despite that, the housing sector has done incredible work to deliver the highest annual rate of affordable homes since 2000. We are making

£3.5 billion available in the current session of Parliament—members should remember that that £3.5 billion is being impacted by inflation construction as well—towards delivery of affordable and social homes. We recognise the need to keep pace with the demand for social housing and we are making more than £60 million available from this year's £752 million budget to support the acquisition of properties to be brought into the affordable housing sector.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I was interested to hear both the minister's and Colin Smyth's spin on this topic, because new statistics published on Tuesday show that the number of affordable homes that were approved in the quarter between April and June has reached the lowest level in 10 years. Those are the facts. Why have SNP and Green ministers dropped their target for the number of affordable homes to be built during this parliamentary session?

Paul McLennan: That target has not been dropped. During my summer tour, I went round most local authorities. I have also spoken to private builders and housing associations on this issue. The two main reasons that they give for the situation with approvals are to do with construction inflation—given the inflation rate in the United Kingdom—and additional borrowing costs, which, again, have been caused by the UK Government's mismanagement. If Miles Briggs speaks to them, they will tell him exactly the same thing: construction inflation, inflation rates and borrowing costs are why things are slowing down.

Child Poverty (Universal Free School Meals)

3. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with its "Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan", including in relation to its commitment to pilot universal free school meals in secondary schools. (S6O-02506)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our annual report on progress towards meeting the child poverty targets is published in June each year and will include updates on actions that have been taken on the delivery of the free school meals project.

Through the programme for government, we have recommitted to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to prepare schools and infrastructure for the expansion of universal free school meal provision to primary 6 and primary 7 pupils during 2026. That will start with those who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment and will save families £400 per child per year on average.

Monica Lennon: Back in 2021, ministers promised to expand universal free school meal support to all primary pupils in the first 100 days of

this session of parliament. That expansion did not materialise, and this major delay to the manifesto commitment will make hungry children wait until 2026, if we are to believe the First Minister.

In addition to what the cabinet secretary said, when will we see detailed implementation plans around the timeline not just for P6 and P7 pupils, but for the pilot in secondary schools, which is also long overdue?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: During this parliamentary session, free school meals provision in primary 6 has expanded. As I stated, that will continue, through our commitment in the programme for government.

Monica Lennon is right to point to the Government's commitment also to pilot free school meals in secondary schools. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has met officials and engaged with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on that issue. The discussions will conclude and something will be made public in due course.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary as frustrated as I am by the audacity of Scottish Labour, which criticises the steady roll-out of free school meals in Scotland despite the fact that such a pledge by United Kingdom Labour was one of those that were abandoned over the summer by Keir Starmer?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It has been a bit difficult to keep up with the number of commitments—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat. If a member wishes to raise a point, they know how to do that. Otherwise, the floor is with the person who has the floor—that is the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It has been rather difficult to keep up with UK Labour's changes in policy. That is concerning, because we in the Scottish Parliament fear what the impact might be on policies for Scottish Labour. This Government has reaffirmed its commitment to helping families through the roll-out of free school meals. It is a disappointment that the UK Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has refused to follow that example, and I hope that that is not now a slippery slope for Scottish Labour.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): My point earlier was that a question about Labour Party policy was addressed to a cabinet secretary. I find that not to be in order. That is not why we have these sessions. [*Interruption.*]

The heckling from a sedentary position aside, I have in front of me the stats on school meals take-up. Why are they down on 2016?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the cabinet secretary, I say to Stephen Kerr that, if he wishes to raise a point of order, he should do so; otherwise, he should just ask his question.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will be guided by you, Deputy Presiding Officer, rather than Stephen Kerr as to what is in order in the chamber. His concerns for young people and children are just crocodile tears from a Government and a member who back the rape clause, the benefit cap and recent cuts to universal credit, and who support tax cuts for the richest. I will take no lectures from Mr Kerr on how we try to provide support—as we already do—to children throughout Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: At your invitation, Deputy Presiding Officer, I would like to make the following point of order. Is it in order for members of the Government party to ask the cabinet secretary questions about Labour Party policy, or any other party's policy, as opposed to asking questions in relation to the stewardship that lies within the realm of those ministers?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Kerr for his contribution. As far as I recall, the question was related to the social justice portfolio and, indeed, the issues raised in the principal question of Ms Lennon. I am not responsible for the manner in which any particular Government minister seeks to answer a question, which is not a matter for the chair, but I was satisfied that the issue that was raised fell within the scope of the question in the *Business Bulletin*.

Social Security (Investment)

4. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what stakeholder input informed its decision to increase investment in social security. (S6O-02507)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We regularly engage with a wide range of stakeholders. In 2023-24, we will invest £5.3 billion in social security benefits, which will reach 1.2 million people, with those figures rising to £7.4 billion and 2 million people in 2027-28.

Social security is a fundamental right, which is why we have established a radically different benefits system that is built on dignity, fairness and respect.

Colin Beattie: I am heartened to see the professional input that underpins the Scottish Government's compassionate and ambitious approach to social security, but I am painfully aware of how efforts to tackle poverty here are undermined by Westminster benefit cuts—which are now backed by not only Tories but Labour.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is likely that the Scottish welfare model will keep having to mitigate United Kingdom Government welfare policies in the years ahead, whether under Rishi Sunak's blue Tories or Sir Keir Starmer's red Tories? *[Interruption.]*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I completely agree with the premise of the question. I hear by their reaction that both Labour and the Conservatives are uncomfortable at that line of questioning. *[Interruption.]* I am not surprised.

We have spent more than £1 billion mitigating the impacts of 13 years of UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefits cap—and the Conservatives do not like to hear about that. Meanwhile, the UK Government is steadily dismantling the welfare system across the UK and enforcing a sanctions regime that is punishing the poorest members of our society. That is exactly the opposite to how our dignity, fairness and respect system in Scotland works.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I was slightly surprised by the part of the cabinet secretary's answer that said that Social Security Scotland is "radically different" from the Department for Work and Pensions. With regard to the regulations that the Scottish Government has brought forward, will she tell me how adult disability payment, children's benefits or any benefit that has so far been devolved to Scotland is radically different?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I do not have time to go through that in detail, but I would love to meet Mr Balfour to give him the full details. What I will say is that the client experience that is already being published in our surveys—*[Interruption.]*

If Mr Kerr is genuinely interested in the subject, he may wish to listen.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I did not say anything!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, please let the cabinet secretary respond.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are radically different in our application process, in the way that we work with stakeholders to ensure that people are encouraged to come forward for the benefits and in making sure that we are delivering the right result, first time, which is very different from the appeals process that people are made to go through with the DWP and the barbaric personal independence payment process.

Those are a few examples, which I would be keen to elaborate on in a meeting with Mr Balfour in due course, should he wish to have one.

House-building Programme

5. **Alex Rowley:** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has carried out of any barriers to achieving a national house-building programme for Scotland. (S6O-02508)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Government has set a clear ambition for the delivery of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with 70 per cent for social rent and 10 per cent in rural and island communities. We have well-established partnership working with local authorities, registered social landlords and the construction sector to ensure that we deliver the right homes in the right places.

As I mentioned earlier, Scotland has led the United Kingdom in providing affordable homes. Since 2007, Scotland has seen more than 40 per cent more affordable homes delivered per head of population than in England and more than 70 per cent more than in Labour-controlled Wales.

Alex Rowley: I will quote Shelter Scotland director Alison Watson on the subject of how we in Scotland are progressing on housing. She said:

“The snail’s pace of delivery demonstrates clearly that the Scottish Government has got its priorities badly wrong and is neglecting social housing.

No minister can claim ignorance of what that means; it means more children with nowhere to call home, it means more people trapped in miserable temporary accommodation, and it means Scotland’s housing emergency continuing to devastate lives.”

Does the minister not agree that what we need is a national house-building programme that takes into account the land that needs to be made available, gives local authorities the power to give up that land—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rowley. We will move to the minister.

Alex Rowley: —and trains in the skills needed to build houses?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will now move to the minister for the answer.

Paul McLennan: I have met Alison Watson twice this week, on Tuesday and Wednesday. I regularly meet her to discuss the issue.

This summer, I have been on a programme of visits to all 32 local authorities. The key point that has come through them all is that there are 32 different local solutions. I have visited Fife on a number of occasions and have met representatives there to talk about homelessness and the affordable housing supply programme. I invite Mr Rowley to ask me about those discussions.

We have made £180 million available for Fife in this parliamentary term, which was an increase of

£35 million. Part of the discussions that I have had with the representatives from Fife has been about how we can maximise capacity and the pace of building there. There are other barriers relating to those issues.

The key point for me has been discussing with local authorities what they need on homelessness and house building. I will be happy to speak to Mr Rowley about the discussions that I have been having on those matters.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Over the summer, the housing minister made an announcement of funding of £960,000 to support community housing trusts in rural and island areas. That is a welcome example of what is needed to boost progress towards Scotland’s ambitious housing goals. Will the minister say what role empowering local communities has in ensuring that we meet our affordable housing needs?

Paul McLennan: Earlier I mentioned the visits that I undertook over the summer. Last month, I had the pleasure of visiting Gairloch, where we launched that funding. We could see there the difference that community-led housing can make, and the local project was really driven by the community.

Community-led housing plays an important role in our broad approach to deliver more affordable homes in our rural and island areas. Many communities actively engage in pursuing projects in their own local areas, often supported by the rural and islands housing fund. That fund plays a critical role in supporting community organisations and others in implementing housing projects where they would otherwise be unable to access the mainstream affordable housing programme. The key point is to give them the capacity to drive projects forward on their own.

The recently announced core funding support will enable the Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing to continue to provide advice and support to communities.

Welfare Spending (Aberdeen City Council)

6. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has spent in the last five years, within the Aberdeen City Council area, to mitigate any effect of United Kingdom Government welfare policy. (S6O-02509)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Over the past five years, including this fiscal year, the Scottish Government has spent more than £733 million to mitigate UK Government welfare policies.

Although we are unable to break that down by local authority area, over the past five years we

have invested £17.2 million in the Aberdeen City Council region, through the Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments, to mitigate, among other things, the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and the local housing allowance. Additional funding has been made available through universal credit Scottish choices and advice services. Some £11 million has also been provided through the Scottish child payment.

Jackie Dunbar: Would the cabinet secretary agree that the £84 million per year spent on discretionary housing payments could make a huge difference in supporting folk through the cost of living crisis if it were not being spent on mitigating the UK Government's cruellest policies?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is frustrating that in 2023-24, the UK Government plans to spend £100 million on discretionary housing payments for England and Wales, whereas Scotland, which has a tenth of the population of those countries, will spend more than £80 million. If we did not have to spend that money on mitigating the UK Government's cruel policies, it could be used to further our national mission to tackle poverty. I suggest that that shows that the UK welfare system—if not the UK itself—is not fit for purpose.

Cladding

7. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress in removing highly combustible cladding from buildings. (S6O-02510)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The safety of home owners and residents is our absolute priority. That is why the programme for government sets out proposals for a cladding remediation bill that will give ministers new powers to remediate buildings with unsafe cladding, and why we are seeking the transfer of powers that we need in order to create a building safety levy, about which we are in discussions with the United Kingdom Government at the moment.

We are undertaking a robust programme of single-building assessments. Those assessments are being completed and remediation is under way on one building. We are committed to undertaking a stock census to help alleviate buildings and explore ways to minimise cost and maximise revenue to ensure that the programme can deliver its objectives in full, efficiently and in a reasonable timeframe.

Maurice Golden: A loophole means that combustible cladding can still be used on schools and hospitals under 11m in height and on all hotels and office buildings. The Government is reviewing safety regulations this year, so will the minister close that loophole?

Paul McLennan: I am happy to discuss that further with Mr Golden.

I want to add a few things on the issue of cladding. There have been consistent meetings with residents groups. We have also been working closely with developers on the issue, and we have got them to sign up to the developer commitment letter and are moving towards long-form contracts in that regard. We have regular discussions with developers on the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Two members have requested to ask supplementary questions, and, as we have some time in hand, I will take both.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): My constituency is significantly affected by the issue and a number of my constituents have contacted me with questions regarding their developments. Although I appreciate that a different approach and solution will be applicable for each building, is the Scottish Government able to provide further detail on when home owners can expect to receive communications about the outcome of their single-building assessments, including a high-level timescale for any remediation work that is required, and clarity on where the responsibility for meeting costs will lie?

Paul McLennan: The First Minister's mandate letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice sets out our commitment to focus on supporting residents by ensuring that each of the buildings that are already on the pilot programme is on a single-building assessment pathway by summer 2024. It is absolutely correct that the timetable and detail of work to be undertaken will depend on the circumstances of each individual building. I am happy to meet Mr Macpherson and residents in his constituency to discuss their specific needs.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): The minister will be aware that I have been working closely with my constituents in Glasgow Kelvin on this issue, and I know that residents in a number of the buildings that we are talking about find themselves facing rising factoring fees and other costs as remedial work is rolled out. Can the minister provide us with an update on recent engagement by the Scottish Government with relevant stakeholders regarding insurance and mortgage issues?

Paul McLennan: I have met the member on a number of occasions to discuss those issues and have also met residents in her constituency on the subject. I sympathise with the difficulty that owners are facing. Regulation of mortgage lending is reserved to the UK Government, and we would expect any changes in the lending market in England to be extended to all nations of the UK.

However, current arrangements are not applicable in Scotland, given that they involve UK Government funding schemes that apply only in England. Therefore, we have been exploring what actions will be taken to provide reassurance to home owners in Scotland, and I can confirm that, where requested, we will issue letters of comfort to home owners whose buildings are part of the pilot cladding remediation programme. Those letters provide factual information, and, although they will not completely resolve the difficulties that home owners face, they should help.

I am happy to discuss the matter further with the member.

Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group

8. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further information regarding the minimum income guarantee expert group. (S6O-02511)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The expert group includes people from academia, trade unions and poverty and equality organisations, who bring a wealth of relevant knowledge and experience. Membership and terms of reference for the group, together with the minutes of meetings and papers prepared for the group and the group's interim report from March 2023, are published and available on the Scottish Government website.

John Mason: I was very enthusiastic to see the minimum income guarantee mentioned in the First Minister's programme for government the other week. Can the cabinet secretary say whether we will need input from Westminster to go forward on that, and whether she has had any discussions with Westminster in that regard?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The expert group's interim report acknowledges that the full potential of a minimum income guarantee might not be realised without our having full legislative powers. Although devolution continues to limit what we can do, we are determined to use the powers that we have to the fullest extent. Therefore, we will continue to use those powers to tackle poverty and inequality. The recommendations of the expert group are welcome, as they take the current situation into account as well as giving broader advice about what could be done if, in the future, we had additional powers. I look forward to receiving the group's final report in due course.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10429, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill reconsideration.

14:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our programme for government includes a commitment to invite the Scottish Parliament to bring back the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill for reconsideration. That is the invitation that I make to Parliament this afternoon.

As the First Minister set out in his policy prospectus, we remain absolutely committed to Scotland being the first United Kingdom nation to incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law, ensuring that we are a country that respects, protects and fulfils children's rights. The path to achieving that has not been straightforward. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill was unanimously passed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2021 but, in October 2021, following a referral by UK law officers, the UK Supreme Court found certain provisions in the bill to be outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.

On 27 June, I provided a statement to Parliament in which I explained how we propose to amend the bill in response to that judgment and the impact that that will have on the coverage for children's rights in respect of the compatibility duty. I explained that, in drafting amendments to the compatibility duty, we tried to balance three important considerations: protecting children's rights to the maximum effective extent possible; minimising the risk of another Supreme Court referral; and making the law as accessible as possible for users.

In balancing those considerations, I reached the conclusion that the maximum effective coverage is for the compatibility duty to apply only when a public authority is delivering devolved functions conferred by or under acts of the Scottish Parliament or common-law powers. That means that the duty will not apply when powers are delivered under acts of the UK Parliament, even in devolved areas and even where the legislation requires or gives discretion to a public authority to act compatibly.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will start with Maggie Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: The cabinet secretary has just outlined that we will not be able to act in Scotland to uphold children's rights under the compatibility duty if it is determined that powers are with the UK Government and UK Government legislation. What does she think that that means for the rights and services that we deliver for and to children in Scotland, given the wide-reaching implications of UK acts such as the Illegal Migration Act 2023?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I share Maggie Chapman's concerns about the Illegal Migration Act 2023. We have, of course, debated that in the chamber a number of times. Maggie Chapman is quite right to point out that there are a number of important pieces of legislation that will not fall under the remit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill once it has, I hope, been passed by Parliament.

Martin Whitfield: The cabinet secretary rightly talked about the three tests that the Government applied. The second one was minimising the risk of another Supreme Court referral. There has been much discussion in the chamber over two years about contact between the Scottish Government and the UK Government. In the correspondence to the committee, there is an indication that the response from the UK Government was perhaps less than satisfactory. Can the cabinet secretary expand on that and on what potential challenges she fears might come down the line with regard to the amendments?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that Martin Whitfield will appreciate that the work that has gone on is legal advice work and that it is important that I respect the confidentiality not just of legal advice to the Scottish Government but of the office of the Advocate General. There have been numerous pieces of correspondence and work between officials on that. It is disappointing that we did not get to the point at which the office of the Advocate General and representatives of the UK Government could say that they were content with our proposed amendments. I thought that that would have been the point that we would get to. We are therefore at a suboptimal point on that issue, but we are content that our amendments are within competence.

In balancing the considerations, we have reached conclusions about maximum effective

coverage, and that is a disappointing loss of coverage for children's rights compared with what we originally hoped to achieve. Nevertheless, it represents the maximum effective coverage that we think we can achieve in the present devolved context.

Amendments cannot be formally lodged, and an official decision about the admissibility of amendments cannot be made, until Parliament passes the motion to reconsider. However, I have shared draft amendments to the bill with the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee in response to Parliament's request to see those amendments. Assuming the Parliament passes the motion, I will formally lodge the amendments on Monday, when the office of the clerk is open. The purpose of my motion today is not to debate the detail of those draft amendments—that debate will, quite rightly, take place at a later stage. Today we are simply asking Parliament to agree to the UNCRC bill proceeding to the reconsideration stage. On that question, I trust and hope that we will have Parliament's full support.

The fundamental intent behind the bill is to deliver a proactive culture of everyday accountability for children's rights across public services in Scotland. Although the scope of the compatibility duty in the bill will be narrowed, bringing the bill back will give an important signal about the kind of country we want to be, as well as providing a solid legal foundation on which to build in the future, including via the proposed human rights bill.

In June, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published its concluding observations following its state party examination of the UK in May. Among its recommendations was that the UK should strengthen efforts to fully incorporate the convention into national legislation in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Following my statement to Parliament in June, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland to provide an update on our plans for the revised UNCRC bill; to highlight the loss of coverage for children's rights as a consequence of how we need to amend the bill; and to underline the need for the UK Government to incorporate the UNCRC into UK law to give children and young people the full protection that they deserve. The Secretary of State for Scotland responded on 14 August, saying that the UK Government was currently giving careful consideration to the concluding observations but giving no indication of the UK Government's willingness to incorporate the UNCRC into UK law, and that is deeply disappointing.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The concluding observations of the UN

Committee on the Rights of the Child are what keeps the convention alive. The cabinet secretary will know that one of the criticisms that the UN committee has repeatedly levelled against our country—Scotland—is that we still have an age of criminal responsibility that is below the recommended international norm. Can she update Parliament on the progress that is being made to yet again review the age of criminal responsibility to uplift it to a minimum of 14?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member raises a very significant point. The UN committee's concluding observations do not deal just with the UNCRC bill progression. If he will allow it, I will get back to him in writing in due course on the point that he raises.

The importance of incorporation—including the importance to children—is underlined in the example that Maggie Chapman has already brought to Parliament's attention once again of the Illegal Migration Act. That is an act that includes a ban on the right to claim asylum, allows for the prolonged detention and removal of children, creates barriers for acquiring nationality and lacks a consideration of the principle of the best interests of the child. The UK Government's assessment of the impact of that legislation on children's rights is simply not robust enough.

In its concluding observation, the UN committee expressed its deep concern about the potential impact of that legislation on children, for exactly the reasons that Maggie Chapman has pointed out. Although the UN committee has called on the UK Government urgently to repeal all provisions that would have the effect of violating children's rights, we are still waiting for a response from the UK Government. That shows the limitations of what we have the powers to do in this Parliament.

That said, passing the motion today would allow us to progress a concluding observation that was directed specifically at Scotland—that is, to bring forward the amendments necessary. If the motion is passed, we can work with Parliament to consider next steps, which will, I hope, allow for Parliament to debate and vote on amendments to the bill before the end of the year, although, of course, whether to hold deliberations and how long they will take will be for Parliament and not Government to decide.

When it originally passed the bill in March 2021, the Scottish Parliament made a significant statement of intent about what its parliamentarians collectively wanted to achieve. Sadly, we cannot deliver a package of provision that fully reflects the democratic will of the Parliament. However, I know that there is a keen interest in passing the bill, not just in the Parliament or from our stakeholders, children and young people but internationally. I look forward to the day when Scotland becomes

the first UK nation to incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to reconsider the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill.

14:35

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I whole-heartedly accept what the cabinet secretary has said.

I am delighted to speak on behalf of my party in this important debate on the reconsideration of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill. The significance of protecting and safeguarding the rights of our children is of fundamental importance to me personally and for us all. I am sure that it is no surprise to members that I will approach the debate from a child-orientated and personal angle.

Respecting and valuing the contributions that our children make in the decisions that directly impact them is a crucial part of our democracy and of society as a whole, and it is well documented that I fully support the input of young voices. Therefore, we will be supporting the Scottish Government's motion to finally reintroduce the bill.

I make no apologies for using my short time in the Parliament to consistently stand up for the rights of all children, whether they are care experienced, struggling with their mental health or currently being failed by our education system. On many occasions, I have offered to work collaboratively with the former First Minister, the former Minister for Children and Young People and the current Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise. I stand by that and reaffirm my offer to meet any of them.

However, I would be remiss in representing the children in Scotland if I did not mention the fiasco in relation to this bill, which shows that there is a problem with the Scottish Government's ability to legislate.

It has now been 912 days since the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the bill. The bill was backed by the Scottish Conservatives, who worked constructively and positively with all parties, because we recognised that the bill is far more important than any individual or party.

It has now also been 708 days since the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the UK Government's challenge to the bill. The Scottish Conservatives saw that challenge coming when we warned at stage 1 that the bill must not result in endless clashes of legislation and long-lasting legal battles. I will repeat the question that was posed by my colleague Meghan Gallacher in June

this year: what on earth has the Scottish Government been doing?

The truth is that, instead of making the necessary changes to the bill that the Supreme Court's decision requires, the Scottish National Party has deliberately provoked grievance in politicising children's rights, which I find abhorrent. I note from the cabinet secretary's statement in June—she repeated this in her opening remarks—that,

"In drafting amendments to the compatibility duty,"

the Government has

"tried to balance three important considerations: protecting children's rights to the maximum effect possible, minimising the risk of another Supreme Court referral and making the law as accessible as possible for users."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2023; c 21.]

Many across Scotland will be wondering whether the Scottish Government should have thought about those considerations during the initial passage of the bill. However, that being said, it is essential that the bill receives full cross-party support. My party will continue to play a constructive role in the passage of the bill.

We have a proud tradition when it comes to championing human rights, and played a key role in drafting the European convention on human rights, which was ratified in 1951. The Human Rights Act 1998 transposed the European Court of Human Rights' rulings into domestic law. Every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, deserves the opportunity to grow, thrive and reach their full potential. The UNCRC provides a framework that serves as a beacon for our collective commitment to protect and nurture our children.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Given the member's clear personal commitment to the issue and the limits of what we can do within this Parliament, will she join me in encouraging the UK Government to pass the UNCRC into domestic law so that we can get to the point that she and I both seem to want, which is to give rights to children on every issue, not just in the limited way that we can do within the bill?

Roz McCall: Here we are again with—unfortunately—a similar kind of response. It is important to say that we have things that we can do, which we should be doing, and I will give support to ensure that that happens.

Let us reaffirm that the importance of children's rights is not disputed. I will take a moment to comment on some of the convention's articles and how they should apply here in Scotland.

Article 28, which is on the right to education, says:

"Every child has the right to an education. Primary education must be free and different forms of secondary education must be available to every child. Discipline in schools must respect children's dignity and their rights."

Article 29, which is on the goals of education, states:

"Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment."

Every child must have access to education that allows them to reach their full potential, and the Government is duty bound to ensure that that happens. To properly follow article 29, we should be raising attainment for all. References to attainment gaps—whether they relate to poverty or otherwise—run the risk of reducing achievement for our children.

The Scottish National Party's commitment to eliminating the attainment gap has been watered down over the years. Although it has repeatedly pledged to focus on closing the gap, little substantial progress has been made. Eight years ago, the former First Minister vowed to close the attainment gap completely and, in his statement on the programme for government, the current First Minister said:

"We will continue to focus on closing the attainment gap".—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2023; c 21.]

We have promise after promise, but figures show that we have had a three-year consistent reduction in attainment. Instead of closing the attainment gap, we are seeing it stagnate, whereas we should be raising attainment for all, as per article 29.

Article 24, which is on health and health services, says:

"Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment and education on health and well-being so that children can stay healthy."

The delay in providing free school meals at all primary schools is a deep concern and a clear indicator of a significant policy setback. The Scottish Government made a firm commitment that every primary school student would have access to free school meals. That is a critical step in addressing child poverty and promoting equal opportunities in education. However, the reality stands in stark contrast to those promises, and we are again missing the directive that is behind the UNCRC.

Instead of delivering on the commitment in the promised timeframe, the Government is now talking about plans to expand free school meals to primary 6 and primary 7 by 2026. Expansion is a positive step, but it does not negate the fact that

the Government failed to meet its initial obligations. The delay in implementation means that children who needed such support for years have gone without, and it actively promotes the stigma that is attached to child poverty when it comes to school meals.

The delay in providing free school meals, which are a fundamental support mechanism, exacerbates the crisis. It sends a message that the Government's commitment to addressing child poverty is not as steadfast as it should be, and it raises questions about the priority that is given to our youngest citizens' wellbeing.

As the mother of two daughters, I have tirelessly fought for their rights from the moment that they entered my life, and I will continue to do so until my last breath. The rights of the child are not up for debate; they are fundamental to our society's wellbeing. Our world becomes a better place when we amplify the voices of our children and champion their rights. In principle, I agree with the bill and the crucial steps that it will take towards ensuring that children's rights are recognised and protected in Scotland.

14:43

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Today, we find ourselves debating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, which was initially introduced on 1 September 2020. As we just learned, the bill was passed 912 days ago, which is just shy of 30 months ago.

I very much welcome the debate. Even if the motion does not technically require a debate, I am glad that the Scottish Government has provided time to do so, because it is important that the people who sit in this chamber have the chance to explore the reasoning behind the motion and—I hope—to put out the message again that all parties still support the incorporation of the UNCRC.

On 6 October 2021, the UK Supreme Court gave its judgment. The judges unanimously decided that four sections of the bill went beyond the Scottish Parliament's powers. We were warned about that risk prior to stage 3, in correspondence from the UK Government, and at stage 3, by members in this chamber and through amendments that sought to prevent that overreach.

I have no intention of rehearsing events since October 2021, as that was covered previously, not least in my members' business debate. Suffice to say that, from the United Nations all the way up to our young people here—and from almost every group in between—the call to the Scottish

Government has been: "Get on with it. Share your ideas, and show us your plan."

Today, we vote on whether we will reconsider the bill, which is a first for the Parliament. If it is agreed to, the motion before us will open the process that is known as reconsideration stage. As yet untested procedures are laid out that support the stage. I refer to rules 9.9 and 9.9A of standing orders, for those who are interested. Rules on what makes a valid amendment are contained in rule 9.10.5, which I feel will prove interesting in the debates that will follow. I know that, as always, we will be ably guided by those who advise the Parliament, both in the chamber and further afield.

That brings me to the body of what I wish to discuss today. I welcome the support and comments regarding the debate from those outside the chamber. They can be summed up no better than by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, who has written to MSPs, saying:

"It has taken longer than any of us would have wished for the Bill to reach this stage. That should not detract from the importance of the decisions that you will be asked to focus on now, as human rights guarantors".

That is what we are in this chamber: we are one of the walls of human rights guarantors that young people have. As the commissioner said, we need

"to protect children's rights in Scotland to the fullest extent possible."

I also thank the Scottish Human Rights Commission and other organisations making up the Together alliance for their correspondence.

Although the bill is to be narrowed in scope, it will still increase protections for those who are most vulnerable. It will demonstrate to children and young people in Scotland that we will continue to uphold the commitments to them, now and into the future. The culture change that we want to happen as a result of incorporation will still be possible. More can be done in the near future to bring further devolved issues into the scope of the bill, but we can act now to secure what is possible.

As part of the programme for government, correspondence was published between the First Minister and cabinet secretaries. The correspondence to the cabinet secretary who has moved the motion said:

"You will ... bring a revised UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill back to Parliament".

In similar correspondence to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, it was written:

"A revised UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill will be brought back to the Scottish Parliament later in the year"—that is, 2023.

I raise that because there has been secrecy over the wording of amendments to rectify the bill. I respect the cabinet secretary's contribution and her defence of legal advice, but there has been secrecy over the wording that was anticipated. On numerous occasions, I and others, both within and outwith this place, have called on the Scottish Government to publish, share and even talk about the wording of its amendments.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I thank Martin Whitfield for everything that he has done to get this issue dealt with as a matter of urgency. I share his concerns around the lack of information during the work that was undertaken by the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. Many committee members asked for an update. We, and the Government in particular, can learn lessons from that.

Martin Whitfield: The member is, of course, right. If mistakes are made, we need to learn from them. We have an opportunity to see whether that learning will take place in the very short period that the Parliament has between now and Christmas, when the bill will, I hope, become law.

That is prescient, as the First Minister made an offer in the chamber. He said:

"to all the parties represented in this chamber, I repeat the offer that I made on becoming First Minister. You will sometimes disagree with things that we do, but, when you can, work with us. You will find that my door is always open. I have already shown my willingness to work with others in recent months."—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2023; c 12.]

I understand that interim amendments have already been published in correspondence to the committee and that, if today's motion is supported—I can confirm that Labour members will support it—they will be lodged formally on Monday, which is the right thing to do.

There is a weight of expectation that the Scottish Government will listen to advice from the organisations outside this place that speak, with authority, for young people and from experts who may propose changes to the Scottish Government amendments and there is an expectation that those in this chamber who represent young people will both have ideas and listen to those of the young people themselves.

The Scottish Government has kept the ball close since 6 October 2021. If the amended bill is to be passed by the end of this year, the Government must be open to discussion about whether the amendments will achieve the goals sought or whether other wording is needed. I welcome the cabinet secretary's promise to work with members from all parties. The Government, and members, must listen to the committee or committees that take an interest, and it must do all

that in a tight timeframe that is completely unnecessary. The time for secrecy never actually existed. From now on, the Scottish Government and the minister in charge of the bill must be transparent in their intentions and open to suggestions. This Parliament, and this Government, will not be forgiven for failing Scotland's young people again.

14:51

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It gives me great pleasure to offer the support of the Scottish Liberal Democrats for the motion and for the reconsideration of a vital piece of legislation.

Why are we here? What is important about the legislation before us today? I turn to the words of my friend Bruce Adamson, the outgoing children's commissioner, who said that the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law was

"the most important thing that we can do in legislative terms for children".

Why is that? It is important that we in this place illustrate policy with human experience, and I do so with reference to an individual who is known to members and who once spent the night in a police cell after punching a police officer. I am sure that that is something that happens from time to time across Scotland, but what was different about this case was that the individual in question, Lynzy Hanvidge, was only 13 years old. She was arrested on the night that she was taken into care and, understandably, lashed out because she was being separated from her siblings. Her fist connected with a police officer and she then spent the night in adult prison accommodation at the age of 13.

I use her story, although she was then older than our age of criminal responsibility, which is still one of the lowest in the world, not in reference to the age of criminal responsibility but because she had no access to the justice that should have been provided to her under article 37 of the UNCRC, which is about ensuring that children who are arrested are held in suitable accommodation. No one here would suggest that compounding one adverse childhood experience of being taken into care with another of spending a night in the cells was in any way in Lynzy's best interests, which is the test that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to children. There was no recourse to justice for Lynzy.

The journey of this bill has been a long one and predates my time in the chamber. It began with commitments in the 2011 election manifestos of several parties, including my own and that of the governing party, to bring forward a bill on the

rights of children and young people. That bill was drafted and talked about incorporation of the UNCRC, but was then conflated into what we now know as the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. At several points during the work on that piece of legislation, incorporation was mooted, or was attempted via amendments, but was then dispensed with, largely because the Government felt that it would be too complicated to make public bodies, or itself, act compatibly with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Happily, we have moved forward.

There have been bumps in the road. I return to the idea of the age of criminal responsibility. I believe the Government's credentials and its wish to make Scotland the best place in the world for children to grow up in. However, it was unedifying and embarrassing when it introduced a piece of legislation to lift our arcane age of criminal responsibility from eight to the *de minimis* position of 12 yet, during consideration of that bill, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child further increased the international floor to 14. We fell short of that, and we are still behind Russia and China on the rights that we afford to children who are suspected of a crime and on the age at which we hold them responsible. You cannot lead the world on human rights from the back of the pack.

We have heard many times about the stipulations of the court and the court judgment. There was no dispute that the Parliament can incorporate a UN convention such as the UNCRC into Scots law. That is a helpful and important precedent, because it paves the way for other conventions to be incorporated into Scots law, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and I hope that similar legislation will be introduced on those.

The judgment referred to four provisions. Those provisions were clear, but they were also simple and the judgment should not have been a surprise. Several members raised concerns that there might be a lack of compatibility with the strictures of devolution based on those points. There is even a suggestion that that was communicated to the Scottish Government in advance of stages 2 and 3 but it still pressed ahead. Had we known that that would have resulted in such a delay, the Scottish Parliament would have taken steps at those stages to make sure that the legislation was compatible. I hope that that was not done deliberately on the altar of grievance to necessitate a constitutional fight. I echo Martin Whitfield's well-made points about how we should proceed by looking at the amendments and including the voices of the people whom the legislation will affect.

It is important that I reflect that my chairmanship of Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's

Rights) was very much focused on how we get the UNCRC incorporated into Scots law in a living way that is meaningful to the people at the business end—the children of Scotland. As I said earlier, we want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up in, and I hope that everybody in the Parliament shares that laudable ambition of the Scottish Government. It has had that ambition for the 16 years for which the SNP has been in power but, up to this point, we are not much closer to realising that ambition.

I will finish by resting on the words of the person who I mentioned at the start of my speech this afternoon. Bruce Adamson, the outgoing children's commissioner, said:

"Every day of delay is a failure to properly respect, protect and fulfil children's rights. This bill was approved by parliament, but the prevarication and delay is robbing children of the protections they are entitled to."

He was talking about Lynzy Hanvidge and many other thousands of children who, every day, find themselves being wronged by public bodies, public institutions and acts of the Parliament. As he said,

"Every day of delay is a failure",

and there have been nearly 1,000 days since the Parliament passed the bill unanimously. It is time that we brought an end to that delay and made rights real for Scotland's children.

14:57

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank members for their contributions. A number of members rightly and understandably have pointed to the amount of time that has passed before we reached this stage. During that time, we have been looking at the options to ensure maximum effective coverage. We could have taken a variety of ways that could have given us more coverage, but they ran the risk of legal challenges and made the bill exceptionally complicated, to the point at which it might genuinely have become unworkable, particularly for the children and young people whose rights we want to ensure are protected.

We have an obligation to continue to point out where the gaps in provision are, particularly because of the changes that we have to make because of the Supreme Court judgment. I fully respect the Supreme Court judgment and our requirement to do so.

Roz McCall talked about some issues surrounding education. I will not get into the more political aspects of her speech, but I will say that, because of the changes that we have to make, a number of important education acts no longer fall under the scope of the bill. I am afraid that that proves the point about why it was necessary to take some time to see whether more could be

done to get a workable piece of legislation that incorporated as many acts as possible. Ms McCall might call that politicisation, but I call it a statement of fact about where we have got to.

I have provided a solution, which is the UK Government itself incorporating the UNCRC. It is unfortunate that we cannot come together, collectively as a Parliament, around that proposal. It is not political to say that we want to protect all children's rights, not just those that we will be able to protect under the proposed act.

A number of members have talked about the process that led us to this stage. I do not want to go over that in too much detail. We do not have time for that, and I do not think that it would be helpful for me to do that, because I am keen to move forward. However, for the record, no amendments that were lodged at stage 3 would have covered the Supreme Court judgment. It is not a correct analysis to say that there was something on the table at that point that would have allowed us to progress.

Martin Whitfield: This is quite mischievous, but the issue was the stage 3 amendments that took the bill beyond the powers of this Parliament, rather than stage 3 amendments that might have pulled it back within the Parliament's powers.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The debate was had and members voted on the bill as amended.

We are now at the point of reconsideration. This is a brand-new process for the Parliament. Although certain aspects are covered by standing orders, it would be fair to say that there are certain aspects on which the Parliament is free to roam. I look forward to working with the Parliament and with the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee in whichever way they decide that they want to proceed.

We have been working with stakeholders for a long time on the possibility of amendments. Until recently, there were a number of options on the table. In June, I announced to the chamber the options that we would go forward with, and we worked with stakeholders on the detail of those options before formal drafting took place in the Government. I have no interest in secrecy on this matter, and there would be no benefit to it. I am not aware—I am sure that members will correct me if I am wrong—of having turned down any proposals for meetings from members to discuss the issue. As the First Minister has said, in general, my door is always open to those who wish to discuss this matter.

I want to conclude by thanking the most important people who are involved in the process—the children and young people who have continued to campaign for the bill and to highlight the challenges that still exist to ensure that their

rights are protected. I am immensely proud of, for example, the children and young people who represented Scotland in Geneva in May as part as the regular scrutiny of the UK by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In its questions to the delegation, it is clear that that committee reflected the issues that those children and young people raised with it.

I am also very grateful to the children and young people who have met the Cabinet and the executive team over the years. We all owe them a degree of hard work and concentration on the bill so that they can be reassured that the act that we emerge with at the end of the process will protect their rights to the maximum extent possible under the devolution settlement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Football

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10439, in the name of Maree Todd, on the role of football in Scottish society and communities. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:04

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Few issues manage to unite members in this Parliament. However, football—proving the famous Bill Shankly quote about it being more important than life and death—appears to be one such issue. I welcome the support across the chamber and from all parliamentary groups for today's motion for debate, and I look forward to hearing members' contributions.

I am sure that members were shocked, as I was, to see the proposed guidelines on taking passengers to sporting events in Scotland, which the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain published for consultation last week. The consultation, which was launched without any prior engagement with the Scottish Government, the Scottish football authorities or supporters in Scotland, seeks views on a range of restrictions that relate to carriage of supporters to sporting events by public service vehicles—coaches, in other words—and which, it is purported, would bring Scotland into line with England and Wales. The list of sporting events to which the new guidelines would apply are all, and only, football matches. The guidelines would therefore not apply to a coach full of supporters going to Murrayfield to see the rugby or one taking people to a concert or any other event.

It is extremely difficult to see how the proposals could be workable in any circumstance, but they are especially impractical and demeaning in the current positive circumstances in which our national game finds itself, and when no evidence has been offered to suggest that they are necessary.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I agree with everything that the minister has said so far. The rules for coaches are not appropriate. However, would the minister accept that there is an element of antisocial behaviour around football? We have people urinating and drinking alcohol in the street in my constituency, and celebrations by both Rangers and Celtic fans have been a major problem for my constituents in Glasgow.

Maree Todd: Mr Mason and I discussed those issues very recently in the chamber. I certainly acknowledge that there is a small minority of fans whose behaviour requires attention and effort from everyone involved who wants to ensure that the game of football, which we all love—it is our national game and there is a huge level of positivity about football in Scotland—is inclusive of absolutely everybody. Mr Mason is correct that some of the behaviour of a small number of fans is particularly challenging. However, I do not think that the fans who were particularly troublesome in his constituency, as Mr Mason highlights, would have the same need for a coach to travel to fixtures as, for example, people in my constituency, who travel very long distances to watch football and who cause no problem whatsoever.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): John Mason misses the point completely. Matters relating to the issue should be dealt with by the authorities in Scotland. That is the main issue that we are all united around, is it not?

Maree Todd: Well—that is a very welcome change, indeed.

The regular organised supporter coaches that attend league matches the length and breadth of the country every week present little or no issues from a football safety officer perspective or a policing perspective. Many have local arrangements with pubs and clubs for pre-match access for a beer and a bite to eat, whether it be a substantial meal or a microwaved scotch pie.

However, the proposed guidelines portray a travelling football support that requires to be highly regulated in how, when and where they travel by bus, in order to avoid risk to public safety and order. That portrayal is appalling: it is misleading and wrong, and it bears no relation to reality. It paints a picture of Scottish football that I simply do not recognise.

The truth is that the vast majority of supporters' clubs and organised buses actually aid in maintaining public order. If one looks at any bus travelling this weekend to any match, one will see men of all ages, but one will also see grandparents, grandchildren, young people, families, women and girls. Indeed, organised buses and supporters' clubs often enable fans who might not otherwise get to matches to do so. For every fan who travels on a bus, there is potentially one car off the road, so organised buses play their part in tackling climate change and cutting emissions, too.

I welcome the fact that, under pressure, the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain chose to withdraw the consultation.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I, too, welcome the change of heart from the senior traffic commissioner. His failure to consult was wrong indeed, and failure to consult often leads to problems.

We have a situation in relation to the Scottish Assessors Association's fundamental change of methodology for assessing rateable values for football clubs and stadiums. I know that the Scottish Football Association and the Scottish Professional Football League have written to the Government. Would the minister persuade her colleagues to consider the briefing that the SPFL and SFA have sent the Government on the subject?

Maree Todd: I am always happy to speak up in Government for the SFA and other sporting governing bodies. At my core, I absolutely believe in the power of sport, and that sport should be celebrated. I agree that sport reflects society and that, sometimes, there are challenges. Through sport, and football, we have an opportunity to lead the way in addressing some of the social challenges that we face.

I strongly urge that future proposals be developed with the full involvement of the Scottish Government, the Scottish football governing bodies and—most important—supporters and fans. I have written directly to the commissioners to make that request.

However, the stramash has also provided our Parliament with a welcome opportunity to highlight the positive contribution that football makes to so many aspects of Scottish life. Never in my lifetime as a Scotland fan have we had such a purple patch at national level.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The minister rightly spoke earlier about the impact that football can have on helping to sustain public order. She also talked about the transcendent qualities of football. Will she join me in paying tribute to the many youth work clubs around the country that use football as a means of bringing young people together to give them skills and interpersonal development—sometimes to great effect in terms of a reduction of antisocial behaviour in their communities?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back for all the interventions, minister.

Maree Todd: Absolutely. I am more than happy to support that cause and I hope that we hear more about how football is used not simply for young people but to bring together everyone in society, and about how its power is used for good.

We might not have gotten the result that we wanted on Tuesday night at Hampden, but

everything else about that sell-out match was fantastic. The national team has won an incredible five out of five qualifiers for the European championships in Germany next summer, so back-to-back qualifications for that tournament are a real possibility. Not only are fans flocking to international matches in huge numbers, but domestic Scottish football attendances—as many members will be aware—are, by some distance, ahead of the rest of Europe on a population basis. Recently published figures show that more than 5 million people attended matches in the 2022-23 season, which is a record high.

It is not just men's football that is growing. The women's game is going from strength to strength, with the creation of the Scottish Women's Premier League and the first-ever women's Scottish cup final being held at Hampden in 2022. Last season's SWPL title went down to the final day, with any one of three teams having been capable of winning it, and our national women's team is inspiring people, especially girls, to take up the sport.

"Accelerate our game" is the first-ever strategy for the entire girls' and women's game in Scotland and sets ambitious targets in participation, performance and club football. With endorsement of our strategy from the Union of European Football Associations, Scotland is considered to be a best-practice model, although this week's news reports still show how far we have to go to create a truly equitable approach.

We have a strong track record on creating inclusive opportunities. Cerebral palsy football and the homeless world cup are two powerful examples, and Scottish Para-Football, under the leadership of Ashley Reid, runs parallel football for participants for whom the mainstream game is not accessible, including walking football, powerchair football, football memories and autism football. Scotland is seen internationally as a leader in the area, having recently won a UEFA gold award, and we are very honoured to be hosting amputee football's nations league in Fife in October, which I hope to be able to attend.

With over 2,500 clubs across the country and over 900,000 people being involved in one way or another every week, football is helping to deliver on key policy priorities for the Scottish Government. Football is at the heart of every community, with 83 per cent of our population living within 10 miles of an SPFL ground—over 4.5 million people. However, research also shows that those who live closest to the stadiums are three times more likely than others to be living in poverty.

Football is playing its part in tackling poverty and addressing linked challenges such as physical

and mental wellbeing, education and attainment, employability and social isolation.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: Do I have time, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have quite a bit of time in hand, minister.

Maree Todd: Thank you. I will take an intervention from Ben Macpherson.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the minister for taking my intervention. I fully endorse her points about the wide-ranging positive effects that football has on our communities.

Will she, as I do, pay tribute to the efforts in my Edinburgh Northern and Leith constituency that are undertaken by the Spartans Community Foundation, Street Soccer Scotland and the Hibernian Community Foundation? They provide so much opportunity and so many wellbeing improvements across my constituency.

Maree Todd: Absolutely. I heartily endorse the efforts that are going on in Ben Macpherson's constituency. However, I say to Parliament that such work is replicated all over Scotland. The power of football is being used in every corner of Scotland.

I want to highlight the work of a club that I had the absolute pleasure of visiting in August. Bonnyrigg Rose Football Club offers a wide range of activities for men, for mums and for anyone who might be isolated. Many of the people who benefit from the support that is on offer there might have been reluctant to seek support through more traditional routes. Rather than accessing healthcare or mental health help through traditional routes, those people are able to go to their community club and meet professional counsellors who can help them with a range of issues, from domestic abuse and neurodiversity to struggles with addictions. It is phenomenal.

The work of clubs such as Bonnyrigg Rose is absolutely priceless, but the social return on investment can now be measured through UEFA's model. It shows that the impact of community participation in the club was worth £3.95 million.

Richard Leonard: Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: I will, if that is okay with the Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Leonard.

Richard Leonard: I thank the minister for taking the intervention. I remind Parliament that I am convener of the Professional Footballers Association Scotland parliamentary interest group. In this debate about the role of football in Scottish society, I wonder whether the minister, as the minister who is responsible for mental wellbeing as well as sport, is prepared to lend her support to the campaign for recognition that dementia in former professional football players is an industrial injury.

Maree Todd: I am keenly aware of the debate around dementia and its association with football, and the association with head injuries and other diseases and concerns that have been acquired through sport. A lot of work is going on on that—not least on whether women might be more susceptible than men to concussion. The evidence base is not entirely clear yet, but like everyone who has an interest in the game, I am watching keenly as that evidence base develops to see what we can do—first, to make participation in sport safer in the future and, secondly, to ensure that people who have acquired injuries through sport are supported in later life.

It is a sadness to me that the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain appear to know so little about the rich hinterland of Scottish football. How else to explain how they arrived at the proposed guidelines, which failed to recognise the reality of being a travelling football supporter in a country that is 98 per cent rural? It is unclear what problem they thought they were trying to fix, unless it was to bring Scotland into line with guidelines that are used elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Imposing unnecessary and unhelpful rules without understanding the consequences of that suggests that this is yet another area in which we need the powers to make such guidelines for ourselves. A four-nations approach—*[Interruption.]*—to issues of transport safety is absolutely still important, but there is no reason why that could not be achieved through co-operation and collaboration, where needed. *[Interruption.]*

Would Rachael Hamilton like to make an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I would just like to point out to the minister that co-operation works both ways.

Maree Todd: It certainly does, so, having such guidelines imposed on us without any consultation—with not even the Government, never mind the governing bodies, the fans or the clubs—is absolutely outrageous. I am pleased that my Conservative colleagues agree with me that

having issues imposed on Scotland simply in order to align them with England, without any consultation, is absolutely not good enough. I thank them for their support on that.

I hope that members' contributions to the debate will show the commissioners how strongly Scotland's Parliament feels about the issue and about football more widely. I urge the commissioners to listen to what we have to say, then to think again—not least about whether the guidelines are needed at all—and, at the very least, to adopt a fair-play approach to the process.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges that football contributes significantly to the cultural, social, economic and sporting fabric of Scotland, including through the work of the Scottish FA, which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2023; recognises the important role that football clubs play in their communities, supporting a wide range of Scottish Government priorities; welcomes in particular the growth of inclusive opportunities in football in Scotland; notes that the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain have withdrawn the consultation on proposed new guidelines for fans travelling to football matches in Scotland on public hire vehicles, and calls for any future consultation on and development of Scottish guidelines to be fully informed through the involvement of the Scottish Government, football clubs, authorities and, especially, fans and supporters' groups to best meet Scottish needs and interests.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As members will have picked up, we have extra time. Members who wish to display their debating skills will be indulged in that. I invite those who are looking to participate but have not yet pressed their request-to-speak buttons to do so as soon as possible.

I call Stephen Kerr, for a generous seven minutes.

15:22

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I saw what the Presiding Officer did there on "extra time"—boom boom!—in the debate. Well done, Presiding Officer.

My goodness me! The Government started off by talking about how we were going to be united on football and then spent the next 15 or 16 minutes creating division where it does not need to be. That speech was for the previous motion, but they could not be bothered to update it, so they gave the old speech instead. It is ridiculous, frankly, that the minister could not live up to her opening paragraph about the fact that the issue can unite us.

Now that I am a back bencher, it is a rare privilege for me to respond to a Government motion in the Parliament. I will give some first reflections on Scottish football over the past week.

Tuesday's match was only a friendly. As Steve Clarke said,

"sometimes you have to take your medicine".

The men's team will come back stronger, because what is being achieved by Steve Clarke and the Scotland men's team is truly exciting to watch.

The Football Association needs to come up with an anthem for when England plays. It is that simple. It really should not use "God Save the King"; that is the anthem of the whole United Kingdom, not England.

Matters that relate to football fans travelling to and from matches in Scotland, in buses or by any other means of transportation, are for the authorities in Scotland—end of story. There is no need to talk about that any more. It has been dealt with. It does not exist. Those guidelines have been withdrawn, and rightly so.

In a debate in the chamber last week, I said something about our not living our lives as

"isolated beings; even though we have our individual identities and preferences, we are woven together"—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2023; c 44.]

in society. I believe in the power of community and the importance of the identity of a community. I believe in civic pride. Whenever I think about football and the community, my mind goes back to 1978. Yes, I am that old—I can remember 1978.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise to Mr Kerr for interrupting, but I want to hear what he has to say. Could I very gently ask for your guidance about asking members to speak through their microphones?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for that point of order. I was going to make that point myself. I did not know whether, with the projection that Mr Kerr has, it would have been picked up anyway, but it is valuable advice to Mr Kerr and to everybody.

You can have the time back, Mr Kerr. Please continue.

Stephen Kerr: I am terribly surprised that you could not hear me up there—it is not very far.

I think about 1978—[*Interruption.*]

I will pull the microphone down—how is that?

Gillian Mackay: Grand.

Stephen Kerr: My first exposure in 1978 to the power of football and civic good relates to my hometown's football team, Forfar Athletic. Archie Knox had the managerial reins at Station park, and he would go on to do other things with Sir Alex Ferguson and Walter Smith, but the Loons—[*Interruption.*]

We need microphones that hang down, do we not? That is another suggestion.

The Loons had reached the semi-final of the league cup. They were to play Rangers—the mighty Glasgow Rangers of Jock Wallace, John Greig, Derek Johnstone and Davie Cooper. The game was supposed to take place in the November of the year before, but bad weather had forced it to be played on a Monday night in February 1978. There was a huge build-up to the game. I think that the whole population of Forfar travelled to Hampden park, in Glasgow, for the match. We were bursting with pride—in the team and in the town. As I remember it, even Forfar's Rangers supporters had got behind Forfar Athletic.

On the night itself, the part-time players of Forfar Athletic took the mighty Glasgow Rangers to extra time. I suppose that, realistically speaking, the result was inevitable, but you can dream. That night, even though we were defeated, we all floated home to Forfar, because it was a dream fulfilled. We—I emphasise “we”—had nearly caused a football sensation, the “we” being the team and the people of Forfar.

What has not changed since 1978 is the profound significance of football clubs to communities and the positive impact that they can have. It is my belief in community that leads me to urge caution against one-size-fits-all policies that neglect the importance of individuals within the wider context of a community. Politicians should empower, not instruct, the people. People are agents, not objects.

Football clubs remind us of that by serving individual needs while bringing communities together. For young people, football clubs inspire dreams of playing. For working people, they offer 90 minutes of escape from life's stresses. Football brings people together, promotes intergenerational companionship and strengthens family bonds. It creates cherished memories. For me, growing up, it was about going to Station park with my dad, complete with the half-time Forfar bridie—and, later, taking my daughter and sons to the football. *[Interruption.]* Those who have not partaken of a Forfar bridie have missed out on one of life's great culinary delights. I urge my colleagues to try bridies.

The family outings that I am describing resonate across our nation. We should be mindful, as policy and law makers, of what will strengthen and give support to the institution of the family. Communitarian identity cannot be imposed from above; it happens when local people come together and act voluntarily, and football plays a powerful role in bringing communities together. Its impact extends beyond the stadium, as fans gather in pubs and cafes before and after games, which supports local businesses.

Football can also combat the blight of loneliness. We do not speak enough about loneliness in this Parliament. I believe that isolation and loneliness are one of the biggest silent killers in our society, and football brings people together.

Increasingly, football clubs offer work experience to young people, especially in the realms of social media and marketing. They create and lay career pathways that many go on to follow.

Through charity work, football clubs support vulnerable community members and global causes. Although there are numerous examples in central Scotland that I would like to draw on, I want to bring members' attention to the work being done by East Stirlingshire Football Club, which has recently announced ECO vision—a project that aims to make the club carbon neutral by 2035. This season alone, East Stirlingshire is offsetting carbon emissions from all away game travelling, planting a tree for every 10 programmes sold at home games, and using recycled materials for all new goods sold.

At the heart of East Stirlingshire's project is sustainability. However, sadly, for many football clubs across the country, financial sustainability is becoming more difficult because of football inflation, rising costs in the general economy, and changes in how people participate in and support football. Running a football club in the lower divisions is therefore becoming increasingly difficult financially.

I believe that, because of the societal benefits that local football clubs create, the Scottish Parliament has a duty to explore ways in which we can get behind them. We should explore how we might use football to create more social good and create sustainable and tangible better outcomes. During the three minutes or so of her speech in which the minister was being positive, she spoke about matters that are of vital importance. I mentioned loneliness; she mentioned physical, mental and emotional health. Such issues are best tackled through the social interaction and cohesion that local football clubs can create.

Football is good for people and for the local economy. I am not arguing for a blank cheque for football clubs, but public bodies as well as third sector organisations ought to be exploring how to develop deeper connections with football clubs to harness their broad appeal to power social change and social good across the entire demography of our communities.

Football clubs are at the heart of our communities. They bring people from different generations together, strengthen family bonds, and bring individuals a sense of identity and civic

pride that is shaped by a shared history and local culture. Football is at the heart of Scottish life. We, in the Parliament, should recognise and encourage the creative and positive reach of Scottish football.

I hope that, in the remainder of our debate, we will hear less grievance and grudge and much more celebration of what community football clubs are achieving for their communities right across our nation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Neil Bibby for a similarly generous six minutes.

15:32

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the chance to speak in the debate. First, I must declare an interest. I love football, which is why I am leading the debate for Scottish Labour. Secondly, I must declare that, sadly, I am not any good at football, which is also why I am leading the debate for Scottish Labour.

Of course, I am not alone in my passion for football. It is not just a sport in Scotland; it is woven into the very fabric of our society. In his book on football, the legendary sports journalist Hugh McIlvanney quoted Arthur Hopcraft, who wrote that football

“is built into the urban psyche, as much a common experience to our children as ... school”

and extended family. Hopcraft went on to say:

“It is not a phenomenon; it is an everyday matter.”

This week, in a match between Scotland and England in Glasgow, we celebrated 150 years of international association football. Football has been central to the life of our communities over the past century and a half. As other members have said, it is our national game and a force for good. It is important that we recognise that anniversary, as it makes us reflect on just how much the game has grown and evolved. Today, we should celebrate football and debate what more we can and should do to support it.

Before I turn to that, though, I want to welcome the halting of the traffic commissioners’ proposed guidelines. The draconian proposals, which included restrictions on arrival and departure times and guidelines on pick-up points and reporting to a dedicated police officer, were set to punish football fans in Scotland. The proposals were completely unnecessary and would have interfered in people’s lives when they were merely trying to watch the game that they love. That is why we completely opposed them and will support the motion today.

César Luis Menotti, Argentina’s former world cup-winning manager, said:

“football belongs to the working class and has the size, nobility and generosity to allow everyone to enjoy it as a spectacle.”

I agree that everyone should be able to enjoy it. Of course, we should expect football fans to behave appropriately and responsibly, but—let us be honest here—there is often a snobbery on the part of the establishment towards working-class football fans that is not felt by fans of other sports. We in Scotland know what happens when the Government fails to listen to fans and overreacts. The prime example of that was the pushing through of the discredited—now, thankfully, repealed—Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012, which again unfairly targeted football fans and treated them as second-class citizens.

The Scottish Government should reflect on its own track record because, sadly, many fans do not view the Government as a friend and an ally of football, which is regrettable. In fact, the Government should be the game’s biggest fan and champion. Just as the Scottish Government has recently stated its intention to reset its relationship with businesses, perhaps it should also reset its relationship with football fans and clubs.

John Mason: I take the member’s point that football fans should not be unfairly discriminated against, but would he accept that it is at football games that we have fans—especially Rangers and Celtic fans—shouting hatred at each other and voicing hatred of the Irish and of Catholics, and that that does not happen at netball, rugby and basketball games?

Neil Bibby: Of course, we want fans to behave responsibly. I was just going to come on to the issue of relationships between clubs, because, although I have called for a reset of relationships between Government and fans, I also think that there needs to be reset of relations between our clubs, as opposition fans continue to receive limited or no allocations at away games.

I do not accept the premise of what Mr Mason has said. It is often said that people who attend other sporting events are impeccably behaved and that it is only football fans who misbehave. I do not accept that at all. As I said earlier, football is a force for good.

Stephen Kerr: Does the member agree that we in Scotland have a completely different relationship with football than we do with all the sports that John Mason just listed, and that the traditions and history of Scottish football are something to be respected and admired? John Mason’s contributions in this debate so far all seem to geared towards somehow belittling Scottish football. We should not be doing that. Today, of all days, we should be celebrating it.

Neil Bibby: I agree that we should be celebrating football and the force for good that football is, and I want to pay tribute to all our coaches and players, especially those at the grass roots who give up their time for their teams.

We invest in football because we recognise that it can reach people who Government and the authorities often cannot. There are numerous examples of great charitable work done by our clubs on issues such as employability and tackling obesity. One example that I want to highlight is the fantastic street stuff initiative, a partnership programme run by Renfrewshire Council, St Mirren FC and the police, which provides free weekly activities, primarily in the evenings and weekends, to young people throughout Renfrewshire. Since 2009, street stuff's approach has contributed to a reduction of 65 per cent in reported youth disorder and antisocial behaviour. Such initiatives provide evidence to show the multiple benefits that football brings to our communities and society, and that is why investment in the game is vital.

Although we celebrate 150 years of international football this week, we must also remember the disgraceful banning of women's football between 1921 and 1974. It is hugely welcome to see women's football grow and thrive in recent years, and we must recognise that that has not happened by chance; it has happened because of the pioneering work of many inspirational women—inspirational not only to girls but to all of us—across Scotland, including those at Glasgow City FC, who I recently met. They told me of a time when they were forced to use car headlights in place of floodlights in order to play. That reinforces the need to reverse cuts to playing fields and to invest in sports facilities in order to make them accessible to everybody who wants to play the game.

Finally, we also need to see positive reform to support the game and to ensure that the interests of the fans are always at the heart of the game. Independent research by the Scottish Football Supporters Association has revealed a disconnect between supporters and those who run the game. Scottish Labour therefore welcomes the publication of the fan-led review by the Scottish Football Supporters Association. We are carefully considering all the recommendations in that report, and we urge the Scottish Government to publish its own response to the review as soon as possible. We should also have a full parliamentary debate on the issue.

Football has played a crucial role in our society for 150 years. With a reset in relations with fans, a reversal of cuts to facilities and reform of the game, we can and should make our national game fit for the next 150 years.

15:40

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is, of course, a great privilege to speak in this debate.

I draw members' attention to the fact that I am the convener of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on the future of football in Scotland.

Love it, as I do, or loathe it, as I am sure others do, it is a fact that football is an integral part of Scottish society and is therefore of great value to all the communities that we represent. Let us consider some of the statistics on those who support the game. In the previous season—the 2022-23 season—the SPFL enjoyed record attendances, which exceeded 5 million people. That is the highest attendance per capita anywhere in Europe. Furthermore, a study by the Fraser of Allander Institute showed that the activities of SPFL clubs and spending by fans in league and cup competitions as far back as 2017-18 contributed more than £400 million to the Scottish economy and helped to support more than 9,000 jobs.

Stephen Kerr will be happy to hear that I will not dwell on this for too long, but that is why the traffic commissioners consultation on proposed new guidelines for fans travelling to football matches in Scotland was so outrageous and misplaced. I am glad that that has now been withdrawn. I take on board Stephen Kerr's comments. We cannot get fairer than that.

Fans are the lifeblood of the game. The recently published fan-led review of Scottish football, which I just mentioned, is perhaps another demonstration of that.

While I talk about fans, I want to touch on John Mason's points, as he made a couple of interventions about them. His points cannot be ignored. We all know that fan behaviour can sometimes be difficult, and that needs to be addressed. However, the answers are not simple, as we found out with previous legislation. As I said, I will not dwell on that for too long, but we cannot simply ignore those concerns. However, we know that those fans are always a very small minority.

The statistics for those who play the game are just as impressive. It is estimated that an impressive 800,000 people play some form of football in Scotland. That includes those involved in regular five-a-sides, such as me, as you know, Deputy Presiding Officer; in walking football, as run by Albion Rovers in the community, which I recently had the pleasure of visiting; and in powerchair football, among many other forms.

On the grass-roots game, the SFA has highlighted that, in 2019, there were more than 147,000 players, the majority of whom were young people and children at the grass-roots level.

Ben Macpherson: Does Fulton MacGregor agree that we must all be focused and determined to ensure that we continue to have a substantial amount of facilities in communities for people to take up and discover the game? Given that local authorities need to give that focus, will he, like me, urge local authorities, including the City of Edinburgh Council, to ensure that there is adequate provision of football pitches? Unfortunately, we have seen a decline in the number of available football pitches in my constituency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Fulton MacGregor the time back.

Fulton MacGregor: I totally agree with that point, and I will come back to it later. I thank my friend and colleague Ben Macpherson for raising it.

Local parks and community hubs across the country are full every night of the week with young people playing the game and learning life skills. I have a bit of experience of that as a football parent. My eldest child plays for Dunbeth FC, which is a well-established football team in Coatbridge—indeed, for anybody who is interested, I will be going straight to his training after decision time. Dunbeth is only one of many teams in my constituency, of course. I pay tribute to all the coaches and volunteers who work selflessly at those teams to ensure such good experiences for young people.

It is also great to notice the huge rise in the girls' game at the grass-roots level. That mirrors what is happening in the professional game. I know that all local clubs are doing work in that area, but I highlight the work of Burnbank FC and Bedlay Community Football Club for the groundbreaking work that they are doing in that area.

As demonstrated through the recent UEFA grow report, football is very much a force for good in helping to deliver the Scottish Government's health and wellbeing priorities for individuals and communities. It is also worth an estimated whopping £1.35 billion to the Scottish economy.

As I highlighted at the outset, I am the convener of the cross-party group on the future of football in Scotland. The SFA is our secretariat, and I thank Paul McNeill of the SFA for all his support to the group over the years. I hope that he is watching because—I did not say this on the night—I thank him for his work on the reception that I hosted at the Parliament in May to celebrate 150 years of the SFA. It was an excellent evening celebrating the value of football and its power to change lives.

We have discussed a number of things at the cross-party group that I would recommend to the Government and local authorities. The first, which Ben Macpherson preceded me in raising, is to do with access to facilities. In my local area, teams often struggle to get pitches even within the town. A new school hub with pitches opened up in Carnbroe in Coatbridge a couple weeks ago and was booked out even before a ball was kicked, with many local clubs left disappointed with their allocation. To be fair, North Lanarkshire Council is carrying out a review of football pitches across the authority area, but we in the cross-party group believe that some work needs to be done at national level to ensure equity of access. That must also include appropriate facilities to help promote the growth of the women's and accessible games.

Secondly, we think that more can be done to make the game more affordable, particularly in deprived areas. I welcome the First Minister's recent announcements in that regard. If football is made free for young children, or at least for those who cannot afford it, that will be an investment in the long term, not an expense.

The third ask would be for more support for community clubs to grow their facilities and increase their community engagement. On that point, I welcome the minister's response to my recent letter in accepting an invitation to visit Albion Rovers in the coming months to hear more about their plans in that area and the challenges that they face.

The men's national team might not have won on Tuesday night in the 150 year heritage match, but we are on course for Germany, which is very good. Even more important is the pivotal role that football plays in our society. That has been well demonstrated in the debate, and I think that it will continue to be. We have the power, in this chamber and across the country, to harness it even further to improve our wellbeing, community cohesiveness and prosperity as a nation.

15:47

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Just last week, the Parliament heard the former First Minister say that Parliament needs to be less polarised. It became so last week—briefly, it seems—thanks to an unusual source in the Senior Traffic Commissioner for Great Britain. I am glad that the commissioner heard the united roar of anger from members of all parties and scrapped the ill-thought-out proposals. It is clear to me, from sitting on the Finance and Public Administration Committee, that there are too many commissioners in the Scottish Parliament, but it seems that the UK Parliament might have a similar problem. As a football fan, I am getting fed up with

being branded a criminal just because a small minority of fans cannot behave. The proposals that were put on the table were completely over the top, unworkable and unwanted.

To be fair, it is not just the actions of the senior traffic commissioner that have looked to treat football fans unfairly. As has been said, this Parliament has often passed laws that have branded fans as criminals and has not targeted the minority who cannot behave. For example, we have different laws on alcohol in stadiums for rugby and football fans—there is a discrimination there.

One fan who could not behave the other night was our First Minister, who smirked when “God Save the King” was booed—an absolute disgrace for someone in his position. He should be leading, not laughing.

Stephen Kerr: It is interesting to note that the First Minister and his wife had just spent the weekend at Balmoral with the King.

Douglas Lumsden: That is quite ironic. He was meeting the King one minute and smirking the next.

That is my rant over.

Maree Todd: Is it the case, then, that the entire Conservative front bench agrees with Stephen Kerr that perhaps another national anthem ought to be chosen, to avoid controversy, and will they be writing to the FA in England to apprise it of their stance?

Douglas Lumsden: I cannot speak for everyone else on the Conservative benches, but it is certainly my view, which I share with Stephen Kerr, that they should have their own anthem.

Ben Macpherson: Does the member, as someone whose mother is English, agree that the great country of England should have a national anthem that talks about more than one person?

Douglas Lumsden: That would be something for the English FA to decide. The point that I was making is that, in his position, the First Minister should not have been laughing at what was happening the other night.

I will move on, Presiding Officer, because that is my rant over. I promise to be more positive from now on. The issue demonstrates how important football is to our society and how emotive it can be.

Football has always been part of my life. It provides stories and memories. I remember, as an 11-year-old, queuing up all night to get a ticket to see Aberdeen beat Bayern Munich 3-2. I remember my first Scotland game—not such a happy memory—at Hampden in 1989, when we were narrowly beaten by England, as well as the

long bus journey home. Closer to home, when my son and daughter came along, I helped out with their school teams, and, when they got older, I travelled the country to watch their games. I can remember those events from years ago, yet I cannot remember what I had for my dinner last night.

We had an event in Parliament this week to celebrate volunteers in Scottish sport, which was hosted by my colleague Liz Smith. I want to give a big shout out to all those volunteers who help to run sports clubs, including football clubs, right across Scotland. Without those volunteers, grass-roots football would not exist. As a councillor on Aberdeen City Council, I was also able to see at first hand the impact that football trusts make in our communities. I will talk about two of those trusts.

Since being set up in 2014, the Aberdeen Football Club Community Trust has shown the important role that football plays in our local communities. Over the years, the trust has partnered with 17 primary schools and seven academies across the north-east. The trust’s work has increased pupils’ attendance and has improved time keeping, attainment and behaviour. Amazingly, a total of 119 pupils achieved Scottish Qualifications Authority qualifications through the trust’s interventions. The trust’s youth ambassador programme gives young people the opportunity to gain real-world experience, skills and qualifications through volunteering opportunities and work experience. However, the work of the trust goes beyond just education. Its 12-week MINDSET programme, which breaks down the stigma around mental ill health, has been delivered to every secondary 1 pupil in three secondary schools and Aberdeen city academies.

The work of the trust is not limited to young people. The football memories programmes and the regular health walks offer a safe space to people who are suffering with dementia and their families, while improving participants’ mental and physical wellbeing and tackling loneliness, which Stephen Kerr has mentioned. Because of the programmes that the trust offers and the positive impact that it has on the local community, it is not surprising that the trust has been awarded both the UEFA best professional football club in the community award and the Queen’s award in 2019.

As a councillor, I often thought about how the AFC community trust could reach out to people that the local authority could not reach. That ties back to how clubs are woven through the fabric of our communities. In Aberdeen, we are lucky that great work is being done by the Denis Law Legacy Trust, which was instrumental in setting up Cruyff courts in Aberdeen. Those free-to-play courts have a huge impact in some areas of Aberdeen.

They were approved in partnership with the then Conservative-led administration, which I was proud to lead. The Denis Law Legacy Trust also works in partnership with local police in tackling anti-social behaviour, providing its streetsport programme five nights a week, improving health and wellbeing and reaching out to youngsters right across the city.

It is not just Conservatives in local government who are helping grass-roots football. Let us not forget the recent announcement by the UK Government that it will invest £20 million in grass-roots multisports facilities in Scotland. That is a huge boost that has been warmly welcomed by the SFA, which will see a significant portion of that cash. The organisation said that it will help to reinforce the power of football locally and, in doing so, develop our national game.

Of course, football brings huge economic benefits. Travel operators and hospitality venues benefit hugely on the back of match days, and town centres benefit hugely by having our stadiums close by. I really hope that Aberdeen Football Club and the local council can work together to ensure that the UK's first net zero stadium is built in the city.

The Scottish Football Association's 150-year anniversary really is something to celebrate. The SFA can rightly be proud of its contribution to world football. If England claims to be the mother of football, Scotland must claim to be the father of football, which should make us all proud.

15:54

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): As a football fan, I was keen to speak in the debate. I am a Greenock Morton fan and I follow the national team. It is fair to say that, over the years, supporting both has not always been easy. However, football fans live for the days when we get a chance to witness something special.

I was in France for the Scotland v Norway game at the world cup in 1998, and those memories will stay with me for the rest of my life. I had the honour of piping our national anthem at Hampden in 2019, when Scotland played Cyprus in a qualifying match. I have had the pleasure of piping at Cappielow and around Finland when Morton took part in a pre-season tour in 1996. As colleagues in the chamber will know, I did a pipeathon in 2017 around all the senior football clubs in Scotland to raise money for charity.

In recent years, I have taken both of my daughters to watch Scotland and Morton. We have also attended a Scotland women's match at Hampden, and I will touch on the growth of the women's game in a moment. For anyone who is

not aware, I point out that not only did the first men's international match take place in Scotland, but the first women's international match in Great Britain took place at Ravenscraig stadium in Greenock on 18 November 1972. It was a Scotland v England match. A match was held at that stadium last year to mark that game's 50th anniversary, and there is no lie in saying that Scotland is a home of international football.

Football has the ability—possibly like no other sport—to impact a town's or a nation's mood. We can think of the collective anticipation that we all felt on Tuesday in the build-up to the Scotland v England match. Sadly, the result was not what I would have wanted—I see Mr Simpson smirking over there.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I should not need to point out to Stuart McMillan that I am a Scotland fan. I think that he knows that I was born in Aberdeen, so I was rooting for Scotland.

Stuart McMillan: As an England-born Scot, my loyalties were only on one side on Tuesday night.

The men's national team is on the cusp of reaching its second Euros in a row. There is so much optimism and excitement around the team, and long may that continue.

There is no doubting the role that football plays in our societies and communities. No playground would be the same without a ball being kicked, and it would not be a family party without someone talking about the most recent football results.

Football is ingrained in Scotland; it is hard to ignore our national game. Even those who are not regular football spectators got involved during the Euros in 2021. Children the length and breadth of the country felt the excitement that only those who are old enough to remember the halcyon days of Craig Brown and Andy Roxburgh taking us to international tournaments had felt.

Douglas Lumsden: Stuart McMillan mentioned Craig Brown. Will he join me in remembering what a great man Craig Brown was? We lost him recently. He was a great manager for Scotland and Aberdeen.

Stuart McMillan: I absolutely agree with the comments that have been made. Craig Brown was an outstanding manager and servant to football in Scotland. He managed elsewhere, too. He is a great loss.

My local club, Greenock Morton, will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year, and I look forward to colleagues signing my motion on that when I lodge it in due course. No one can enter or leave Inverclyde without driving past Cappielow, which is one of Scotland's most traditional grounds and has

one of the smallest pitches. The place has so much character.

Many parent and child bonds have been developed while standing in the cowshed at the stadium and cheering on Morton legends such as Allan McGraw, Andy Ritchie and Alan Mahood, to name just three. Football has the ability to unify us in the most special way. When Allan McGraw—Mr Morton—passed away earlier this year, there was an outpouring of emotion for him. He was inducted into the club's hall of fame in 2017, after spells as a player at, and a manager of, the club.

In 2019, a group of Morton fans began Morton Club Together with the aim of contributing to the first team's playing budget. That goal developed into pursuing community ownership and, since June 2021, Greenock Morton Football Club has been owned by its fans.

Morton Club Together is an entirely volunteer-led organisation, with many dedicated people giving up time, effort and money to help make community ownership a success. Where else would we see people giving up so much time, effort and money to something that can sometimes put them in the worst of moods? Football clubs have that enduring hold over their fans.

Morton also has a community development trust. I had a members' business debate about the Greenock Morton Community Trust a number of years ago. Morton in the Community, as it is now called, is an example of what can be done with the right attitude and desire to make things better for people living in a community. Now led by Brian McLaughlin, the organisation has been operational since March 2013. It helps to create a healthier and safer region by working closely with key partners in the public and private sectors to create inclusive programmes that engage people of all ages and abilities. Those range from physical literacy classes in nursery schools to non-elite coaching sessions with two to 16-year-olds, employability training for people of all ages, the promotion of healthy lifestyles and physical and mental wellbeing sessions. More than 5,000 people are engaged in those programmes on an annual basis. Football can have such an effect on our communities in Inverclyde.

Turning to the women's game, I genuinely think that this is a really exciting time for young women and girls in football. At no other time in history has there been so much support for the women's game. I am in no way saying that things are equal—they are not, and we still have a long way to go—but, for the first time, young girls are having it normalised to see elite women's football on television at prime time. Many people now watch women's football. For the first time, Scotland qualified for the world cup, in 2019. Scottish teams compete at a high level in European competitions,

and domestic games now appear regularly on television. I hope that the present feel-good factor around the women's game continues to grow.

When I was growing up, Scotland men's games were free to watch on TV. Before I was elected to the Parliament, I lodged a petition to the Public Petitions Committee, in around 2003 or 2004, calling for the men's game once again to be shown on free-to-air TV. During this cost of living crisis, we should not be asking football fans to pay even more money to watch our national team play. The UK Government needs to hear those calls loud and clear and must ensure that every young person in Scotland is able to watch our national teams on free-to-air channels at what is such an exciting point in our footballing history.

16:02

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin by giving my sincere apologies for having missed the first two minutes of the minister's speech. There is nothing worse than arriving late at the football to find you have missed the only goal of the game—I am sure that I missed a highlight in that regard.

I am always glad of the opportunity to discuss Scotland's national game, day or night. I am also glad of the outbreak of consensus around supporters buses. The ludicrous and unwarranted proposals from the traffic commissioner for Scotland resulted in a lot of traffic in my inbox from fans across Dundee and the north-east. Those buses are part of the lives of thousands of Scots every fortnight, and they are their own wee communities, which cross generations and classes. Judging from the proposals, we might have thought that they were touring groups of hell's angels, bringing terror to our streets, but we would be far more likely to find people doing quizzes about Scottish cup wins in the 1970s or their daily crossword, before tucking into the ham piece that they made at home.

What we have seen in that policy is not unusual, however. Football fans in Scotland seem to be set apart from the general population and, over the past decade, they have become more and more used to being on the front line of blame by the Scottish National Party Government for various versions of Scotland's ills. As Mr Bibby set out, the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 was certainly the most obvious egregious illustration of that, and it was completely incompetent. It flowed from the tendency of the Government to set football fans apart, not just in policy but as a class in law, suggesting that football fans are somehow different from all other sports enthusiasts and can be targeted as such for easy headlines. There is, of course, a historical class prejudice that runs

through that. The licensing laws for football and rugby being different is the obvious illustration of that.

The manner in which football fans were treated during Covid restrictions is a broader example. When restrictions were lifted, no food could be sold at football grounds, while other sports had the beer taps flowing. The infamous cancellation of an Aberdeen v Celtic match, making an example of thousands because one young player made a very bad mistake with his own isolation, is yet another example.

At a time when the general observation of Covid rules, and the willing co-operation of the public with those rules, was vital, football fans felt as if they were the recipients of a different approach from a Government that thought that only some kind of punishment could teach them a lesson. The absence of the game from their lives during Covid was intolerable for many people and the huge rebound in match attendances to well above pre-Covid levels shows how much we wanted to be together and how much we missed that community and that part of our lives.

Football is integral to the rhythm of Scottish life. We sit with our parents, children, friends and with those who would be far-flung strangers from different walks of life but for our shared obsession with its highs and lows. We stand on the touchlines in horrific rain watching our daughters, sons and grandchildren. There are volunteer coaches, committee members, treasurers, bus conveners, league administrators, programme writers, bloggers, historians, journalists, fans and players of fives, sevens and 11s who walk, wheel, sprint and fall.

Stephen Kerr: Since my party leader is not here, I feel obliged to point out that Michael Marra did not mention match officials and I think I should put the record straight on that score so that I can take the lead another debate at some point.

Michael Marra: I do recall Mr Kerr's party leader running the line at Tannadice just last season, when Dundee United conceded a dubious penalty to Hearts. The gentleman in question had flagged and my son started screaming, "That's that man that you work with!" [*Laughter.*] I had to quickly explain that we worked in the same building, rather than being very much closer than that. Our referees, linesmen and officials certainly play a huge part in our game.

I think of Johnny's stressed days and sleepless nights over his search for a goalkeeper for the Riverside under-10s. Football takes so many hours and so much passion, not all of it rational.

Our game is not without its flaws. We saw 21 men playing one game at Hampden the other night while Jude Bellingham played an entirely

different sport. That may have been the reality check that our game needs, but a further and urgent reality check is required when we consider the damage done to players by repeated head impacts, as my colleague Richard Leonard already mentioned. Those impacts have left so many players suffering from degenerative brain disease incurred in the line of their work. Those are industrial industries, so the Scottish Government must recognise them as such and must ensure that families are afforded support, based on overwhelming medical evidence. I am delighted that our injury time campaign on that most serious of issues is being discussed at Westminster this very afternoon in a debate brought forward by Ian Blackford MP and supported by Chris Stephens MP, both of the SNP, which is a good sign of cross-party support for that very present and coming issue.

We know that our national game must carefully and honestly confront some grave legacies: sectarianism, homophobia, misogyny and racism—a microcosm of our society, indeed, but all exist in the context of the love of the game, and that should give us some hope.

We watch football in this country more than anywhere else in Europe and we play as much as anywhere in the world. I believe that we are at a moment when football is more hospitable and inclusive than at any time in the 150 years since the wise old men of Mount Florida invented the modern game.

There is huge potential for football to help transform our health and how we see each other and it can be a truly common ground between us all. The community trusts of our senior clubs feed bairns, put boots on their feet and give what is, for some of them, a rare chance for joy. Football fans in training combat obesity. Street Soccer's change centre in Lochee in Dundee works with people with addiction. The idea of fans supporting food banks, which started in Merseyside, was copied in Dundee and is now spreading across Scotland.

We also see the inexorable and joyous rise of the women's game, with Rachel Corsie in court this week leading a captain's fight for equal treatment for her players. Zander Murray, a gay man, is changing attitudes with his honesty and his play and is a new icon to stand alongside Andrew Watson, who, 140 years ago, was the first black captain of our national team.

Those are the stories of a national game in which we are all players.

16:09

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I welcome this debate and start on a positive note by celebrating the fact that football contributes

significantly to the cultural, social, economic and sporting fabric of Scotland, including through the work of the Scottish FA, which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2023

Right across the country and in every single one of our communities, football contributes to healthy lives, socialisation and even to careers and lifelong interests for so many of our young people. Every year, millions of Scots attend games and pour money into the economy while enjoying football. It is not only clubs that benefit; it is the hospitality sector, food and drink producers, and indeed transport companies.

Transport providers brings me nicely to my next point. Like many football fans the length and breadth of Scotland, I was outraged when the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain published proposals last week to change the guidelines around supporters' buses in Scotland. If introduced, the changes would have had an impact on every fan travelling by bus to a game in a country. A joint statement from the Scottish FA, Scottish Professional Football League, and Scottish Women's Premier League said that the proposals were "unnecessary and heavy handed." They came without any consultation with the Scottish Government and, it would appear, no consultation with Scottish football clubs, and they seemed completely unworkable.

Reaction from Scottish football fans was overwhelmingly negative. The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, Maree Todd, wrote to the commissioner to better understand where the ludicrous proposals came from. As a result, the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain ceased the consultation exercise. I add my thanks to the minister for that. The scrapping of those ridiculous proposals was a victory for every Scottish football fan who stood up and made their voice heard loud and clear. The whole episode reeked of complete snobbery, and the very fact that the UK traffic commissioner tried to do it speaks volumes about the contempt in which they hold our national game.

Scottish football is something to be celebrated and our fans should be heralded. Perhaps it is time for consideration about how football fans are treated more broadly. Let us ensure that such an attack on our national game never happens again, and let us treat supporters fairly, as we do everyone else. I ask the minister to continue to act in that vein.

Douglas Lumsden: I thank the member for taking an intervention and I also think that we should treat everyone fairly. Does the member think that the licensing laws that discriminate between football and rugby, for example, should be looked at again?

Collette Stevenson: I totally agree with the member that we should look at that again.

As an advocate for equality, with a particular interest in women's participation in sport, I want to touch on women's football and celebrate its success in Scotland. I welcome that the Scottish Government is a committed and long-standing supporter of women's and girls' football. Great progress has been made in recent years and the Scottish Government is working with the Scottish FA and Scottish Women's Football to build on those strong foundations.

The Scottish women's national team now plays at Hampden and has delivered record crowds for women's qualifiers in Scotland. Elite women's football became the responsibility of the Scottish Professional Football League from season 2022-23. The Scottish FA published its bespoke women's football strategy, "Accelerate Our Game" in 2021. The strategy is helping to harness that power to ensure that women's and girls' football in Scotland goes from strength to strength.

The Scottish Government wants to increase the participation of women and girls in sport, so the success of the women's team will inspire more women and girls to get involved, from grass-roots activity to elite level. That includes the East Kilbride Thistle Girls Football Club in my constituency. The team has gone from strength to strength in recent times and it is a great example of an inspirational Scottish women's football team. I extend an invitation to the minister to visit the team when her diary allows.

Across Scotland, policymakers, businesses, institutions and individuals are embracing new ways of thinking to prioritise our collective wellbeing and help to build flourishing communities.

The Scottish FA commissioned a Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland report to inform policy makers about the value of football and to potentially contribute to policies aimed at building a wellbeing economy.

Football has long been at the heart of Scotland's communities and has a unique reach. It is played and watched by children, young people and adults across Scotland, in the streets, in parks, in halls, on pitches and in stadiums. It is a sport that everyone should be able to get involved in when provision is tailored—teams can comprise players of different ages, genders, physical abilities and levels of performance. It should and must continue to be celebrated.

I again celebrate football's contribution to Scotland. I welcome the scrapping of the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain's ridiculous guidance, and I ask that we all work to celebrate

the contribution that football—women’s football, in particular—makes to Scotland.

16:15

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To get straight to the point, before they were taken off the table, the proposed restrictions on travelling football fans were unwarranted, unworkable and entirely out of touch, and they were rejected by the SFA, the SPFL, the SWPL, clubs and fan organisations. They served little purpose other than to demonise law-abiding citizens. Our football fans should be celebrated.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Gillian Mackay referred to policies that are unenforceable and unworkable. What does she think about the ban on alcohol on Scottish National Party-run ScotRail, which started off as a ban on match days but has been permanently extended to a 24-hour ban? As well as banning the consumption of alcohol on trains at any time of day, it extends to the carrying of alcohol in an unopened bottle, unless it is in a bag that is not see-through. Is that not also unenforceable and unworkable? Should the SNP Government not reconsider the ban on alcohol on our trains?

Gillian Mackay: I am sure that Craig Hoy is aware that I am not the Minister for Transport. I suggest that he puts his proposals to her and finds out what she has to say.

As we have heard, a higher proportion of people attend football matches in Scotland than do anywhere else in Europe. Our fans enjoy a wonderful reputation internationally for the support that they provide and the atmosphere that they create. On the rare occasions on which incidents occur, the police and other bodies already have the powers that they need to deal with them. Frankly, it is irresponsible to make sweeping generalisations about football fans and their behaviour.

This afternoon, members have shown the value and benefit of football to our communities, and I want to shine a light on the fantastic work that is carried out by some of the many football clubs, and their supporters, in my Central Scotland region.

The difference that Motherwell FC, as a fan-owned club, makes to its local community should not be underestimated. In December last year, the club teamed up with Samaritans, Breathing Space, Childline and the local charity Chris’s House to launch a charitable kit that encouraged fans who were struggling to speak up, speak out and be heard. All profits that were made by the club on the kits were split equally between the four charities, which provide a vital first point of contact for people who need to talk or are feeling suicidal.

In 2021, which was a year that was disrupted by lockdowns and restrictions on numbers and travel, a social return on investment report found that Motherwell Football Club Community Trust brought benefits of £13.64 million to the local community. As the official charity of Motherwell Football Club, the trust uses the brand name of the club and the power of football to bring about positive change in the local community through programmes that bring health and wellbeing benefits, tackle isolation and increase participation in sport.

In recent months, supporters of Motherwell have raised thousands of pounds for mental health charities. At Christmas, they organised a toy drive, and they regularly participate in food bank collections, an activity that is replicated by the fans of other clubs who support food bank groups across Scotland.

Similarly, Falkirk Football Club’s community foundation is a community leader and provider of sport, health, education and employability activities to children, young people and adults. The community’s wellbeing is integral to its work, and tackling deep-rooted issues is of the utmost importance to it. One initiative that stands out is its hugely successful partnership with Falkirk & Clackmannanshire Carers Centre. The partnership has resulted in more than 600 season tickets being gifted to carers and cared-for people in the current football season. Its work is invaluable and, last year, it had 3,603 unique participants through the door, making up more than 250,000 hours and providing 1,312 SQA qualifications, allowing local people to develop skills and opportunities to secure future employment.

Football is very much a force for good, and fan ownership clearly has its benefits for those clubs. We need to understand what barriers there are for other clubs joining them and how we can facilitate that. Fan groups such as the Hampden Collection and the Scottish Football Supporters Association do phenomenal work to preserve our footballing heritage and encourage fan engagement. We need far more of that at national level.

The ludicrous proposal that we are discussing, which, thankfully, has been withdrawn, was an infringement of the civil liberties of football fans. The demonisation of football fans is clear from the outset of the proposal. Although the title of the paper references sporting events, the word “football” is used 35 times in the document, yet no other sport is mentioned.

Although I welcome the cross-party concern, it is important to highlight the fact that the harsh treatment of football fans is not a new concept, and we all have a responsibility to stand up to and challenge it wherever we see it. The proposals were unmanageable. It was suggested that

supporters could buy alcohol in a pub only with a substantial meal. That sounds like something that we would hear in a sitcom instead of reading it in an official document published on a Government website. The knock-on effect for small businesses could have been significant, with pubs and restaurants near football stadiums relying heavily on passing trade on match days. In a cost of living crisis, we should be creating opportunities for traders and not putting them under further pressure.

The strength of feeling is emphasised when we see Rangers fans in agreement with Celtic fans, political parties in agreement across the chamber and the SFA in agreement with supporters groups.

However, we must remain vigilant. The proposal has been removed for now, but there is nothing to prevent something similar coming back. If it does, together, we must condemn any more such attacks on our football fans. I pay tribute to the fans who highlighted the proposal on social media in the first place.

We must support fan groups, build on and empower their work, increase fan ownership of clubs and get more Scotland games on free-to-view TV—I fully support Stuart McMillan's calls for that. We need to do more to promote women's football, as Collette Stevenson said, and provide parity for women players.

Fans are a phenomenal resource and support to their clubs, and everything that we can do to support them benefits football across the country.

16:22

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I declare a couple of interests. First, I have two grandkids who play for the youth team of a premiership club in Scotland. One of them has just come back from Dortmund, having played in a tournament with Borussia Dortmund, Real Madrid and Everton, which is quite an experience for an 11-year-old.

Secondly, I must declare that I have played football at senior level. [*Interruption.*] Yes, it was a long time ago. I will put it in context, Presiding Officer. I was coaching Ayr United and, during a pre-season tournament, we ran out of players, so I had to put on my shinnies and go on. In the post-match media, the manager, Gordon Dalziel, described my participation as running about a lot and drinking a lot of water. Those members who have seen me play football will know that the description was probably true.

I am delighted to rise again to speak about sport and to have the opportunity to highlight the positive contribution that sport provides in our communities and, more widely, for our country's

wellbeing. The motion points to the role that football clubs play in their wider communities, which is a crucial point. Many supporters have been encouraged to participate in exercise and weight loss programmes organised by clubs. I am sure that quite a few members have visited football clubs where men's mental health groups are held; many of their participants would not access similar help from statutory services. I note the work of Kilmarnock, Ayr United and St Mirren football clubs—I have to mention those three because I have coached at them. Hearts and Hibs, to name but a couple, have fantastic programmes, too.

Football clubs provide an environment in which supporters feel comfortable and can walk the same paths as the heroes and heroines they watch week in, week out. Football clubs are central to many community activities and, way beyond just watching the club, it is important that we support those efforts as much as we can and do not just assume that the football clubs will foot the bill. That kind of interaction is positive for the football clubs, too, because those bonds with their respective communities deliver for the long-term future of the clubs as well as for the wellbeing of supporters. We need to consider how we can build on those relationships for the health and future of those communities.

You will not be surprised, Presiding Officer, to hear me advocate for the role of sport in our society. I have often said that I do not think that we give the value to sport and physical activity that they deserve. Physical activity is a cornerstone of good health, and we need to consider how to encourage physical activity more, given Scotland's poor health record.

Douglas Lumsden: I think that it was Ben Macpherson who made a point about the lack of facilities. When I was trying to run football teams, it was not just the lack of facilities but their cost that was putting football out of reach for so many children.

Brian Whittle: The biggest inequality that we have in this country is the inequality of opportunity. I reiterate that sport is increasingly becoming the bastion of the middle classes.

Maree Todd: The member and I have exchanged views on that point during other debates. I am sure that the member would welcome the fact that, despite all the challenges, football is the one sport that has equal participation right across the socioeconomic divide, which is, indeed, to be celebrated.

Brian Whittle: I speak from personal experience: of my three eldest grandchildren, the eldest plays rugby and the next two play football. The two who play football happen to go to one

senior club now, but they used to go to two different ones, which meant that three kids had to be transported to three different venues at the weekend and sometimes had to call Paps—that is, me—to come and help.

The problem that we have is that sport is becoming the bastion of the middle classes. Scottish school sport is increasingly dominated by private education. Minister, you have challenged me on that point previously and said that that has never been the case, but I have to say that you are simply wrong.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Always speak through the chair, please.

Brian Whittle: Sorry, Presiding Officer; apologies to the minister.

When I was at school, there were 36 rugby-playing schools in Ayrshire; the last time that I checked, there were six. Looking at the various Scottish schools championships across many sports over the years, you will see that correlation. School sport has declined, along with access to sport, at the same time as the number of fast-food outlets has exploded. That has led to the cost of obesity to the Scottish economy standing at a staggering £5 billion; to the mental health bill standing at £4.5 billion; and to diabetes treatment accounting for 10 per cent of the national health service spend.

You know that I am a simple man who looks for simple solutions, Presiding Officer. The way in which children participate in sport now is increasingly about going home from school and then needing to go somewhere else. The school estate and environment are very much part of the solution. When I was at school, I never went home at 4 o'clock—there was always something else to do. We have to look at the issues that we are considering here—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way on that point?

Brian Whittle: Have I got time, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: I regret to say that you do not, because we are using up all the spare time that we have. Could you please draw to a conclusion?

Brian Whittle: Sorry to my colleague.

I want to look at the issues that we are trying to consider in the education environment: attainment, poor mental health, physical health, behaviour and hunger. An investment in pre-school activity along with a breakfast can help to address those issues as well as dealing with stigma.

I will cut my speech and just sum up, Presiding Officer.

Sport helps with physical health; not only that, but the interactions, the camaraderie, the confidence, the resilience and the aspiration spill into all aspects of life. It is time that we recognise that sport is a force for good through both participation and volunteering and that we are brave enough to change the goalposts when it comes to access to sport; it is time that the Scottish Government recognised that football clubs and sports clubs are at the centre of so many communities, and that it properly invested in sport.

16:29

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate the Scottish Football Association on its 150th anniversary. Of course, the history of Scotland's beautiful game dates back much further, possibly to the middle ages. In its modern guise, football enjoyed rapid growth after the formation of Scotland's earliest clubs in the 1860s, and the SFA was established to organise how our game should be played and structured. In the generations since then, our clubs and national teams have experienced many highs and lows, bringing joy and more than the occasional tear to millions.

Earlier, Stephen Kerr talked about Forfar's epic journey to the league cup semi-final, which I also recall. I recall that Rangers were not doing particularly well at the time, and there was a certain allegation about hot balls and cold balls when they did the draw so that, with Hearts, Forfar, Rangers and Celtic being in the last four, Rangers and Celtic miraculously avoided each other. In fact, that continued until St Mirren's magnificent win with the Scottish cup final victory in 1987, when they actually sold out the cup final at Hampden. The authorities possibly thought, "You know, we don't need to do the hot ball, cold ball thing because we'll sell out the final every year anyway." Since then, a plethora of different teams have competed in the final and indeed won it.

Stephen Kerr: I assume that the member is using parliamentary privilege to make such a scurrilous accusation against the football authorities.

Kenneth Gibson: That is why the word "alleged" is always important on such occasions.

In the 1970s, Scotland had some of the world's most formidable players, who played for European trophy-winning sides such as Liverpool, Nottingham Forest, Aston Villa and Aberdeen. Sadly, a lack of self-belief and, at times, good luck on the pitch meant that Scotland fans were denied some of the great success that clubs achieved on the international stage. Celtic won the 1967 European cup with a team entirely from the west

of Scotland that included my Saltcoats constituent Bobby Lennox, who is still going strong at 80. Rangers won the cup winners cup in 1972, Aberdeen won two European trophies in 1983, and a classy Dundee United team beat Barcelona twice, home and away—also a magnificent achievement.

The professional game has seen radical change since then and such results would be difficult in this day and age, where money talks louder than ever before. The English Premier League is awash with TV money, and across Europe many football clubs are in the hands of capricious billionaires at best and oil-rich Governments with questionable human rights records at worst. That makes it increasingly difficult for our club sides to compete on the international stage. It is not surprising that some fans feel increasingly alienated from the modern game, which often prices out the most ardent.

What gives us hope is that, in Scotland, despite our club sides no longer being as competitive as they were, the passion and enthusiasm of supporters shows no sign of abating. In fact, the Scottish Professional Football League continues to top the table of match attendance per capita across the world, with 21.3 attendees per 1,000 people at matches across our top four divisions and average weekly support of 117,700 fans. That is 65 per cent more than the second-placed Netherlands. In addition, despite Tuesday night's tactical setback, the national team is doing better than it has done for years. We may have had to field players from Bournemouth, Norwich, Southampton and Watford against those of Manchester City, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid, but the team has fire in its belly.

Do we have too small a population? In the less than 30 years since it secured independence, Croatia, with only 3.9 million people, has appeared in two world cup semi-finals and a European nations final, and in the 2018 world cup final against France it was clearly robbed. Uruguay, with 3.5 million souls, has twice won the world cup and it has been South American champion 15 times—six times more than Brazil. Who can forget tiny Iceland, with fewer people than Ayrshire, defeating England 2-1 in Euro 2016 despite going one down in seven minutes to a dodgy Wayne Rooney penalty? If those countries can do well, so can Scotland.

Football has always been about more than pitch action. Its importance is difficult to overstate. It has given many people a social network, a feeling of belonging or a sense of identity. Supporters also make a vital contribution to their communities and Scotland as a nation through the many charitable and community initiatives, and money is injected

into local economies by fans travelling to attend games.

That is not to say that Scottish football does not still have a problem with sectarianism. It does. Nevertheless, compared with fans of other sports, today's football fans face more restrictions in following their teams on match days. I am therefore glad that the Scottish Government's motion refers to the ludicrous and widely criticised proposals from the traffic commissioners to unfairly target football supporters who are following their teams. The commissioners' U-turn is a clear win for Scottish football fans, supported by the SFA and the First Minister, who made their frustration at the proposals known loud and clear. I hope that the outcry will give way to more consideration as to how football fans are treated more broadly and will involve the representation of clubs and fans more directly.

A prime example of that is the 2021-22 programme for government commitment to provide financial support over this parliamentary session to allow more communities to purchase a share in their local sports club or facilities, by creating a fan bank. I am delighted that, earlier this year, the Falkirk Supporters Society, as the first beneficiary of the programme, was awarded a £350,000 interest-free loan, which allowed it to buy collective shares in the club.

In the long run, it would be desirable to look at the German model, whereby a minimum of 50 per cent plus one share of the club must be owned by club members, as a glowing example of how clubs should be governed. The results speak for themselves in the league's strength and financial stability, as well as in its passionate fans, who often pay as little as £10 for a standing ticket at one of the country's top Bundesliga clubs.

In 2016, Motherwell Football Club became the first top-flight club in Scotland to be fan owned. That has undeniably led to financial consolidation and stabilisation on and off the pitch, with the team reaching cup finals and the club becoming ever more deeply rooted in the local community.

Although I have focused mainly on professional football and the men's game, we must not forget that the football that we celebrate is played all over Scotland by men, women, boys and girls, from large stadia to the pitches of junior and amateur clubs and in local parks and schools. Scottish fans do not need to see global stars pull on their team's kit in order to be passionate about their club or country. They need to be treated with respect and to have their voices heard when it comes to how their clubs are run, so that the interests of clubs—not those of shareholders—are always put first.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:36

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Although it may not be so when I and, as we have heard, Neil Bibby and Brian Whittle play it, football really is the beautiful game. I have enjoyed listening to members talking of their love of the game, sharing the highs and lows of their teams—from Stephen Kerr’s memory of the Loons missing out narrowly to Rangers in the cup in 1978 to Douglas Lumsden’s slightly more successful trip to Pittodrie to see the Dons defeat Bayern Munich on that memorable journey to Gothenburg 40 years ago. It has felt a wee bit like group therapy, at times, as members have shared their highs and lows.

I will add to that. Since I was a boy, I have followed my hame team, Queen of the South, through thick and maybe slightly more thin. I was nine when I went to my first game at Palmerston park—at home to Partick Thistle in February 1980, in the fourth round of the Scottish cup. That match was not a classic; my lasting memory is of Alan Rough’s curly perm.

I saw the Queens in their only Scottish cup final, in 2008. It did not matter that we did not win; thousands of the blue-and-white army still proudly paraded through Dumfries behind the open-top team bus, days after the game. Of course, getting to that cup final meant that the Queens got to play in Europe, against Denmark’s FC Nordsjælland, and the chance to go to Copenhagen with so many fellow Doonhamers.

Bill Shankly was right when he said that football without fans is nothing. However, sometimes, as we have heard in the debate, we would not know that from how fans are often treated. Rightly, several members have commented on the traffic commissioners’ recent and now withdrawn proposals on how fans are taken to football matches, which were ill thought out, unworkable and unenforceable. Neil Bibby was right to say that those plans showed snobbery towards working-class fans, who are often treated as default criminals—just as they were by the likewise dropped laws on offensive behaviour at football.

Often, that disrespect for our fans can spill over into some of the decisions by football authorities. Gillian Mackay and Stuart McMillan were right to highlight the calls for Scotland matches to be shown on terrestrial TV. Of course we need to maximise the income for our game, but the deals that have been signed mean that, if we want to watch Scottish men’s clubs and the national team, we need to subscribe to three separate to-TV providers.

I may stop short of repeating Bill Shankly’s much-misquoted words, which were mentioned by the minister—that the game is more important

than life or death—but it matters to fans. It is part of who we are, our history and our heritage. The spending power of our clubs and fans creates thousands of jobs across Scotland. Football is one of our most significant economic and cultural exports, with Scottish footballers playing for huge clubs around the world and Scottish fans following the national team across Europe—including, I am sure, Germany next year. Let us hope that I do not have to change the parliamentary record on that one.

Football is also good for our health and wellbeing. It can be—and is—a force for good. That good goes beyond the big national and international men’s teams. A number of members have rightly highlighted the growth of women’s football, which has inspired girls and boys—from the edge-of-the-seat excitement of Glasgow City snatching the SWPL title in injury time last season, to the journey of the European champions, the Lionesses, to the recent world cup final. We also have the equally inspiring growth of para-football.

Local grass-roots clubs continue to be the heartbeat of our communities, often run by volunteers, who are real local heroes, and our local professional clubs are increasingly going beyond the pitch. Tragically, suicide remains the single biggest killer of men under 45. Last year, my hame team, Queen of the South, launched the changing room, an innovative mental health project delivered in partnership with SAMH and the SPFL Trust that supports men between 30 and 64 to tackle the social isolation caused by Covid and lockdowns through a 12-week programme.

Kevin Stewart: I also pay tribute to all the clubs that now have changing rooms at their heart to tackle suicide and ensure prevention methods. Clubs also have to be applauded for all the other community work that they do. Some of the work that is being done in relation to social isolation and dementia, in Aberdeen and in other places, is fantastic and really brings folk back to life. I wonder whether Mr Smyth agrees.

Colin Smyth: I will come back to the issue of dementia in football when I respond to some of the comments that Michael Marra made, but Kevin Stewart is right that there are many great examples of the memories programme making a difference, including those involving teams such as Queen of the South and Kilmarnock in the south of Scotland. I have visited one of those projects and seen the way that the eyes of those who go along light up when they have the memories of matches that they were at 40 or 50 years ago. That is a fantastic piece of work that many clubs are doing.

Another local team in my region is Annan Athletic, who are the very definition of the community, because they are owned by that local

community. More than seven years ago, Annan began working with the co-operative Supporters Direct to explore a new ownership model to put the fans at the heart of the club. That culminated in 100 per cent community ownership through a community benefit society. They are now putting those community values into action, from backing the fitba first project to hosting the armed forces veterans breakfast club. Stuart McMillan shared a similar story of Greenock Morton, and we should encourage and enable more of that community ownership model.

Although football brings community values to life, it also—as we have heard—carries inherent risks. Michael Marra highlighted the growing concern about the long-term impact of head injuries in football, with emerging research showing that former footballers are three and a half times more likely to die of brain injuries, including dementia. I pay tribute to his injury time campaign, on which he has worked with the PFA Scotland and the GMB. The campaign, which was also mentioned by Richard Leonard, is encouraging the Government to recognise the brain injuries of professional footballers as an industrial injury.

One of my football heroes, former Queen of the South centre-back Kevin Hetherington, is involved in that campaign. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at just 58 years of age. I hope that we can use the battles of Kevin and others as a force for good to bring better support and protection for our players, in the same way that the memory of Frank Kopel, struck dumb by dementia at 59, led to the inspiring campaign by his wife Amanda Kopel to extend free personal care to those under the age of 65.

It is clear from the debate that, despite what people sometimes think, we politicians are not different from most. We love the beautiful game and we recognise, in a rare case of consensus, that it really is a real force for good.

16:43

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It has been a largely positive debate. It did not quite start off that way, but I invite the minister to make her closing remarks, when she responds, wholly and 100 per cent positive, in order to reflect the nature of the debate that we have had. That is what one would expect, given the subject.

Everyone who has spoken is a fan of football. Some of us will have played football at some point in our lives, to varying standards—not very high, in my case. I suspect that Stephen Kerr has never pulled on a pair of boots.

Stephen Kerr: Not true.

Graham Simpson: I am not sure that that is a sight that I would wish to see. Stephen Kerr might wish to intervene to disabuse me of that notion.

Stephen Kerr: I confirm for the record that I have, indeed, worn a pair of football boots.

Graham Simpson: He did not say that he played football; he just said that he had “worn ... football boots.” I am not entirely sure that I would like to see Mr Kerr marauding across a football pitch.

I noticed that Mr Kerr did not refer to Falkirk Football Club, which is in our shared region. That was a shame, because ahead of the debate I was recalling a time when I played at the former Brockville Park for a team from *The Sun* newspaper. I think that it was during that game—we played a few there—that former Partick Thistle manager Gerry Collins rather brutally body checked me off the pitch. I was also successfully man marking one of my football heroes, Danny McGrain, until our manager made the tactical blunder of taking me off, then it all started to go wrong. [*Interruption.*] Mr Kerr is laughing, but I am telling the truth, Presiding Officer.

I mention that match because football gives people great memories. Whether they play, just watch or do both, it is a game that brings people together. It can be good for their mental and physical health—or maybe not, depending on which team they support.

This was originally meant to have been an entirely different debate, following the commissioners' deeply flawed consultation on supporters' buses. That was a mad idea from the start, so I am pleased that it has been dropped. I hope that we will not see it again. I am not aware that there is an issue to solve in respect of fans on buses in Scotland, so let us not create one.

I want to talk about the good that football does in the community. In 2018, Scotland became one of the first countries in Europe to take part in a landmark UEFA study to illustrate the unique benefits of football participation nationwide. The strategic return on investment model was created to provide national associations with a tool to help them to understand the value of football participation at all levels. It provides tangible evidence of how football can improve lives. The SFA actually put a monetary value on participation in football: the 2018 report concluded that the total number of registered players in the game was worth more than £500 million annually to Scotland.

In my region, one of the best-known community clubs is Motherwell FC, which Gillian Mackay mentioned. Motherwell Football Club Community Trust uses the brand name of the club and the power of football to bring positive change to the local community. Ms Mackay has visited it, as

have I. In 2021, UEFA's social return on investment report demonstrated a huge variety of social, economic, educational and health benefits associated with the local community in Motherwell because of the programmes that were available through the trust and the club. Social benefits include improved educational attainment, reduced school absence through targeted social projects, and participation programmes spanning projects for disability football and children and young persons' football.

Last year, I was delighted to visit Fir Park to see at first hand how much of a positive impact such programmes have on people of all ages and backgrounds. Efforts there to have me pull on my boots again have so far proved fruitless, but you never know—it might happen.

The 2021 UEFA report concluded that, even though it has a staff of just seven, supplemented by more than 60 volunteers, the impact of the Motherwell Football Club Community Trust's activity was worth £13.6 million across social, economic, health and education measurements, which is very impressive indeed.

Cumbernauld Colts Football Club is an excellent example of how the presence of a community football club can positively impact on the lives of women and girls. It launched a women's team earlier this year, with the aim of its becoming the biggest club in North Lanarkshire to offer girls football.

I should also mention Hamilton Accies, which has been running a very successful scheme that goes into local schools to teach young people about drug safety. Accies' ground also has a food bank, a men's shed and even a beach. Yes—a beach. I urge members to go there. The club has built a beach behind the ground.

I will briefly mention the contributions of other members. There have been various calls for the England football team to have its own national anthem. That sounds like a pretty good idea to me, but no one made any actual suggestions on that. Off the top of my head, I can think of "Land of Hope and Glory" or perhaps "Jerusalem", but there might be other ideas.

Stephen Kerr: "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life".

Graham Simpson: "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life", which Mr Kerr does regularly.

Neil Bibby talked about snobbery towards football; Douglas Lumsden revealed his own football memories, but then told us that he cannot remember what he had for dinner last night. Stuart McMillan reminisced about his piping tour of football grounds and spoke of his love for Greenock Morton FC. Michael Marra and Richard

Leonard mentioned the serious issue of brain disease linked to heading the ball, which we should debate further, and Gillian Mackay mentioned Motherwell and Falkirk and, rightly, said that we need to see more Scotland games on free-to-view telly, as Tuesday's game was.

Speaking of Tuesday's game, before it started, I spent some time with British Transport Police at Glasgow Central station, watching how the officers marshal the fans. It was a seamless operation. England fans were in good spirits, and I hope that both teams get to the Euro finals. I am sure that they will, and I am sure that they will do well. I support the motion.

16:51

Maree Todd: Football is a subject that many of us clearly feel passionate about, and we have heard many contributions this afternoon that demonstrate the incredible impact of football on people's lives, and which highlight the amazing work that football clubs and their associated trusts and foundations do in their communities.

At the end of May I, as many members did, had the great pleasure of attending a reception here at the Scottish Parliament to mark the 150th anniversary of the Scottish Football Association. We heard from a number of speakers including David Duke, of Street Soccer, who told a powerful story about how involvement in football had helped to turn his life around and how Street Soccer was doing the same for many other participants.

We heard from new Scottish FA President Mike Mulraney about his priorities for the association, particularly in relation to the on-going challenge of facilities—an issue that we fully recognise and on which we will continue to work with the association in order to achieve a solution. We also heard from Sam Milne, who is the Scottish FA club development officer, about the positive impact that football had made on the lives of women, and the significant benefits to their physical and mental health through participation in recreational football.

At the event, the Scottish FA presented its strategic plan to MSPs and it continues to reinforce the power of football with Government and across the political spectrum on a regular basis. That is something that I believe in, and we will continue to work in partnership with the association to realise its benefits.

We have talked about the importance to our physical and mental health of being physically active, and how the Scottish FA's drive and determination to provide more opportunities to play football for as wide a range of participants as possible is paying dividends. Our national game continues to grow in popularity and to reach wider audiences, and I know that the Scottish FA is

committed to continuing to grow and develop the game.

As has been said, football is not just about participation. Supporters are the lifeblood of the professional game and it is vital that their role is recognised. Fans should be able to have real influence over the future of the clubs that they love and support. That is why, earlier this year, we launched the fan bank, which is intended to support organised fans groups to become more involved in ownership of their clubs, thereby ensuring that their interests are represented on clubs' boards and protecting the clubs for generations to come. The fan bank will make a positive change to football and will help to put real power in the hands of the supporters and local communities. As Kenny Gibson mentioned, Falkirk Supporters Society was the first recipient of a loan from the fan bank, and we are in discussions with a number of other supporters groups about potential bids. I am glad that the fan bank initiative has proved to be popular with football fans.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for the positive tone of the minister's closing remarks. Does she agree with Ben Macpherson, Brian Whittle and others that there is not equality of opportunity for all Scotland's young people when it comes to access to facilities and community assets? Does she agree that we should unite across the parties and do what we can to ensure that—with regard to playing sport of all types, but particularly football—every community asset is sweated?

Maree Todd: Absolutely—I happily agree with that. However, as I have pointed out, football is a shining light among all sports in respect of participation in it across the socioeconomic divide.

A number of members have raised the issue of unacceptable behaviour by football fans. I know that, from time to time, the behaviour of fans can cause concern and disruption. However, let us be absolutely clear: the vast majority of football supporters go to games to support their team, to see their mates, and to have a great day out, whatever the final score is.

In my opening statement, I mentioned that the SPFL had record aggregate crowds of more than 5 million last year.

Douglas Lumsden: If the issue is about treating fans fairly, does the minister support a review of licensing laws so that football fans are not discriminated against? Not everyone is lucky enough to get invitations to corporate hospitality, at which alcohol is free flowing, at sporting events.

Maree Todd: As we are all aware, the issue of licensing pre-dates devolution. It came about in the early 1980s after an old firm cup final. The issue has been raised with me by clubs and football authorities, and I have said that I would

need to be persuaded that no unintended consequences would follow if a law that has been in place for over 40 years were to be removed. I would be happy to look at the evidence that they bring forward. Obviously, Police Scotland's view on any change in the legislation would be vital. We cannot ignore incidents of antisocial, threatening or offensive behaviour, and we condemn the actions of people who engage in such actions. I fully support Police Scotland in taking appropriate and proportionate action in response to any such acts, but they are something that all of us with an ability to influence and change must contribute to eradicating.

I was honoured to be invited to attend the women's Scottish cup final at Hampden at the end of last season, and I was truly inspired by the quality of the game and the commitment of the players to engaging with their fans long after the final whistle. We saw both captains being in with their fans for longer than any of the official supporters in the hospitality suite—Mr Lumsden mentioned hospitality—were there for. Long after they had left, the captains were still out on the field engaging with the fans. That can be done, and we should work together to ensure that the very small proportion of people who see football as a cause for antisocial behaviour can begin to rethink their ways.

Neil Bibby and a number of other colleagues mentioned the review of Scottish football that was launched on 21 June by the Scottish Football Alliance and the Scottish Football Supporters Association. We have a really good relationship with the SFSA, and it has been really helpful in brokering discussions on the fan bank with supporters groups. We are also working with it to support grass-roots clubs to purchase defibrillators, which can be the difference between life and death when someone suffers a cardiac arrest on a football pitch.

The alliance's review covers a very wide range of issues, many of which—issues relating to the formation of the leagues or the division of prize money, for example—are simply not for the Scottish Government to comment on. That said, I have already met the football authorities to discuss the alliance's review, and I will continue to discuss it with them and, indeed, to challenge them on how we can continue to grow and improve the game in Scotland.

We have heard what football means to people in respect of participation and what it means to fans to support their club and their country. There have been a few surprises for many people in Scotland—if there are many people listening. I must admit that I never thought that I would hear the Scottish Tories campaigning against the

singing of “God Save the King” at football matches.

We have also heard about how much of a force for good football is in local communities and people’s lives—not least in the lives of children and young people. I passionately believe that sport, including football, has the power to change lives for the better. The evidence of that is all around us.

There is no doubt that, like all of our society, football represents both the best and the worst of us. Scotland has a complex relationship with alcohol, and it is right and proper that we address that. Football has a part to play there, as do other sports. Again, I commend the women’s national team for taking an ethical stance on alcohol sponsorship. It does not have alcohol sponsorship on its shirts, and that is a really good thing.

Yet just as we are a disputatious nation, we will not allow rivalry to become something less edifying. Our football authorities can and must do more to support tolerance, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of the sport. That cultural shift is every bit as important for football as a sport as it is for us as a society. So many contributions have shown that when football leads, real change can be achieved in attitudes and behaviours. Football can and does play a powerful role in leading the way to address wider societal challenges.

Yes, football divides—but it also unites. Scotland has had a long love affair with the game that we founded, and it still holds a special place in our hearts. It reaches the parts that other sports and other activities cannot. It offers community and opportunity to many who often can feel that they are outside of mainstream life, and it allows wee girls and wee boys to pull on a shirt and to dream big. Like no other issue could, it has brought this Parliament together to agree on its contribution and its importance to the cultural, social, economic and sporting fabric of Scottish life. It truly is the beautiful game.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Might it be helpful to clarify for the chamber and the *Official Report* that the Scottish Conservatives are all in favour of singing “God Save The King”—at every possible opportunity—but we think that the England football team should find another anthem?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr will be well aware that that is not a point of order. We will therefore move on.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today’s business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-10429, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill reconsideration, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to reconsider the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-10439, in the name of Maree Todd, on the role of football in Scottish society and communities, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament acknowledges that football contributes significantly to the cultural, social, economic and sporting fabric of Scotland, including through the work of the Scottish FA, which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2023; recognises the important role that football clubs play in their communities, supporting a wide range of Scottish Government priorities; welcomes in particular the growth of inclusive opportunities in football in Scotland; notes that the Traffic Commissioners for Great Britain have withdrawn the consultation on proposed new guidelines for fans travelling to football matches in Scotland on public hire vehicles, and calls for any future consultation on and development of Scottish guidelines to be fully informed through the involvement of the Scottish Government, football clubs, authorities and, especially, fans and supporters’ groups to best meet Scottish needs and interests.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

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