



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 21 September 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 21 September 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Innovation and Entrepreneurship	1
National Health Service Dentistry (Charges).....	2
Winter Flu and Covid-19 Vaccination Programme	3
Flood Prevention Remedial Works (Annie'sland).....	4
Ardrossan Harbour (Upgrade).....	5
National Health Service Waiting Times	6
Changing Places Toilets.....	7
Largs to Cumbrae Ferry (Monthly Season Ticket)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Oil and Gas Sector	10
Delayed Discharge	13
Cabinet (Meetings)	15
Carer Support Payment.....	16
Net Zero Targets (Planning and Funding).....	17
School Meal Debts.....	19
Cancer Research UK (Investment).....	21
Bank Branch Closures (Islands)	22
Colleges (Finance).....	22
National Eye Health Week.....	23
Short-Term Lets Licensing Scheme (House Swaps)	23
School Buildings Cancellations	24
United Kingdom Mini-budget (Scottish Economy).....	25
Interlinked Heat and Smoke Alarms	25
Fair Pay (University of Dundee)	26
Short-term Let Licences (Privacy)	26
European Union Exit.....	27
WORLD RIVERS DAY 2023	29
<i>Motion debated—[Jackie Dunbar].</i>	
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	29
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP).....	32
Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con).....	33
Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)	34
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	36
Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)	37
The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater).....	39
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	42
EDUCATION AND SKILLS	42
Summit on Tackling Violence in Schools	42
Learning Estate Investment Programme	45
Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodiversity (Support in Education)	47
Universities (Assessment and Marking Backlogs)	48
School Estate Improvement (Highland Council).....	49
Scottish Education Exchange Programme	51
Digital Education.....	51
National Allowance for Foster and Kinship Care.....	53
ONLINE CHILD ABUSE, GROOMING AND EXPLOITATION	56
Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)	56
The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don)	59
Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)	62
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)	65
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	68
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	70
Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con).....	72

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	75
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)	77
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)	80
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	82
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	84
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	87
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	89
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	90
The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown)	93
Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con)	96
URGENT QUESTION	99
Net Zero Targets (United Kingdom Government Announcement)	99
DECISION TIME	104

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 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.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

1. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to support innovation and entrepreneurship. (S6O-02544)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): Our ambition is to establish Scotland as a leading European start-up economy and, with the chief entrepreneur, we have a comprehensive strategy to achieve just that. The £42 million Techscaler network is operational, and we have launched two new funds to support start-up ecosystem builders and female entrepreneurs.

We have recently published “Scotland’s National Innovation Strategy”, which sets out our vision for Scotland to become one of the most innovative small nations in the world over the next decade, and the programme for government announced an additional £15 million enterprise package to help deliver on our ambitions for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Colin Beattie: I very much welcome the announcement in the programme for government of continued reform of the education and skills system to ensure that we have the skilled workforce and talent pool to attract investment and meet Scotland’s economic needs. In my constituency of Midlothian North and Musselburgh, I am working closely with experts in the space sector and the local authority to expand the education provision from the local space sector into the classroom. What steps is the Government taking to work closely with experts from industry to ensure that Scotland’s emerging workforce remains competitive and at the forefront of emerging industries?

Richard Lochhead: The member is quite right to highlight the need to ensure that we have a 21st century—not 20th century—education and skills system for the times ahead. We are working closely with industry and Skills Development Scotland, which has various pipelines of work, to

ensure that we have the appropriate skills available for the new and emerging sectors of the 21st century.

It is also the case that many businesses locate themselves in Scotland, while our indigenous businesses benefit from the enormous pipeline of talent from Scotland’s universities. We are working closely with our university sector on that issue.

National Health Service Dentistry (Charges)

2. **Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what the increase in patient charges for national health service dental treatment will be. (S6O-02545)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): Our priority in delivering payment reform is to ensure that fee levels are reflective of the increased costs of modern dentistry, providing longer-term sustainability and encouraging the dental sector to increase its existing NHS provision.

Although patients who are required to pay an NHS charge are likely to see an increase in costs, that will be dependent on overall treatment plans. Around 40 per cent of patients will continue to receive free NHS care and treatment, as they did under the previous arrangements, and all patients will continue to receive examination and review appointments that are free at the point of use.

Willie Rennie: The last time that I asked the minister how many dentists would be returning to the NHS as a result of the new fee system, she did not know. This time, I asked a very simple question: how much more will patients have to pay as a result of the retention and increase of the charges? She still does not know. Is it not the truth that the Scottish National Party not only has broken its promise of abolishing NHS dental charges but is presiding over the break-up of NHS dentistry?

Jenni Minto: As I outlined in my previous answer, payments are calculated on the basis of clinical treatment. I emphasise that we have made progress as part of the 100 days commitment, and we have delivered free NHS care for 18 to 25-year-olds. As we made clear in the First Minister’s policy prospectus, the policy must be to sustain and improve patient access to dental services.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The British Dental Association believes that NHS patient charge revenue is not the most appropriate way of funding NHS dentistry. Those on modest incomes who are not exempt from patient charges will have to make the difficult decision whether they can afford to pay for NHS dentistry. Is the minister concerned that the Government’s policy on NHS dental charges will have a significant impact on people with such incomes? What will

the minister do to prevent the worsening of oral health inequalities?

Jenni Minto: Our view, as a Government, is that payment reform is important, as is the further work that we will do with the BDA on stabilising dental services and making them sustainable. Parliament needs to recognise that paying more for the NHS is a significantly better outcome than paying for private care, where equivalent treatment can be six to 10 times the cost of NHS care.

The Presiding Officer: I call Paul Sweeney. *[Interruption.]* We will move on to question 3.

Winter Flu and Covid-19 Vaccination Programme

3. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the winter flu and Covid-19 vaccination programme. (S6O-02546)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The winter flu and Covid-19 vaccination programme commenced on 4 September 2023. Public Health Scotland will publish statistics on administered vaccines for winter 2023, starting from 21 September, with weekly updates being released on the Covid-19 and respiratory surveillance in Scotland interactive dashboard. Commentary will also be included in the PHS national respiratory infection and Covid-19 statistics report. A letter to all MSPs on the rephrasing of the programme was issued on 15 September.

Rona Mackay: Can the minister provide an update on the strategies that are being introduced to encourage appointment attendance among the people of Scotland upon receiving appointment letters and on how those strategies are expected to ease national health service workloads over the winter period?

Jenni Minto: That is a really important question. Those who are eligible will receive a letter with an appointment, or a digital prompt to book an appointment, if that is their communication preference. We try to offer people vaccination appointments close to home, utilising community-based clinics where available, and, to support attendance, communications encourage people to reschedule appointments if the date, time or location is unsuitable. Our national marketing campaign amplifies our message on the importance of getting vaccinated.

The main aim of the vaccination programme is the prevention of severe illness, hospitalisations and deaths. By getting vaccinated and protecting themselves, people are also alleviating pressure on the NHS during winter.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The roll-out of vaccinations is still patchy, and how it goes depends on which part of the country you live in. In Argyll and Bute—the minister's constituency—constituents were waiting for hours on the phone to book an appointment, only to be told that it was not certain whether the Covid vaccination would be available. In neighbouring Greater Glasgow and Clyde, drop-in clinics worked extremely well. What action is the minister taking to ensure speed and consistency in the programme roll-out?

Jenni Minto: I recognise that there have been some issues with the roll-out of vaccinations, and my officials have been working very closely with the health boards to alleviate the situation. I am sure that the member will recognise that one size does not fit all in Scotland, and that we have to get it right for each area.

Flood Prevention Remedial Works (Annie'sland)

4. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Annie'sland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether Scottish Water has completed any remedial works to prevent future flooding in the Glasgow Annie'sland constituency, following reports of widespread flooding in the area earlier this year. (S6O-02547)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): Scottish Water has completed remedial works to prevent future flooding in Mr Kidd's Glasgow Annie'sland constituency.

Over the past 10 years, Scottish Water has delivered nine capital projects to enhance sewer network capacity, reducing the risk of sewer flooding to 47 properties. It has also provided 119 properties with property-level protection to reduce the risk and impact of internal sewer flooding, and investigations are on-going in a further 13 properties.

Scottish Water continues to work with Glasgow City Council on further solutions for its highly challenging and complex system, and it will meet stakeholders again in October.

Bill Kidd: Unfortunately, there are areas in which residents have been forced to mount their own flood defences to ensure that effluent and rainwater do not reach their gardens and homes, some of which have been so badly affected by flooding that Scottish Water has had to purchase and demolish them. Other residents cannot obtain insurance. That has happened in Drumchapel, High Knightswood and Lower Knightswood. Can the minister look to raise this untenable situation with Scottish Water in order to get things moving as quickly as possible?

Màiri McAllan: I completely understand how devastating the situation must be for Mr Kidd's

constituents. I recognise the need to build on some of the work that I narrated in my initial answer to address the particularly concerning issues that he raises, so I will ask my officials to urgently raise the matter with Scottish Water and to keep me and Mr Kidd fully updated on the action that can be taken.

Ardrossan Harbour (Upgrade)

5. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the procurement process for the upgrade of Ardrossan harbour. (S6O-02548)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The procurement of improvements to Ardrossan harbour, which is owned by Peel Ports, was paused on 15 August to help ensure that the business case is suitable to support decisions by the funding partners. There have been a number of changes since inception, and some works were not previously costed. The decision was not taken lightly, and it will be disappointing for the communities that are affected, but the pause is essential to ensure value for the public purse. I stress that there will be no final decision on investment until the business case review is reported to the task force later this year.

Katy Clark: As the minister will appreciate, there has already been six years of delay while terms were negotiated with Peel Ports. The decision has a massive impact on Ardrossan and on the Arran ferry route. Will the minister ensure that the Parliament is kept closely advised of developments, and will she use her office to ensure that we can have a full debate in the Parliament as soon as possible on the timetable, the costs and the implications for the local economy?

Fiona Hyslop: I am acutely aware of how important this matter is. I have previously met the Arran ferry task force, and the member will know that the work of the task force group is really important. It brings together many partners, from Transport Scotland, Peel Ports and North Ayrshire Council, and the local member, Kenny Gibson, is also a member of the task force.

At the point of the pause, I deliberately ensured that all relevant partners, including the constituency MSP and regional MSPs, were informed of progress, and I will continue to do so.

I am not responsible for the timetabling of debates in the Parliament.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I hear what the minister has said. Is she confident that the work at Ardrossan will go ahead? If so, when does she anticipate that the harbour will be open, whenever the new ferry is ready?

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that the business case is as robust as possible in order for the investment decision to be taken. The work involved is extensive—there is a realignment and different works are now required that were not required previously. That is why making the business case as robust as possible is really important, and we must recognise the pressures on other funding partners, not just the fiscal pressures on us. The timescales for delivery will depend on the works that are being done and the order in which they are done, which comes under the procurement process.

The procurement has not stopped; it has been paused to ensure that there is a very strong business case.

National Health Service Waiting Times

6. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to eliminate long waiting times for NHS procedures. (S6O-02549)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): We are working closely with NHS boards to reduce long waits and to deliver the commitment in our £1 billion NHS recovery plan to increase in-patient, day-case and out-patient activity, which is supported by the implementation of sustainable improvements and new models of care.

This year is a milestone year for the national treatment centre programme. NTCs Fife and Highland opened in the spring, and NTC Forth Valley will open later this year, along with the completed expansion of NHS Golden Jubilee. Those centres will create significant additional and protected capacity for planned treatment and diagnostics, and they are key to supporting us in our aim to address waiting times.

Pam Gosal: My constituent requires a hip replacement and hopes to seek speedier treatment via the S2 scheme. However, the guidance surrounding the scheme is complex, and she has received conflicting advice from stakeholders including Scottish National Party ministers. She has struggled to navigate the application process, and she believes that better signposting and support could reduce waiting times for other patients in her position. Will the cabinet secretary introduce better signposting and ensure that all materials relating to the scheme are clear and accurate?

Michael Matheson: Where there is experience that could help us improve the signposting, I am always more than happy to look at it. If Ms Gosal writes to me on the specific instances that her constituent has experienced, where she feels that

the signposting could be improved, I will be more than happy to look at the matter.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The national treatment centre programme is playing an important part in increasing capacity to support patients to access treatment. Can the cabinet secretary provide any updates as to the latest progress with the roll-out of the programme?

Michael Matheson: The national treatment centre programme is the single biggest increase in planned care capacity ever created in NHS Scotland. The four national treatment centres are opening this year. They will deliver eight orthopaedic theatres and in-patient and day-case wards. They will also provide three endoscope rooms and two general surgery theatres. They are planned to deliver something in the region of 25,000 additional procedures by 2024-25.

Changing Places Toilets

7. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to start accepting applications for the £10 million fund for changing places toilets that was announced in the 2021-22 programme for government. (S6O-02550)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): We know that changing places toilets make a real difference to disabled people and their families, and offer everyone in Scotland dignity and freedom. That is why we have committed to investing in changing places toilets during the current parliamentary term. I confirm that we will look to make the £10 million fund available across the financial years 2024-25 and 2025-26. We will undertake the necessary development work, alongside key stakeholders, to open the fund by the beginning of 2025.

Jeremy Balfour: That is the most disappointing answer that I have heard in a long time. Many organisations have been waiting for years for a changing places toilet. One of them, in Dunbar, has made a business plan and identified a site and all it is waiting for is the fund to open. Why is there a delay when the United Kingdom Government has delivered so much money across the whole of England?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that the First Minister's policy prospectus, which was published earlier this year, sets out that Scotland is facing the most difficult public spending environment that this devolved Parliament has ever seen. The member will also be aware that the purpose of devolution is to enable us to do things differently in Scotland, and that is what we are doing. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear the minister.

Maree Todd: Not only are we using a different model of funding provision—unlike Westminster, as I understand it, we are not providing the funding via local authorities but are working with communities to ensure that the facilities go exactly where the communities want them to go—we are also investing a far greater quantum of money when we do it. England is investing £30 million and Scotland is investing £10 million, but England is 10 times bigger than Scotland.

We have made tough decisions to ensure that we target every pound that we spend and invest to get the maximum value from it and to ensure that it reaches those who need it most. I am delighted to confirm that we will make that £10 million investment in changing places toilets, and I commend the previous minister, Kevin Stewart, who pursued the issue and has ensured that, even beyond his tenure as Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, the money will be delivered to where it will make a real difference to the lives of disabled people.

Largs to Cumbrae Ferry (Monthly Season Ticket)

8. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to any benefits to islanders of restoring the monthly season ticket on the Largs to Cumbrae ferry route. (S6O-02551)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): There has been no specific assessment of the benefit of the reintroduction of the monthly season ticket, but I note the calls for that to be considered. Officials have already had some initial discussions with CalMac on the options. Issues around the practicality and potential costs would need to be considered carefully. The discussions are ongoing, and it will be important that Ar Turas is operating properly before any further changes are made. Wider consultation on fares across the network will take place through the development of the fair fares review.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister for her disappointing answer. The new ticketing system is supposed to make life better for islanders, not worse. I have been lobbying Transport Scotland, CalMac and numerous transport ministers for a year and a half for a decision on this. I do not understand what further consultation could possibly need to take place. All that the islanders want is a reliable ferry service at prices they can afford. It is not beyond the wit of man to design a system that will work for our island communities. When will we get an answer on whether or when these services will resume and the much-needed ticketing system will be available to our island communities?

Fiona Hyslop: Jamie Greene might not be aware, but the decision to withdraw the season ticket was not part of the new ticketing process; it was to do with the introduction of road equivalent tariff, which happened 12 years ago. For several years, there have been no annual adjustments to the monthly ticket in line with inflation, and users of the product have benefited from fares that, previously, were below the road equivalent tariff for the route, with a 17.5 per cent discount.

I have asked officials to work with CalMac to see what is possible. However, as I said in reply to Jamie Greene's first question, we have to ensure that fares are fair across the network.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Oil and Gas Sector

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Tens of thousands of people work in Scotland's North Sea oil and gas sector. It raises billions of pounds to support public services and it is crucial for Scotland's economy. However, this week, across the Atlantic in the United States, Humza Yousaf said that Scotland will no longer be "the oil and gas capital of Europe".

Why has the Scottish National Party turned sour on Scotland's oil and gas?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): We are committed to a just transition for the oil workers in the north-east. I want to pay tribute to the sector and the workforce for the more than £400 billion that they have generated for United Kingdom coffers; although, of course, much of that has been squandered. We are committed to a just transition because we know that the unlimited extraction of fossil fuels is not consistent with Scotland's ambitious climate obligations, and we have to ensure a planned and fair transition that leaves no one behind.

Douglas Ross is brave going on this subject in a week when his Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has not just pulled the rug from under the net zero ambitions of the UK but potentially damaged the net ambitions of Scotland. That does not just damage the environment; it damages jobs in the process. He should be ashamed to stand side by side with Rishi Sunak on that matter.

Douglas Ross: What a predictable response from the Deputy First Minister. The SNP loves to talk a good game but keeps missing its own climate change targets. The Deputy First Minister wants to pay tribute to oil and gas workers in the North Sea—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another, please.

Douglas Ross: —and Humza Yousaf wants to take away their jobs. What we need is a sensible transition to create new energy jobs, but not by throwing away the current ones. It is not a choice between oil and renewables; we need to support both. That is why Humza Yousaf's proposals are so reckless.

A recent report from the Robert Gordon University warned that a "rapid decline" in the oil and gas sector will cost tens of thousands of jobs,

so why is the SNP backing a cliff-edge scenario in which skilled jobs will be lost for good?

Shona Robison: It was just a year ago that Douglas Ross was urging us to follow Liz Truss over the cliff edge, in an economic catastrophe for our country. That same Douglas Ross now comes to the chamber wanting us to follow Rishi Sunak off the same cliff edge, by reneging and backsliding on net zero targets. It is no surprise that one of the first people out of the blocks to support Rishi Sunak was Liz Truss herself. That is the company that Douglas Ross keeps.

We are, of course, committed to a just transition for Scotland's energy sector, and we only just missed our target by 1.2 percentage points, which shows that we are not far behind—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members! Deputy First Minister, if I might ask you to stop for a moment.

I am finding it difficult to hear. I think that members are being somewhat robust in their engagement with responses. I would be grateful if we could hear one another speak.

Shona Robison: Thank you. I have never allowed a man to shout me down in my life, and I will not make an exception for Douglas Ross.

Our targets are world leading. That is why the First Minister is in New York for the United Nations climate change week. We are world leading and our First Minister's ambitions are to meet the net zero targets. He shows leadership—unlike the Prime Minister, who is ditching the net zero targets.

If Douglas Ross does not want to listen to me on that, all he needs to do is listen to the condemnation from industry, business and, indeed, Tory MPs themselves.

Douglas Ross: Let us go through a few of those points. The Deputy First Minister says that the SNP Government's targets are "world leading", but it is not meeting them. In eight of the past 12 years, it has failed to meet its own world-leading targets.

Let us listen to industry. Jaguar Land Rover said that the Prime Minister's plan was

"pragmatic and brings the UK in line with other nations, which we welcome".

However, this is about what is best not just for our economy but for our environment. Industry experts have found that new fields at Cambo and Rosebank would save 17 million tonnes of CO₂ compared to foreign imports. More production in Scotland is cheaper and greener, and it protects jobs.

However, Humza Yousaf no longer wants Scotland to be Europe's capital in oil and gas, and

he is against the UK Government's granting of new North Sea licences. Why would we not use our energy, from our doorstep, instead of costly foreign imports?

Shona Robison: We have been very clear about the analysis of any new licences and the climate targets that they have to meet, which have to be robust. Of course, it is not us who will grant new licences. However, the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy have been very clear about those climate compatibility tests.

Let us get back to the nub of the issue. Douglas Ross talked about our net zero targets. The changes and announcements that have been made by Rishi Sunak make it harder for us to achieve those targets. That is bad for the environment and for business.

Lisa Brankin, chair of Ford UK, said:

"Our business needs three things from the UK government: ambition, commitment and consistency. A relaxation of 2030 would undermine all three."

The former Siemens UK chief executive officer, Jürgen Maier, said:

"It's just chaos, isn't it? It beggars belief ... Everybody is now sitting and wobbling and wondering. And I tell you what, they won't be investing in the UK. It's a disaster for productivity. It's a disaster for jobs, well-paid jobs. And it's a disaster for business confidence and investment – and we need exactly the opposite".

When is Douglas Ross going to grow a backbone and support the net zero targets rather than his Prime Minister?

Douglas Ross: We could trade quotations all day. I quote Toyota, which said:

"The government announcement is welcome as it provides the clarity the industry has been asking for and recognises that all low-emission and affordable technologies can have a role to play in a pragmatic vehicle transition."

Of course, we had—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, please give me a moment.

Mr Robertson, I ask you, please, to remain silent when we are trying to hear Mr Ross's response.

Douglas Ross: Angus Robertson's shouting did not put me off when I beat him in 2017, and it does not put me off now.

It was quite something for Shona Robison to blame yesterday's announcement by the Prime Minister for the SNP's failing to meet its targets in eight out of the past 12 years.

Let us go back to where it all began. The SNP slogan used to be, "It's Scotland's oil"; now, it is "Just stop oil." Humza Yousaf flew to New York—the finance capital of the world—to tell people not

to invest in our oil and gas sector. The First Minister of Scotland is talking Scotland down. It is a slap in the face to north-east workers; it is naive, because we still rely on oil and gas; and it would be a hammer blow to Scotland's economy. Why is the SNP giving up on Scotland's crucial oil and gas sector?

Shona Robison: No one is giving up on Scotland's oil, but it has been squandered by successive UK Governments of all political colours. As I said at the beginning of my answer, we absolutely respect and appreciate the efforts by the oil and gas sector and its workforce, and we support a just transition. We have put serious money into making that happen, unlike the UK Tory Government.

Listen to what the oil and gas industry is saying. Emma Pinchbeck, chief executive officer of Energy UK said:

"Sudden changes to policies and targets like this are damaging to the very investment we need to fund the move towards Net Zero and jeopardise the economic benefits and opportunities this transformation could bring in terms of jobs, growth and greater prosperity to all parts of the country.

Businesses need certainty and stability when making long-term investments worth billions of pounds".

The announcements by Rishi Sunak undermine all of that, not only for the UK but for Scotland, and Douglas Ross's standing shoulder to shoulder with Rishi Sunak will not be forgiven by the people of Scotland.

Delayed Discharge

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): People across our country are paying the price for Scottish National Party incompetence and failure at a time when they cannot afford that. In every area that this Government controls, we see mismanagement leading to billions of pounds-worth of waste. In February 2015, the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Shona Robison, promised to end delayed discharge by the end of that year. So, can she tell members how many people have died while waiting to leave hospital, how many bed days have been lost and how much that has cost the taxpayer since she made that promise?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): First, we remain absolutely committed to eradicating delayed discharge. I said that when I was health secretary, and we were absolutely determined then, as we are now.

Anas Sarwar will understand that that is challenging to do. Back then, we were on the eve of the establishment of the new integration joint boards. I think that it is fair to say that their

delivery of progress on delayed discharge has been a mixed bag. That, of course, is why we want to move forward with the new national care service, which is something that Labour used to support but then opposed as soon as the SNP tried to take it forward. We will get on with the job of tackling delayed discharge while Labour just snipes from the sidelines as always.

Anas Sarwar: The Deputy First Minister is in denial. Almost 4.5 million bed days have been lost, more than 2,300 people have died while waiting to leave hospital and £1.1 billion has been wasted. Shona Robison promised to end that eight years ago, long before Covid, and people are now being asked to pay for that failure during a cost of living crisis. A quarter of households face council tax rises of up to 22 per cent, which is an increase of £740 a year; there will be an income tax rise for people earning as little as £28,000; and there are now proposals for a £15-a-day charge for people driving to work. Why are working people, who have already been hit by the Tory mortgage bombshell, being asked to pay the bill for the SNP's incompetence and failure?

Shona Robison: On the issue of the national health service, we remain absolutely committed to eradicating delayed discharge and we will work with our partners to do that.

I notice that Anas Sarwar moved on to talk about local government finance and taxes, so let me say this about the consultation on the council tax multiplier. The consultation is looking at how we can make council tax fairer, but that joint group with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is also looking at how we could replace the council tax in the future. Here is one question that the consultation is asking: why is it that someone living in a band H property pays so much less, as a proportion of the value of their property, than someone in a band A property? As someone living in a higher-band property, I do not think that that is fair, so why does Anas Sarwar think that it is fair?

We will get on with that consultation, but it is not credible for Anas Sarwar to come here and say no to progressive taxation when it comes to income tax and to any changes in local taxation, but to demand that money be spent on public services. That is not a credible position for Anas Sarwar to take.

Anas Sarwar: The SNP has been in government for 16 years and that is the best answer that Shona Robison can give. The Deputy First Minister just does not get it, so let me give her the example of a family in Cambuslang. The mum is a nurse, the dad is a teacher and they have two young kids. Their energy bills have skyrocketed and they are still paying 50 per cent, or £2,000, more than they used to. Their food bills are up almost 20 per cent; they have been hit with

a mortgage increase of more than £2,000 a year and now the SNP wants to make that worse by asking both mum and dad to pay more income tax, to pay hundreds of pounds more in council tax and to pay £15 a day to get to work in Glasgow. That family is being let down by both Tory and SNP incompetence. Both Governments are making life harder for working people, so why can the Deputy First Minister not see that the people of Scotland are being asked to pay the price for SNP failure?

Shona Robison: We know that Anas Sarwar is now getting his orders from Keir Starmer, and they are to not promise anything in terms of progressive taxation and to turn his back on raising additional funds. Anas Sarwar should remember that, if we had followed what he seems to be suggesting—the Tory tax policies—we would have £1 billion less for public services in our coffers. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: That is what Anas Sarwar seems to be saying.

Let me repeat: there is a consultation on council tax. No decisions have been made in terms of council tax increases. He should not be saying to the people of Rutherglen or anywhere else that that is the case, because that is to mislead.

Let me say to the nurse and the teacher that Anas Sarwar commented on that we have, of course, made sure that nurses are better paid in Scotland than those elsewhere in these islands by making sure that we pay through agenda for change, and teachers, of course, are better paid in Scotland than those anywhere else in these islands, because we settled with the teachers in relation to their pay claim.

We will get on with paying public workers what they deserve to be paid and supporting household incomes. Anas Sarwar will side with the Tories against progressive taxation. What a place for Labour to end up.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Deputy First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-02380)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Next Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful for that reply.

The list of national health service buildings that are being searched for the dangerous concrete known as RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—includes surgical wards and a radiotherapy ward. It includes maternity wards and

major hospitals such as Ninewells in the Deputy First Minister's home city. There, the area of concern extends to 9,500m², which is more than the size of a football pitch. Assumptions about what is low risk that were based on looking at blueprints are now being questioned, because a school beam that was thought to be low risk was then found to be unsound.

Can the Deputy First Minister vouch for the safety of everyone who is going for surgery, every cancer patient and every newborn currently receiving care in a ward where this concrete is suspected to be present?

Shona Robison: NHS Scotland Assure has been going through all the buildings in the NHS, looking at applying the guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers and making sure that there is then a risk rating for any buildings that need repair. However, no patients and no staff will be left in any dangerous building anywhere, and we should not suggest otherwise, because that worries people.

I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care spoke to Alex Cole-Hamilton about this very matter just yesterday, but, if he still has queries, I am sure that the health secretary will be prepared to speak to him again. I know that the cabinet secretaries for social justice and education have also invited him to a meeting to discuss any further concerns.

It is important that we give the assurance to the public that all these matters are absolutely in hand and that the guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers is being followed. I hope that Alex Cole-Hamilton can join us in getting that reassuring message out.

Carer Support Payment

4. **Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):** To ask the Deputy First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential impact of the roll-out of the carer support payment on the national mission to tackle poverty and reduce inequality. (S6F-02396)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): We know that unpaid carers face a higher risk of poverty and that the majority of unpaid carers are women. The carer support payment will be available in the local authority areas of Dundee, Perth and Kinross and Western Isles from November this year. It will be extended to more areas from spring 2024, and it will be available nationally by autumn 2024.

The carer support payment will extend eligibility to more carers who are studying full time. It will remove barriers to education, provide more stable support, promote increased take-up and help

carers to access wider benefits and services. Once case transfer from carers allowance completes, it will also provide extra payments to carers with multiple caring roles and an additional four weeks of support when a caring role ends due to bereavement.

Collette Stevenson: I am particularly pleased to note the expanded eligibility for the carer support payment, compared with eligibility for the Department for Work and Pensions's carers allowance. Relative to the rest of the United Kingdom, how many additional carers are set to benefit from Social Security Scotland's 14th devolved payment?

Shona Robison: Despite our fixed budgets and limited powers, we have transformed social security provision in Scotland by delivering a radically different system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect. From launch, our carer support payment will expand access to many carers. Once the benefit is available nationally, it will widen access to 1,500 more carers.

Carers on the carer support payment will continue to benefit from our carers allowance supplement, which has provided extra support to carers in Scotland since 2018. We will again call on the UK Government to match our actions to address the fact that carers allowance is the lowest of all the working-age benefits.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note the Deputy First Minister's initial reply and her subsequent response of "Westminster bad". However, I draw the focus back to Scotland and to reducing inequalities. The 2022-23 programme for government contained a promise to develop a payment for eligible 16 to 25-year-olds with care experience to provide security as they transition towards independent living. We are a year on from that. When will the promise be fulfilled?

Shona Robison: I say to Roz McCall that it is not about Westminster bad; it is just a fact that carers allowance is the lowest of all the working-age benefits.

In response to Roz McCall's question about the roll-out of the benefit for young carers, I will ensure that the minister writes to her with an update on progress and the timetable for that.

Net Zero Targets (Planning and Funding)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Deputy First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reported comments from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and council leaders questioning the achievability of net zero targets without a detailed plan and adequate funding. (S6F-02384) [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if we could do members the courtesy of hearing their questions.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I am sure that Brian Whittle must be regretting submitting that question. A Tory MSP raising net zero less than 24 hours after the Tory Prime Minister hollered out the Tories' plans is a matter for pity, perhaps.

We will continue to work in partnership with local authorities and COSLA to develop a framework between national and local government to agree shared approaches to delivering net zero. We are doing that at a time when the United Kingdom Government appears determined to undermine the means to deliver the necessary change. Yesterday's decision by the Prime Minister to renege on the UK's key net zero commitments was an unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations. The Conservatives are trading the future of our planet for a cheap electoral ploy.

If Brian Whittle or his colleagues in the Scottish Tories have any influence on the UK Government—which is unlikely—I ask them to please urge it to rethink, because it is on the wrong side of history.

Brian Whittle: As the First Minister grandstands in New York, accusing the rest of the world of catastrophic negligence on climate change, his Scottish National Party councillors have joined COSLA, the Climate Change Committee and countless other organisations in criticising his Government's net zero plans.

The SNP-Green Government loves being praised for its bold, ambitious climate policies, but those same policies keep disintegrating on contact with reality. A just transition requires more than ever-grander promises, with no thought as to how they will work in the real world. Will the Deputy First Minister now commit to setting out a detailed, pragmatic and achievable road map for how the Scottish Government will reach net zero, or will she continue the First Minister's approach of bashing others to disguise his Government's failures?

Shona Robison: Of course, it is the Prime Minister's announcements that are disintegrating in the face of blistering criticism, not just from industry and business but from some of his own party's members. I wonder how Maurice Golden and other Tory back benchers are feeling at the moment.

The First Minister will continue, as the Scottish Government will, to show leadership on net zero. We are regarded throughout the world as having some of the most ambitious targets and policies. We will get on with the job, and we will leave Rishi

Sunak, Douglas Ross and the Tories to try to explain to future generations why they had no backbone when it comes to the environment.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I will stay on the theme of Rishi Sunak's plan to ditch the UK Government's key net zero targets. What initial assessment can the Scottish Government provide on the impact that that will have on the commitment and consistency that industry requires from the Government in order to ensure a just energy transition?

Shona Robison: I am aware that the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition will answer an urgent question on that later today. The Prime Minister's reckless plans have already been branded concerning by the Climate Change Committee, which judges that the plans are

"likely to take the UK further away from being able to meet its legal commitments".

Business and consumer groups alike have referred to the plans as "hugely damaging" and a "colossal error". Al Gore has called them "shocking" and hugely "disappointing". There are many others that I could quote. *[Interruption.]*

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): They do not like that.

Shona Robison: I know that the Tories do not like the facts to be presented to them, but the key and most serious and concerning point is that those announcements will have a serious impact and implication for the climate ambitions of not just the UK but Scotland. That is unforgivable.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The Prime Minister's climbdown on climate shows that he is a politician who is interested only in the next election, rather than in the next generation. What impact will his announcement have on Scotland's plans to reach net zero by 2045?

Shona Robison: The cabinet secretary for net zero will answer that urgent question, and we will get into the detail of assessing the impact. Mark Ruskell is absolutely right to point to what this is all about. It is all about the general election and the Tories trying to appeal to their core vote, which is, essentially, about culture wars, being anti-migrants and, now, being anti-environment. What an unappealing, negative, backward-looking, small-minded prospectus that is, and it will be roundly rejected by the Scottish people once again.

School Meal Debts

6. **Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Deputy First Minister whether the Scottish Government will consider writing off school meal

debts, in light of reports of local authorities instructing sheriff officers to pursue families for unpaid school meal debts. (S6F-02377)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): We recognise that the cost of living crisis is putting a huge strain on families and that many are facing real challenges. We are committed to the expansion of free school meals, saving families £400 per year for every eligible child. Where any families experience difficulties due to the cost of paying for school meals, in the first instance, we expect local authorities to use the powers that are available to them to provide necessary support. Although school meal debt is a matter for councils, the Scottish Government will do everything that we can to support families, and we will consider all the options that are available to us to ensure that families do not find themselves punished for struggling during a cost of living crisis.

Paul O'Kane: Organisations such as Aberlour children's charity speak of a cycle of problem debt owed to public bodies that is trapping families in poverty. Not only are families experiencing the stress of being trapped in that cycle, but we have now learned that councils such as Renfrewshire in my region are sending debt collectors to families' doors, exacerbating unimaginable pressure, when those families are just trying to get by in a cost of living crisis.

Despite what the Deputy First Minister says about the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities guidance on managing school debt, families are now in a postcode lottery, because some councils are writing the debt off and others are resorting to debt collectors. Fifty anti-poverty organisations and trade unions wrote to the Deputy First Minister's predecessor to call for action in the most recent budget. Scottish Labour outlined plans to write off school debt in our call for an emergency cost of living act in the summer of 2022. The former First Minister said that she was "sympathetic" to calls to write the debts off and asked officials to look at the issue.

The Presiding Officer: Please ask a question.

Paul O'Kane: Sympathy, warm words and another year of inaction from the Government—

The Presiding Officer: Please ask a question, Mr O'Kane.

Paul O'Kane: All the while, the debt collectors are banging on the door. If reducing poverty is the defining mission of Humza Yousaf's Government—

The Presiding Officer: Mr O'Kane, you can put your question now or not at all.

Paul O'Kane: When will he take urgent action and provide resource in order to allow all councils

to write off those debts and stop the sheriff officers?

Shona Robison: To fund an emergency cost of living act, we would need to have progressive taxation, whether at a national or a local level, and Labour has now ruled that out, so there are no more funds to pay for an emergency cost of living act. There is a lack of consistency from Labour on that point, because the two-child cap and rape clause do not help vulnerable families either. We need to see some consistency from Labour.

The point about debt is important. I encourage councils to be consistent in applying the guidance to school meal debt or indeed any other debt. They should do so in a way that preserves the dignity of families. We will continue to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on that important matter.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government's failure to fully implement its free school meals promise is relevant here. Just yesterday, the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard from a representative of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy that Government funding for the free school meals that are in place is insufficient. Why is the Government failing to fund its own scheme properly?

Shona Robison: Scotland has the most generous free school meal provision in the United Kingdom, and we are going even further. Liam Kerr, or any other Tory member, cannot pitch up here, demanding more money for free school meals or anything else, when, through the tax cuts that the Tories wanted us to follow, there would be £1 billion less—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Shona Robison: —to spend on public services, whether they be free school meal provision or anything else. The Tories should not turn up here asking for more money when they want to take £1 billion out of the money that we already have.

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

Cancer Research UK (Investment)

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Cancer Research UK has announced a £123 million investment in the Cancer Research UK Scotland Institute, formerly known as the Cancer Research UK Beatson Institute, which is based at the University of Glasgow's Garscube campus, in my constituency. The Beatson name is synonymous with cancer research in the west of Scotland, and the amazing work of the Beatson Institute has been life changing for many. What can the Deputy First Minister say about the

significance of that investment, particularly for the west of Scotland, and the strengths in cancer research and life science that we have in constituencies such as mine?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I very much welcome Cancer Research UK's announcement of that significant investment. Research is vital if we are to continue to develop new approaches to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer. That funding will ensure that the institute continues its research in the west of Scotland. It is recognised internationally for its quality, innovation and impact. The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care met the chief executive officer of Cancer Research UK yesterday to discuss the work of the institute and to recognise Cancer Research UK's very welcome investment.

Bank Branch Closures (Islands)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): This week, we learned the disappointing news of more Bank of Scotland branch closures, including one in Millport, on Cumbrae, and another in Brodick, on Arran. Those are the last remaining bank branches in those island communities. It is disappointing news for elderly residents on islands and many businesses that operate in cash. I wonder, though, whether the devastating effect that it will have on our island communities has escaped Lloyds Banking Group, which received a £20 billion taxpayer-funded bailout many years ago? Will Scottish Government ministers join me in lobbying Lloyds Banking Group to reverse those devastating cuts to branches?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I agree with Jamie Greene. Such services are important, particularly for those who do not have online banking facilities. Many older people are in that position. I absolutely agree with his sentiment. Banking is a United Kingdom Government responsibility, but I am happy to ask Neil Gray to speak to Jamie Greene to see how cross-party representation can be arranged.

Colleges (Finance)

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Given the level of skills shortages across the Scottish economy, is the Deputy First Minister concerned that colleges are cutting courses and making staff redundant in order to balance their budgets?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The future of skills is an absolutely critical area, which is why the Withers review is so important. The college sector will be vital in that regard. There

have been challenges to public finances across all public bodies—no one is denying that—due to the United Kingdom Government's austerity policy. We must therefore ensure that the college sector or any other sector can deliver within the budgets that can be allocated.

We absolutely recognise the importance of skills for the economy. That is why we are keen to see the forward-looking review from Professor Withers being implemented in a way that will see colleges being placed at the heart of our policy.

National Eye Health Week

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister will recognise that this week is national eye health week. As the convener of the cross-party group on visual impairment, I am pleased that Parliament has led the way with a long-standing policy of free eye tests. As they can have multiple health benefits for the individual, will the Deputy First Minister support calls to encourage more Scots to use the free eye tests?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I agree with Stuart McMillan that national eye health week is a timely opportunity to highlight the importance of having a free, regular national health service eye examination and contacting an optometrist as a first port of call for any eye problem. We know that they can provide a full health check of the eyes as well as a sight test, which can help to detect early signs of sight-threatening conditions as well as other serious health conditions. I am proud that Scotland remains the only part of these islands to provide free universal NHS eye examinations, which the Scottish Government is committed to maintaining.

Short-Term Lets Licensing Scheme (House Swaps)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Last week, the Scottish Government rejected calls from the chamber and the industry to pause the licensing scheme for short-term lets because of its emerging unintended consequences. Yesterday, we saw yet more confusion about the policy, with *The Times* reporting that ministers had told Homelink, which arranges house swaps, that swaps would now be excluded from the rules. We learned that the Deputy First Minister herself wrote to councils in March that guidance would be produced around offering temporary exemptions for house swaps, but no record exists of such guidance ever having been published. Meanwhile, the Minister for Housing, who replied to the debate last week, seemed to be unaware of any of that. Can I get some clarity, please? Are house swaps to be excluded from the licensing scheme or not?

Does this not demonstrate, once again, that this is a shambolic policy from a Government where the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I will get the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Shirley-Anne Somerville, to write to the member, because it is important that there should be clarity on the matter—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the Deputy First Minister.

Shona Robison: Murdo Fraser is right to raise the issue. I will ensure that clarity is made available not just to Murdo Fraser but to other members across the chamber.

With regard to the policy per se, it is important that Murdo Fraser and others encourage those people who are running short-term lets to get their licence in order by 1 October, because that will be critical. What this is all about, at the end of the day, is ensuring that whoever is using a short-term let, in whatever sector, can be guaranteed of the application of the same safety measures no matter where they are staying. That is at the heart of what this is about. On the member's specific point, I will ensure that the cabinet secretary writes to him and puts that response across to other MSPs, too.

School Buildings Cancellations

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister will be aware that Highland Council has cancelled 10 new school buildings, which means that desperately needed affordable housing will be lost. It is due to delays to her Government's learning estate investment programme. Will the Deputy First Minister now make decisions about that fund, so that local authorities can build schools? Will she apologise to pupils, parents, teachers and communities that have been so badly affected?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): First, phases 1 and 2 of the learning estate investment programme—LEIP—have been enormously important. Thirty-seven projects were announced, including three in the Highlands, through those first two phases. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will update Parliament on the third phase in due course.

Secondly, one of the issues that we have had to consider is the position of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—schools in relation to phase 3, in order to ensure that they receive the priority that they require.

Finally, our cut to capital budgets, which will be a cut of 6.7 per cent—nearly 7 per cent—makes

the situation very difficult, whether it is around building schools, hospitals or anything else. I hope that the member will join us in ensuring that we say to the United Kingdom Government, in the same way as the Welsh Labour Government did, that we absolutely need that investment in capital. I just met the Treasury with the Welsh Labour Government, and we are saying exactly the same. It is just a pity that Labour members in this place are not aligning with their Welsh Labour colleagues.

United Kingdom Mini-budget (Scottish Economy)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): One year after Liz Truss's disastrous Tory United Kingdom mini-budget, will the Deputy First Minister outline the impact of that chaotic event on Scotland's economy?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The disastrous mini-budget—enthusiastically backed by the Scottish Tories, of course, and Douglas Ross in particular—sent shock waves through the economy, causing market interest rates to jump and sterling to fall, and literally crashing the pensions market in the UK. Alongside that, the proposed tax cuts and the market reaction reduced any lingering credibility that the UK had in terms of economic management, which was already severely damaged by Brexit.

That has now been followed by—the equivalent of that—Rishi Sunak on net zero, Liz Truss being the biggest cheerleader for the backsliding and renegeing on those net zero targets. If ever there was an argument for independence, it is what has happened with net zero this week. Surely there can be no better argument than that control over net zero and the economy should rest here, in this Parliament.

Interlinked Heat and Smoke Alarms

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This week, Clackmannanshire Council admitted that a house that caught fire was not fitted with the legally required interlinked heat and smoke alarms, despite legislation requiring that from February 2022. It might not be an isolated incident, and vulnerable tenants and the elderly might be being put at risk. What urgent action can the Scottish Government take to ensure that councils are fulfilling their legal responsibilities and protecting tenants and lives?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I am concerned to hear about that. Of course, councils absolutely should be making sure that they apply the legislation in the same way as anyone else. If Alexander Stewart wants to write to me with those

details, that is certainly something that we can raise with the council, because it is very important that tenants feel safe in their homes.

Fair Pay (University of Dundee)

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a trade union member.

This week, members of UCU, Unison and Unite the union are on strike at the University of Dundee because their employer has repeatedly failed to make a fair pay offer. Year on year, real-terms pay cuts are harming university workers, student learning and our education system. Will the Deputy First Minister join me in urging university principals in our city of Dundee and across the country to meet the demands of campus unions?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): That is, of course, a matter for Dundee university or any other universities, being independent institutions, and the way in which they conduct industrial relations. However, we would expect them to follow the fair work principles in terms of good engagement with the unions and to follow those in the same way that other institutions should. We would urge them to get around the table with their union partners to find a resolution.

I would say to Mercedes Villalba that what we are seeing from Keir Starmer is a complete retreat from workers' rights and a U-turn on every commitment on workers' rights, so perhaps she should have a word with Keir Starmer—although I suspect that she probably does not agree with him anyway. In terms of the devolution of employment law, I hope that she will sign the motion that is up for debate next week. *[Interruption.]* I understand that Anas Sarwar has sent a memo round, saying that Labour members should not sign it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: I hope that Mercedes Villalba will sign it, because I know that she is of independent mind.

Short-term Let Licences (Privacy)

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): A constituent of mine who is a single mother with a short-term let property has been in touch with me this week. She will shortly be obliged to display a licence notice in the front window of her property in order to be compliant with the short-term let regulations. It will include her name and address. She is concerned about the wellbeing and privacy of her daughter and herself, due to her domestic relationship. Can the Deputy First Minister confirm whether it is her intention for short-term let regulations to make responsible owners afraid and

scared, and possibly have to withdraw the property, and will she look again at whether that type of lack of privacy is appropriate in Scotland today?

12:46

Meeting suspended.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): No, and if Jeremy Balfour wants to furnish us with the case, we will look at it in terms of the guidance that has been issued by City of Edinburgh Council. No one should be afraid or scared. We are asking short-term let owners to get a licence to ensure basic safety measures—that is all—not to put themselves in the position of being afraid or scared.

The system is about basic safety standards. If Jeremy Balfour furnishes us with the details, and if there is an issue with the guidance that City of Edinburgh Council has produced, we will look at that. That is all that I can offer at this stage.

European Union Exit

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Conservatives delivered a ruinous Brexit. This week, Keir Starmer said that he would tweak that ruinous Brexit, while ruling out a return to the European single market. He said that his priorities are economic growth and the opportunities and outcomes for young people that have been lost as a result of Brexit. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the only way to get back the benefits of the European Union is for Scotland to be in the EU as an independent nation, back among the family of nations of Europe?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Clare Adamson is exactly right. It appears that Labour likes to hear the word “Brexit” even less than the Tories do—I wonder why that is.

Brexit is an on-going disaster for Scotland. The Labour Party now—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: The Labour Party wants to keep Scotland out of the hugely important European single market and out of the European customs union. Labour also backs the end of freedom of movement—a freedom that was so important for the Scottish economy.

The real question for Labour is whether, when the onslaught on workers’ rights begins, it will look trade unions or workers in the eye and say, “That’s okay. We support that. We don’t care about workers’ rights.”

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

12:47

On resuming—

World Rivers Day 2023

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the next item of business, and I ask those who are leaving the public gallery to please do so quickly and quietly—thank you.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10364, in the name of Jackie Dunbar, on world rivers day 2023. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament marks World Rivers Day 2023, which takes place on 24 September and is a celebration of the world's waterways; commends the organisations, communities and land managers implementing landscape scale initiatives that improve stewardship of rivers; appreciates what it sees as the value of catchment scale initiatives and networks in connecting projects and communities together to maximise the benefits; considers that nature-based solutions, when successfully implemented, can lead to healthy, dynamic, resilient river systems, delivering multiple benefits to interconnected species such as sea trout, Atlantic salmon and freshwater pearl mussels, among others; recognises what it considers the seriousness with which the Scottish Government is treating Scotland's declining salmon stocks; further recognises the Wild Salmon Strategy and its objectives and priority themes; understands the interconnectivity within the ecosystem, where pressures such as water temperature, extreme flow events, nutrient enrichment and pollution can be substantial and cumulative; acknowledges Scottish Water's improving urban waters route map, which is backed by £500 million of investment; understands that SEPA's recent results show that 66% of Scotland's water bodies are in good condition or better, compared with just 16% elsewhere in the UK, and considers that implementing nature-based solutions can mitigate such pressures, delivering multiple benefits by boosting biodiversity, reducing diffuse pollution and reducing river temperatures in the Aberdeen Donside constituency in Scotland, and in the rest of the UK.

12:48

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased to have secured this members' business debate to celebrate world rivers day 2023. I thank all the members who supported my motion and all the organisations that have got in touch and provided helpful briefings in advance of the debate. I also declare my interest as the nature champion for sea trout.

World rivers day is a celebration of the world's waterways that is held on the fourth Sunday of September each year, which means that this year's celebration will take place this coming Sunday, 24 September. World rivers day is especially relevant to us because Scotland is renowned worldwide for the environmental quality of our rivers, lochs, seas and waterways, which

attract visitors and support our key industries. Scotland's landscape is shaped by its rivers, which provide fresh water to sustain us, support our farms, drive industry and power our homes.

Scotland as a whole has more than 125,000km of waterways that range from small burns to wide, deep rivers. Every major city has grown up around them and they have benefited our populations hugely, not only economically as the gateway to trade and transport goods in the past but for the health and wellbeing of our citizens. Edinburgh has the Forth, Glasgow has the Clyde, Dundee has the Tay and Aberdeen has the benefit of two rivers, the Dee and the Don.

The River Don runs through my constituency of Aberdeen Donside, hence the reason I was delighted to become the champion of the sea trout, as it leaves the North Sea to travel up the River Don to spawn each year. One of my favourite walks is a dander along the riverbank, where wildlife roam freely right on my doorstep. Last time, I was lucky enough to see a heron standing on a large stone in the river. I just hoped that it was not on the prowl for one of my sea trout on its way upstream.

Folk have lived and worked along the River Don for centuries. We can still see the relics of Aberdeen's industrial past and some of the better-known mills on the lower reaches of the Don. The river has been used as a power source to drive processes and machines for hundreds of years, which really developed in the 1700s when there were several mills along the river. Many became large concerns and household names such as the inventor of the Crombie coat, John Crombie at Grandholm Mills. The textile mills have all closed, but you will still find machinery and buildings along the river, which stands testament to that fine part of the city's history.

Let us have a wee look at the history of world rivers day. The United Nations launched the water for life decade in 2005 to create greater awareness of the need to better care for water resources. That led to Mark Angelo, an internationally renowned river advocate, establishing world rivers day. The proposal for a worldwide event to celebrate rivers followed the success of British Columbia rivers day, which Mark founded and led in western Canada in 1980. The annual event has grown a fair bit since then. It has continued to grow annually and was celebrated last year by several million folk in up to 100 countries.

Our rivers and waterways face challenges, whether that be the effects of climate change, or the impact that we have on our planet and its environment. The likes of water temperature, extreme flow events, nutrient enrichment and pollution can have a substantial and cumulative

effect on our waters as well as the living creatures within them. For example, Atlantic salmon and sea trout play a vital role in the complex life cycle of the freshwater pearl mussel, as they act as a host in the larval stage. That is just one example of how we cannot afford to lose a link in our ecosystems. I know that the champion for the freshwater pearl mussel, Audrey Nicoll, is taking part in the debate and I am sure that she will be able to expand on that further.

Without trees and foliage on the riverbanks, river temperatures rise, which in turn means that there is no shade for trout or salmon to rest in as they make their way upstream to spawn. Riverwoods is a partnership initiative that is being led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and is one example of how co-ordinated actions help to create thriving riverbank woodlands and healthy river systems, which help to keep river temperatures where they should be. I thank the organisation and its partners for their work, as well as the landowners and communities who are taking part in landscape-scale restoration projects, such as re-meandering to combat the loss of spawning gravel habitat in the rivers.

On the important point about the impact that our waterways have on the species that live within them, this is a good opportunity to highlight the Scottish Government's wild salmon strategy, which also benefits sea trout and brown trout as they have similar life histories, while all species would benefit from improved river and riverbank conditions. It is appropriate that we acknowledge the work that the Scottish Government is doing in Scotland but also that we recognise the commitment in the strategy to support and push forward collective action in the international arena, particularly to assist the young salmon and sea trout that depart our rivers in surviving the challenges that they face on the high seas and returning to their home rivers to spawn the next generation.

The health of our river basins is a key commitment of our Scottish Government, and I was pleased to see the previous environment minister, in partnership with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, introduce "The River Basin Management Plan for Scotland 2021-2027". It sets out ambitious targets to improve water quality in Scotland's waterways by 15 per cent, to ensure that 81 per cent of Scotland's water environment is in a good condition by 2027. The plan aims to work with land managers to reduce diffuse pollution from agriculture and to support the passage of migratory fish such as salmon.

I thank the members who supported my motion and the members in the chamber for their attendance, and I look forward to listening to

contributions during the debate on this important issue.

12:55

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank my friend and colleague Jackie Dunbar for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

In Scotland, rivers, their small tributaries and the lochs and run-offs that feed them are home to thousands of species. When our rivers are healthy, biodiversity thrives; when our rivers are not looked after, the ill effects are many. For example, on the Forth, as Jackie Dunbar mentioned, industry has had a lasting impact. Everything from chemical and agricultural pollution to forestry can put pressure on the river system.

In my constituency, a wide range of local projects are making strides to support river systems and to recover lost biodiversity. Individual landowners, such as Kate Sankey of West Moss-side organic farm, have encouraged riverbanks to renaturalise after years of dredging, which has seen the return of otters, water voles and, most recently, beavers as a result. The Carse of Stirling project is getting schoolchildren involved in learning about species in wetlands. The Forth Rivers Trust is planting trees along the Allan Water to boost habitat and to provide a wildlife corridor and shade for river species. That is increasingly important as greater extremes of weather brought by climate change see hot, dry summers, which dry up bodies of water, lead to increased risk of fire and decimate water-reliant species.

Winters are wetter, with enormous rainfall over short periods bringing flash floods and washing away roads, fields and habitat. If we support our river systems, we can do a great deal to mitigate that. In November 2021, the Bowser family became the first private landlords in Scotland to legally translocate beavers to unenclosed ponds. Fourteen beavers have since been released on Ardoch Burn near Doune. All came from land in Tayside where lethal control licences had been issued. Last week, I was delighted to visit Niall Bowser at his farm to see where the beavers live. What a wonderful job they have done of transforming the local environment. Unfortunately, the beavers were resting, as they had been very busy building dams, chewing logs and engaging in other beaver behaviour, so I did not see them—maybe next time. Niall does small tours at certain times of the year for those who are interested.

Beavers are often known as ecosystem engineers, helping to provide habitat for young fish, food for invertebrates, deep pools for large fish to rest in, and much more. However, as Niall told me, they also have a transformational impact

on the wider environment. At Ardoch Burn in previous summers, ponds and streams evaporated, while in winter they flooded. They also flooded the farm steading below. However, since the beavers' arrival, their dams have meant that the pond has stayed full through one of the driest summers on record, which has kept thousands of water-dependent species alive.

From my work as a nature champion for the rare azure hawker dragonfly, I know just how important it is to ensure that ponds do not dry up. It is extremely heartening to hear about the positive impact that those projects are achieving. Collaborative working by farmers, local organisations and communities, with a holistic approach, can do so much. We must continue to do all that we can to look after our rivers and watercourses and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

12:59

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West)

(Con): I thank Jackie Dunbar for bringing this important issue to the Parliament in recognition of world rivers day. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests regarding the River Dee. I also note that I was previously the Scottish Environment LINK nature champion for the freshwater pearl mussel, and I enjoyed spending days learning all about the conservation works that are taking place to support a wealth of biodiversity. The pearl mussel is an important indicator species, and its decline is, unfortunately, a shameful testament to the Government's wilful neglect of our rivers, which I am sure Audrey Nicoll will be able to explain shortly.

The River Dee is recognised as a special area of conservation for its efforts to protect Atlantic salmon, freshwater pearl mussels and otters. Numerous initiatives have been put in place to protect its salmon numbers, such as a catch and release policy and the million trees campaign run by the River Dee Trust, which I was delighted to see shortlisted for a nature of Scotland award last night in Parliament.

Sadly, my mailbox is now filled with messages from constituents, businesses and tourists who are concerned about the declining number of salmon in the River Dee. The cabinet secretary will be aware from my correspondence with her that people are frustrated about seal predation; seals are not just eating and scaring the fish but pushing them off their redds during spawning season and disrupting their reproduction. The Scottish Government's wild salmon strategy implementation plan rightly seeks a review of the seal licensing system, but it commits to developing non-lethal methods of control, which is

disappointing, as we already know that those measures do not work effectively.

Local businesses are already reporting a loss of custom due to the shocking decline in numbers. Fishing plays a vital role in our rural economy, attracting tourists from all over the world and supporting hundreds of jobs in local businesses. I hope that the Scottish Government will take serious action to tackle all predators that are disrupting wildlife in our rivers.

I have also worked with scientists in the community who are concerned about pharmaceuticals in the water. Increases in antibiotics and oestrogenic hormones can be very harmful to local wildlife. There is no reference to that in the Government's plan, so I ask the Scottish Government to address it.

I turn to the concern of pollution in our rivers. Less than 4 per cent of overflows in Scotland are monitored, compared with more than 90 per cent in England and Wales. SEPA's licensing conditions do not currently require Scottish Water to report discharge data on either the River Don or the River Dee in my constituency. When Scottish Water confirmed the priority locations that it has identified for its 1,000 new spill monitors, it turned out that the closest location to the north-east was the Invergowrie burn in Dundee. Although £500 million for the improving urban waters route map might sound impressive, that funding is supposed to last until 2027 and does not promise anything for rural communities.

It is clear that the Scottish National Party Government is not doing enough to treat declining salmon numbers, and it is not doing enough to monitor sewage pollution. With rivers such as the Dee and the Don being vital areas for salmon and for conservation, water quality testing and sewage monitoring should be undertaken regularly.

In 2022 alone, monitored overflows in Scotland discharged in excess of 47 billion litres of untreated sewage into rivers, lochs and coastal waters. The exact amount from all overflows is likely to be much higher, given that so few overflows are monitored. The fact of the matter is that the data presented by the SNP Government cannot reflect the true picture, because it simply is not monitoring rivers across Scotland.

13:03

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland)
(Lab): I congratulate Jackie Dunbar on securing today's debate marking world rivers day 2023.

Our rivers are a vital resource in our fight against climate change and biodiversity loss, because our river systems provide a crucial habitat to countless species. As well as the

interconnected species such as sea trout, Atlantic salmon and freshwater mussels that are referenced in the motion, our rivers are home to a wide range of insect and plant life, all of which contribute to the health of our wider environment and, ultimately, to our food security and our public health.

Labour welcomes Scottish Water's improving urban waters route map and the associated investment, but we must also address the complex problems that are endangering wildlife, preventing biodiversity recovery and risking our health. In 2021, the longest sewage overflow event in duration was reported in Aberdeen, in my region. Sewage reportedly spilled into the River Dee for more than four months straight—a shocking 130 days—from April to September. The truly shocking thing, however, is that the volume of waste was not recorded.

We know that sewage overflows can cause algae blooms and loss of biodiversity, and that they can introduce other pollution into our rivers. It is not just nature that suffers; it is our quality of life, as our waterways are a source of recreational enjoyment for many of us. During the pandemic, we were reminded of just how crucial access to nature is to our health and wellbeing. It is clear that monitoring of overflows must improve, but that cannot happen without the installation of spill monitors.

In December 2021, Scottish Water vowed to increase the number of storm drain monitors to more than 1,000 by the end of 2024. However, as of 1 March this year, not a single new device had been installed. When I asked the First Minister to confirm exactly how many of those 1,000 storm drain monitors he expected to be installed by the end of this year, he could not give me a figure. That does little to reassure my constituents in the north-east that an event such as that four-month spill in the River Dee will not happen again. I hope that the minister will provide the Parliament with an update on the progress of that work today.

The importance of affording the highest-possible protection to our natural environment cannot be overstated. However, that is not currently the case for Scotland's waters. Parliament has previously heard that untreated human waste was discharged into Scotland's waters more than 10,000 times in a single year. Our rivers are part of a rich water network that connects habitats, species and life across the country. Even where sewage is not discharged directly into our rivers, the impact is still felt in them.

For the sake of our health, our wellbeing and the future of our environment, regulation of Scotland's waters must be driven by four core principles: keeping Scotland's water in public hands, ensuring access to clean water for local communities,

protecting public health and protecting Scotland's natural environment, so that next year's world rivers day can truly be a celebration of our rivers.

13:07

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Jackie Dunbar for securing the debate.

Having had the privilege of living on the banks of the River Teith for 15 years, I learned very quickly that rivers help to change our whole perception of the natural world and the environment around us. We become far more aware of the changing seasons, of storm surges and droughts, and of their impacts on the river. We get to know the wonderful creatures that live in and around the river, too, so it is an amazing experience.

I enjoyed hearing from Evelyn Tweed about how the beavers that have been reintroduced at Argaty are now thriving. I have been proud to support the Bowsers, over many years, in getting their licence, and I congratulate the minister for finally getting that over the line. That has been a success, and there is no conflict with surrounding landowners. We are now left with the sight of the beavers at the ponds and the amazing benefits that they bring to the natural environment. That is a great success.

In recent years, we have all become increasingly aware of our rivers, as there is a growing movement of wild swimmers, swimming in our lochs, rivers and seas. Earlier this month, I had the pleasure of meeting a group of wild swimmers from Fife. When the group held a wild swim in the River Tay earlier this year, unfortunately, many of the people who were swimming became ill, which was potentially due to a sewage spill from a combined sewage outflow at Stanley. Their main ask of Scottish Water is to provide monitoring and accessible public information, which Mercedes Villalba spoke about, so that they know when there is an increased risk of pollution.

At present, less than 4 per cent of the combined sewer overflows in Scotland are monitored and reported. I know from the Marine Conservation Society that only 11 out of the 496 outflow sites in my region are monitored, with more than 1,300 spillages recorded in 2022.

The water quality in a number of the freshwater habitats in Scotland is deteriorating because of sewage outflows and phosphorus from agricultural run-off or new developments. Monitoring is therefore important if we are to find out what is going on, but we also need to get at the root cause of the problem and invest in solutions. One effective way of doing that is to expand the network of designated bathing water sites to

encourage investment between SEPA and Scottish Water. Bathing water designations are not just for coastal beaches; some freshwater sites have been designated, but the numbers in Scotland are still quite low.

The joint work between SEPA, Scottish Water and other stakeholders to monitor and improve water quality has resulted in some pretty dramatic improvements in many designated areas. For those that fall short of the required standard, it also drives targeted investment. However, the guidelines for designating sites in Scotland require that each site receives at least 150 daily visitors, and that deters applications. According to SEPA, that is one reason why only six bathing water applications were received in the past five years in Scotland. England has no threshold for visitors, so the application process is clearly easier.

I want to briefly highlight the Leven programme, which brings together landowners, restoration specialists, the local community and others to restore the River Leven in Fife for the benefit of local people and wildlife. Historically, the Leven played an important role in powering industry. Through the Leven programme, there are plans to restore habitats by planting river woodlands along and within the river, modifying dams to make it easier for fish to migrate, creating ponded areas for wildlife, and, critically, improving public access. All that work connects with the programme to reopen the Levenmouth rail route. It is a great example of joined-up thinking and investment.

I hope that all rivers in Scotland will, in time, have the opportunity for restoration that the Leven has been given. Once again, I thank Jackie Dunbar for giving me the chance to highlight a few of the issues that are at stake here.

13:12

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Jackie Dunbar on having brought to the chamber the motion on marking world rivers day 2023. As Jackie Dunbar alluded to earlier, as north-east members of the Scottish Parliament, we can both boast that we have two magnificent rivers, the Dee and the Don, running through our respective constituencies.

The motion is comprehensive and it rightly reflects why Scotland is renowned for its fresh waters. They provide our drinking water, they are used to generate electricity, they are essential for the production of our whisky, and they provide a home for iconic species, including the Atlantic salmon and the freshwater pearl mussel.

Free-flowing rivers mean that water can move downstream freely, thereby allowing fish to migrate without restriction, and invertebrates such

as the freshwater pearl mussel to thrive. I have vivid and lasting memories of my granny wearing a simple string of pearls from the magnificent River Tay, where I spent much of my childhood. Their significance passed me by at the time, but, in later life, they have taken on a whole new meaning. It will therefore come as no surprise to members to hear that I am delighted to be the nature champion for the freshwater pearl mussel.

Freshwater pearl mussels are one of the United Kingdom's most threatened species. Scotland holds almost half the global population. They are fully protected, which makes it illegal to take them from a river. This summer, I had the pleasure of joining Craig Macadam of Buglife, Susan Cooksley of the James Hutton Institute and Edwin Third of the River Dee Trust, on the River Dee, where I was so lucky to see freshwater pearl mussels in situ in their natural environment, thriving and safe. It was truly remarkable and an absolute privilege to hold a mussel that was estimated to be around 68 years old.

This might be the one and only time that I agree with Alexander Burnett. Sadly, through various threats, including poaching, water pollution, loss of habitat and climate change, the freshwater pearl mussel is now classified as endangered. How can we preserve not only that vulnerable species but other wildlife species that are reliant on our rivers?

During my day out, I had the pleasure of visiting the restoration project of Easter Beltie burn, near Torphins, which has been returned, from being a straightened agricultural stream, to a natural meandering course, thereby improving habitats for nature and boosting climate resilience. The project has created a stretch of meandering river corridor of more than 2km flowing through 10 hectares of flood plain that is rich in habitats where nature can thrive. I encourage all members to visit it at some point, because it is truly beautiful. That is an example of why nature-based solutions will be crucial in recovering not only Scotland's freshwater pearl mussel population but our wider wildlife populations.

The Scottish Government has enacted additional measures to improve freshwater pearl mussel population levels, supported by the commitment of organisations such as the James Hutton Institute, the River Dee Trust and many others. The aim is to reintroduce mussels to rivers where they once were and to outlaw disturbance, injury, theft or killing of freshwater pearl mussels. I hope that, with the aid of such measures, there will soon be growing numbers of the pearl mussel.

It is imperative that we maintain the biodiversity of Scottish rivers. I welcome the efforts that are being made by the Scottish Government and all stakeholders to achieve that.

I again thank Jackie Dunbar for lodging the motion and for securing this members' business debate. I look forward to celebrating world rivers day this weekend with a walk by the River Dee.

13:16

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater):

Scotland's rivers define our iconic landscapes. From mountain tributaries to estuaries flowing into the oceans, they provide vital water and rich habitats and help us to adapt to global threats, including climate change and water scarcity. As Mark Angelo, the founder of world rivers day put it, "Rivers are the arteries of our planet; they are lifelines in the truest sense."

We have many innovative initiatives under way in Scotland to nurture, improve and protect our rivers. I am proud to outline a few today.

In working with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency to implement river basin management plans, we are investing £4 million this year to continue the work of the water environment fund. The fund restores access to rivers for migratory fish, including salmon, by removing barriers to fish passage. It also restores urban rivers, thereby providing multiple benefits for biodiversity, climate change adaptation, leisure and flood management.

Since 2021, the Scottish Government's nature restoration fund has awarded in excess of £2.3 million for projects to restore and revive river habitats, and to improve their resilience to climate change. I was delighted to visit the River Almond to see such work in action and to celebrate the Seafield weir removal project. I have also visited restoration projects along the Dee and the Don, with the re-meandering—what a wonderful word that is—of rivers to allow for spawning habitats; the embedding of felled trees in rivers to allow for spawning habitats for invertebrates and to create shade; and planting along the sides of rivers to provide shade and animal habitats. It is glorious to see those rivers coming back to life.

The Scottish Government is working closely with partners to develop integrated catchment management techniques to restore rivers and to improve natural flood management.

We take the issue of declining populations of wild Atlantic salmon very seriously, and our wild salmon strategy is working with multiple partners to ensure the protection and recovery of that iconic species. I take a different view from my colleague Alexander Burnett about the primacy of seal predation on Atlantic salmon; there are human impacts on the species as well as climate impacts, so it is important that we look at all the issues, in

the round, to restore that iconic species to Scotland's rivers.

A priority theme is improvement of the condition of rivers and giving salmon free access to cold and clean water—they are so sensitive to climate change. Our actions to achieve that are wide ranging and are supporting salmon recovery and benefiting wider river biodiversity. All the actions that are good for salmon are good for other species as well, including the critically endangered freshwater pearl mussel.

We are also committed to ensuring that our efforts are informed by the latest scientific evidence. Earlier this month, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands announced funding of more than £500,000 to allow Scotland's network of fisheries boards and river trusts to monitor salmon this year.

Members have expressed much concern, specifically about sewage spills and overflows—especially on to our beaches and into our rivers—which cause the distressing sanitary waste that we find. This morning, I participated in a beach clean, in which we picked up such waste. It is absolutely distressing—for everyone—that such incidences occur. Over the past decade, Scottish Water has reduced environmental pollution incidents by 60 per cent—from 800 each year to fewer than 300—despite increasingly challenging weather patterns. That is an on-going project. In the period from 2010 to 2021, Scottish Water invested around £880 million on targeted improvements to environmental quality.

Scottish Water is also investing an extra £0.5 billion over the period 2021 to 2027, as part of its "Improving Urban Waters—Route Map". Members including Mercedes Villalba have raised this issue; I will respond to her question. Through comprehensive asset studies, Scottish Water is identifying the right locations for increased monitoring to maximise the benefit to our environment and to ensure value for money. I am pleased to confirm that it expects to install more than 1,000 additional monitors by August 2024, which is ahead of the timetable that is set out in the route map.

I am excited by today's debate because it has provided such an enthusiastic discussion of biodiversity. Members have mentioned otters, water voles, beavers, herons, salmon, trout, dragonflies and, of course, the pearl mussel. I will add a species. This morning, while on the beach clean, I heard the announcement that oysters have been returned to the Forth, in which they had been extinct for 100 years. Although we found piles of oyster shells on the beach this morning, they were more than 100 years old. Today, the species returns to the Forth.

So much effort is being put into restoring our glorious rivers to what they should be. I was excited to hear Evelyn Tweed's stories about beavers. She noted how important they are in preventing flooding and in storing of water during dry seasons. That will become more and more crucial as climate change progresses. Our ability to manage water is tied up with how we manage the natural environment around our rivers.

That includes managing river temperatures—another issue that colleagues have raised. So many species are sensitive to the temperature of the water in our rivers. By shading the rivers, through planting along the banks and ensuring that there are obstructions in the water that can provide shade and cool spots for important species such as salmon to spawn, we are restoring the natural balance.

We, in Scotland, are on a journey to progress and improve our biodiversity and to improve our clean water—to make sure that there is clean water everywhere and that the standard of our rivers is very high. We want nature to thrive throughout Scotland, and we want businesses and communities to enjoy, and benefit from, our rivers.

I thank colleagues for the debate and I congratulate Jackie Dunbar.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:24

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions on education and skills. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. I advise members that there is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries, so I make the usual appeal for brevity in questions and responses.

Summit on Tackling Violence in Schools

1. **Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the summit on tackling violence in schools. (S6O-02536)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): There are multiple strands to the behaviour in schools summit. In June, I convened the first meeting of the headteacher task force, which focused on issues surrounding school exclusion. On 5 September, I chaired a summit that focused on the recording and monitoring of incidents in schools—an area of concern that was raised during a parliamentary debate in May. The next two events are scheduled for October and November.

That approach enables engagement with a wide range of stakeholders so that we hear and learn from the broadest possible range of interests and experiences. It also allows for the key issues to be explored in depth and for the work to be informed by evidence from the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which will be published in November.

Annie Wells: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer. I welcome the fact that the first part of the summit has been held. However, it should have happened before the Scottish schools returned.

During the debate that the cabinet secretary mentioned, the Scottish Conservatives also called for an action plan to tackle violence and disruption to be ready for the start of the new school year, a new standard reporting system, a plan to address the increasing issues with attendance, and new guidance for school staff. What work has been undertaken on those other key issues?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question. She raises a number of important points. First, however, I reiterate that the debate was held in May and I then convened the headteacher task force in June. The member will be aware that

teachers are usually on holiday in July and August, so the earliest possible opportunity for me to reconvene the summit was the first week back in September. We will have further meetings in October and November.

I am really keen to work on a cross-party basis on the issue, recognising the support that I thought we heard across the chamber back in May.

The member made a point about attendance. I have been addressing that issue with Education Scotland directly and I receive fortnightly updates on national attendance. As the member might have heard during the debate in May, there are real challenges in relation to certain year groups. For example, the year groups that were going through a transition period during the pandemic are struggling, I think, with the return to formal education. There is more that we will need to do at a central Government level to help to support certain local authorities in tackling issues in relation to attendance. I recognise that.

I have made it clear that my priority is to use the summit process in its totality to identify solutions at the school, local and national levels to address the concerns that have been raised. We will use the insights that are provided through the summit process, but also—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: —the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which will give us an accurate national picture in relation to—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. There is a lot of interest in asking supplementaries to this question. They will have to be very brief, as will the responses.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Preventative action is crucial in order to tackle this issue. I note that £2 million was provided to support prevention activity in 2022-23. Will the cabinet secretary outline what projects the Scottish Government is supporting to deliver that?

Jenny Gilruth: The member is right to highlight that investment. As she outlined, the Government is providing over £2 million to support really important preventative work. That includes a range of programmes across portfolio areas, including the education portfolio. The Education Scotland mentors in violence prevention programme helps young people to become part of the solution through peer education and by taking a bystander approach, supporting them to positively influence attitudes and behaviours of their peers.

The funding also enables Medics Against Violence to run a number of programmes, including its youth education programme, and it enables Police Scotland to deliver its youth

volunteers programme to young people in Scotland's communities.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Under this Government, teachers are under more and more pressure, classrooms are like pressure cookers, class sizes have got bigger, and teachers have been left wondering when the commitment to increase their non-contact time will be delivered. Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that fulfilling the promise on non-contact time is essential if we are to address the environment in the classroom, poor behaviour and violence in schools?

Jenny Gilruth: I have to say that the member paints a fairly depressing picture in relation to Scottish education. In Scotland, we have the lowest pupil teacher ratio and higher pay for teachers compared with anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It is also important to say that we have the highest spend per pupil of any part of the UK. We are investing in our education system.

I recognise the member's call in relation to class contact. I wrote to her on that very issue before summer recess, and I will seek to give her a fuller update in the coming weeks.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary did well to build consensus across the Parliament on the issue before summer, so I cannot understand why she has excluded members of the Scottish Parliament from attending some of the summits. I want to hear the unfiltered views of teachers and professionals about the issues that they face. I do not want to speak; I just want to listen, so that we can make the right decisions in the Parliament. I want to be properly connected with teachers. Will the cabinet secretary think again about allowing party spokespeople to attend the summits?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie has to recognise that, in the course of the summit, teachers will want to speak very openly but that they might be reticent about doing so if they think that that might be used for political ends. He has to understand that reality.

I am more than happy to meet MSPs from all parties on the issue, and I am more than happy to look again at how we can engage MSPs directly in the process. However, we need to be mindful that those professionals working in our education system might not feel comfortable speaking out in front of a group of politicians if they fear that that might be used in other ways—for example, in this chamber. I have been careful in building relationships across the education system over the past couple of months, and it is important that we build trust with the profession on the issue.

I will explore with my officials how we might be able to engage MSPs more directly in the work,

recognising the sensitivities around those who work in our classrooms.

Learning Estate Investment Programme

2. Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish updated details of its learning estate investment programme. (S6O-02537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I understand that local authorities are keen to get clarity on phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme. We wrote to local authorities to explain that consideration of potential phase 3 projects was still on-going.

It is important to recognise that we are making important investment decisions against a backdrop of market volatility on current projects, the need to keep Scottish finances on a sustainable trajectory and, more recently, as members will be aware, on reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—prevalence in school buildings. Those are really big decisions and it is important that we get them right. I hope to announce successful projects as soon as possible.

Paul O’Kane: It feels a little like groundhog day each time we get an answer to this question. It is a year now since East Renfrewshire Council bid for two projects for replacements for Carolside primary school and Cross Arthurlie primary school. The schools are badly needed for the communities that they serve.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that issues with uncertainty around financing are causing real concern in local authorities, which are trying to undertake long-term capital and revenue planning? I appreciate that Highland colleagues will raise issues specific to their communities, but does she fear, as communities do, that councils might have to shelve other projects due to the uncertainty from the Government?

Jenny Gilruth: I have to say to the member that the uncertainty has been caused not by this Government but by a Government elsewhere, as he well knows. The decisions that have been taken by that Government are impacting on our ability to spend capital in Scotland. He must take cognisance of that. Indeed, that was raised at First Minister’s questions earlier today.

The issue around uncertainty more broadly is important. I am keen to go to local authorities as soon as possible with an update. The member will recognise that, in the interim, we have faced real challenges in relation to the Department for Education’s decision on RAAC in schools in England. That has meant that we now need to take a RAAC approach to how we administer the LEIP fund, and we are looking at how we might support local authorities to that end.

We are very clear, though, that we expect the Treasury to make further funds available across the United Kingdom to deal with the problems that are caused by RAAC across the public sector estate. I know that the Deputy First Minister has written to the Treasury on the issue, but we have not yet received a response. I have written to the Secretary of State for Education in England on three occasions, and we have yet to receive a response. I am keen to work with our local authorities—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We have a lot of interest in this. I will move to supplementary questions.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The Scottish National Party Government has a strong track record in improving the school estate. However, there are still significant challenges facing teachers, staff and students in schools, such as Buckie high school in my constituency. When will we expect to hear an announcement on the LEIP phase 3 funding, which would build on that track record and could provide real support to address the challenges that have been mentioned.

Jenny Gilruth: As I alluded to in my response to Mr O’Kane, I hope to be in a position to make an announcement as soon as possible.

The other thing to remember is that the school estate does not belong to the Scottish Government; it belongs to our local authorities, which have the statutory responsibility for the provision of education at local level. Notwithstanding that, the Scottish Government has contributed to significant improvements across our school estate since 2007. I am absolutely committed to working with our local authority partners on how we can go further, recognising the very real financial constraints that the Government is currently under.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, Kirsty Flanagan, of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, told the Education, Children and Young People Committee that, even when the delayed funds are finally announced, local authorities will have to assess whether, in the current financial climate, they will be able to deliver what they had hoped to deliver last September. What is the Government doing to assess the impact on local councils and schools of its delayed funding announcements?

Jenny Gilruth: We will continue to work with local authority partners in recognition of the financial challenges that they face at the current time but, as Mr Kerr is aware, the disastrous economic mismanagement by the United Kingdom Government and the subsequent huge rise in inflation from Liz Truss’s mini-budget have had a

real impact on the projects that had already been chosen in previous phases of LEIP. I remind the chamber that Tory MSPs urged this Government to follow that disastrous mini-budget.

We are currently giving very careful consideration to local authorities' bids for phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme and, as I have already outlined today, I intend to update Parliament on that as soon as possible, because I recognise the concerns from local authorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: John Swinney has a very brief supplementary question.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I wonder whether the cabinet secretary believes that, in considering that question, Parliament has to be mindful of the fact that, when this Government came to office, our predecessors judged that it was acceptable for 63 per cent of schools to be in good or satisfactory condition. Despite austerity and all the public spending constraints, in excess of 90 per cent of Scottish schools are now in good or satisfactory condition. Does that not need to be recalled as we consider that important question?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please answer as briefly as possible, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Swinney is absolutely correct to point out the significant investment from this Government. It is also important to remind the chamber that there are a total of 34 on-going Scottish private finance initiative contracts, and that the remaining payments on those contracts, which were awarded for all school PFI contracts, come to a total of £7.45 billion. The economic mismanagement by the previous Administration is still costing this Government, on top of the additionality that we will now be required to find for our investment in—and continued support for—improving our school estate.

Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodiversity (Support in Education)

3. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports children within the education system that have learning disabilities, autism or neurodiversity. (S6O-02538)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We want all children and young people to get the support that they need to reach their full learning potential, including those with learning disabilities and neurodiverse children and young people. The additional support for learning legislation very clearly places education authorities under duties to identify, provide for and review the support needs of their pupils. We have developed a range of professional learning resources for school staff to better identify and

support neurodiverse children and young people—for example, the autism toolbox and the addressing dyslexia toolkit.

Stuart McMillan: I welcome the proposals for a new learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill, but it is important that the process of shaping it is also accessible for the communities that it concerns. What work is the Scottish Government undertaking to ensure that accessible engagement processes are in place and that lived experiences are both prioritised and heard?

Jenny Gilruth: Stuart McMillan is absolutely correct, and that is why we are taking a human rights-based approach to ensure that the bill is fully co-designed by the people with lived experience. We have also established three bill panels to support the development of consultation proposals, including a lived experience advisory panel, which advises on areas where change could have the greatest impact. We will also ensure that meetings and papers are accessible, including preparing easy-read versions of all meeting papers and providing bespoke support to panel members who have a learning disability. We will work with the panel and stakeholders to co-design a consultation process that is as accessible and inclusive as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Martin Whitefield has a brief question.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Dyslexia is a condition that a significant number of our additional support needs-identified pupils suffer from. This Parliament has not had a debate in Government time on dyslexia since very early in its existence. Indeed, the most recent debate was a members' business debate in session 5. Could we have a Government debate in its time on ASN provision, so that I can raise the case regarding dyslexia?

Jenny Gilruth: Martin Whitfield raises a hugely important matter—a third of our young people in mainstream settings now have an additional support need. I will speak to our Minister for Cabinet and Parliamentary Business about how we might secure Government time to debate that hugely important topic, which is crucial and fundamental to the inclusive education system that we have in Scotland.

Universities (Assessment and Marking Backlogs)

4. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any assessment and marking backlogs at universities. (S6O-02539)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Following consultation with its membership,

the University and College Union has withdrawn its marking and assessment boycott at universities across the United Kingdom, effective from 6 September, which is, of course, welcome. Now that the boycott has ended, universities are working to complete outstanding marking and assessments, so that affected students can get their final awards and degree classifications.

I thank students for their resilience during what has clearly been a difficult period. I also extend my thanks to all those people across the sector who have worked hard—and continue to do so—to minimise the impact on students.

Kaukab Stewart: My constituent Claire Shankie has been issued with a letter from the University of Edinburgh that confirms only that she has completed her degree; it does not include grading or a timescale for her final award. Like so many others, her life has been put on hold and she cannot plan for her future. Does the minister agree that that is a distressing situation for students, whose entire experience has been impacted by Covid and then strike action? What assurances can he provide that the situation can be resolved?

Graeme Dey: I empathise entirely with students such as Claire, who have been affected first by Covid and then by industrial action and who deserve to receive the rewards of their hard work.

The impact of the marking assessment boycott has varied across and, indeed, within institutions. Now that the boycott has been withdrawn, it is my expectation that Scottish universities with backlogs will work at pace to complete any outstanding marking assessments to provide affected students with their final awards and degree classifications.

I received a letter from the member just yesterday. I have asked my officials to pick up on that, and I will write to her on the University of Edinburgh's progress with the marking backlog as soon as we have that information to hand.

School Estate Improvement (Highland Council)

5. Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with Highland Council to improve the school estate in the Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch constituency. (S6O-02540)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The £2 billion learning estate investment programme is being delivered in partnership with local authorities and will benefit tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland. Through phase 2 of the programme, we announced that Highland Council's Broadford primary school project, which is in the member's Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch constituency, would receive Scottish Government-funded

support. The school will deliver Gaelic medium and English education as well as community facilities for Broadford. It is being designed to Passivhaus standard, and construction is due to start next summer.

Kate Forbes: The cabinet secretary makes it clear that Highland Council is responsible for the school estate. It has applied for funding to replace the St Clements additional support needs school and two primary schools, in Dunvegan and Beauly, all of which are in a dire state of disrepair. Will the Scottish Government be able to advise the council whether it has been successful on LEIP phase 3 funding?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise the member's interest in LEIP phase 3 funding. We have heard other members raise that issue today, and I am keen to update Parliament as soon as possible on the matter.

As I have outlined, we have written to local authorities to explain that consideration for phase 3 projects is still on-going. It is important to recognise that we are trying to make significant investment decisions against a backdrop of market volatility on current projects, the need to keep Scottish finances on a sustainable trajectory and the additional challenge presented by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in school buildings.

However, I recognise the member's interest in relation to her constituency. I know that other members across the Parliament will have similar interests. I seek to provide Parliament with an update as soon as possible, while recognising the financial challenge at the current time.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We are now left with unsuitable and potentially unhealthy buildings, which will only be made habitable and not replaced with the new school buildings that are so desperately needed. While that make-do-and-mend approach from Scottish National Party ministers in Edinburgh and SNP Highland councillors in Inverness continues, when can teachers, parents and children in Dunvegan, Beauly and other parts of the Highlands expect to see the new schools that they were promised?

Jenny Gilruth: I have to say that, as we heard from Mr Swinney when the SNP first came to Government, about 60 per cent of our schools were in good or satisfactory condition. Today, that figure is more than 91 per cent. I think that that shows this Government's good record on investment in our schools, particularly when the responsibility for our school buildings rests not with the Scottish Government but with local authorities.

Today, I have committed to Parliament to provide an update on the LEIP 3 projects. I hope

that the member will welcome that and also the Government's significant investment in improving our school estate.

Scottish Education Exchange Programme

6. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what opportunities the development of a Scottish education exchange programme would present for young people in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley. (S6O-02541)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): We are committed to addressing one of the most damaging consequences of Brexit for our young people—namely the fact that they cannot access the Erasmus+ programme.

This year, we have set up a test-and-learn project to re-establish some of those opportunities. In 2024-25, we will build on that initial project to develop a programme that provides opportunities for young people, including those in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley, prioritises placements for disadvantaged groups and further demonstrates our commitment to European Union and global partnerships with schools, colleges and universities throughout Scotland.

Willie Coffey: The knowledge education exchange programme forms a core part of our commitment to engage with further learning institutions in the EU. Does the minister agree that the best way—indeed, the only way—for Scotland's young people to receive the full benefits of EU further education is for us to rejoin the European Union rather than to continue to reject it as Scottish Labour, the Tories and the Lib Dems are doing?

Graeme Dey: The member is absolutely right. The hard Brexit that both Labour and the Tories supported has robbed young people in Scotland of opportunities that previous generations were able to benefit from, including Erasmus. That is why we are committed to the education exchange programme, which will re-establish some of the opportunities that Erasmus provided that the United Kingdom's replacement—the Turing scheme—does not. We are designing the programme in partnership with universities and colleges that have real expertise to offer. Instead of picking up the pieces of Brexit, would it not be much simpler for Scotland to play a full, positive and constructive role with our neighbours in Europe by rejoining the EU as an independent country?

Digital Education

7. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what

action it is taking to improve digital education, in light of the increased prominence of artificial intelligence and cyber technology. (S6O-02542)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am acutely aware of recent developments in artificial intelligence and cyber technology, and, in that context, the provision of high-quality digital education has never been more important.

In the programme for government, we have committed to developing a new digital strategy to help ensure that digital provision supports the wider aims of the education system. The £13 million that was allocated in the 2023-24 budget is the first step in delivering improvements in digital provision.

Clare Adamson: Earlier this year, I was privileged to visit the National Robotarium at Heriot-Watt University, last week, I attended the opening of the centre for data science and AI at the advanced research centre at the University of Glasgow, and this week, I hosted Census in the Parliament. The ambitions for Scotland's digital AI and robotics sectors at those centres are inspirational. What is the Scottish Government doing to foster a direct engagement between schools and centres of excellence to encourage diversity and interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point. She has outlined some examples of positive working, and I heard recently about the robotics centre from Liam Kerr, who I understand visited it earlier this week. We would certainly want to do more in relation to linking that opportunity with educational opportunities in school.

That engagement with employers and others to challenge existing inequalities, particularly in relation to access, is a theme of the STEM education and training strategy. There are 20 employer-led Developing the Young Workforce regional groups, which are well placed to make those connections as part of a wider ambition to create a highly skilled and competitive workforce.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The SNP Government has failed to provide digital inclusion funding since 2020-21. As the SNP Government cuts council budgets year on year, how does the cabinet secretary expect local authorities to improve digital education without any support?

Jenny Gilruth: During the pandemic, we provided £25 million to local authorities, which supported the purchase of more than 72,000 devices and 14,000 internet connections for school children across Scotland. As I intimated in my response to Clare Adamson, we will introduce a digital strategy that will work with local

authorities, many of which have practical challenges in relation to connectivity in their school estate, which looks different in different local authorities—I hope that the member would recognise that.

However, the important point to remember is that we have a generation of young people going through our education system who require to be upskilled digitally. That is why we launched the laptop scheme and made our commitment in relation to digital devices, and it is why we are introducing a digital strategy that will not only help those young people's learning and skills but help to improve their learning and understanding as they move into the world of work and further education.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): In 2022, the number of people entering computing teaching training was half the target that the Government set. The STEM bursary scheme has clearly not succeeded in incentivising a career in computing teaching. Does the cabinet secretary accept that unless the Government tackles the chronic shortage of computing teachers, people will rightly question how serious it is about improving education in our schools?

Jenny Gilruth: Our new teacher bursary scheme provides bursaries of £20,000 for career changers who wish to undertake a one-year professional graduate diploma in education in hard-to-fill STEM subjects such as physics, maths and technical education—which includes computing science, I must say. National incentives are in place, too, to encourage teachers to relocate to more remote areas. For example, through the preference waiver payment, probationary teachers can receive up to £8,000 if they are willing to complete their probation anywhere in Scotland—I know that, because I undertook that myself many years ago.

The member is right to raise the challenge around certain subject areas. I raised those matters recently with the strategic board for teacher education in relation to how we can ensure that we have a teaching population that meets the needs of our young people. I have committed to work with the strategic board on that matter, and I will seek to update Parliament later this year in relation to that work.

National Allowance for Foster and Kinship Care

8. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the implementation of the national allowance for foster and kinship care. (S6O-02543)

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): Following discussions between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, it has been agreed that the Scottish Government will provide an additional £16 million of revenue to introduce a new Scottish recommended allowance for foster and kinship carers across Scotland, benefiting more than 9,000 families.

The Scottish recommended allowance will ensure that a consistent and transparent level of financial support is provided to all foster and kinship carers, helping them to provide the standard of living and wellbeing that the children and young people in their care deserve. This is another important step in our ambition to keep the Promise and ensure that all care-experienced children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected.

Roz McCall: I thank the minister and strongly welcome the news. The new national allowance, which was first promised in 2016, will make a significant difference to the daily lives of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Scotland.

I thank the minister for writing to me on 8 September, stating that the £16 million has been found from the children and families directorate to fund the policy. Given that we are consistently told that, in order to spend money, we need to explain where it will be cut, can the minister tell me what the Scottish Government has cut to fund the policy?

Natalie Don: I am sure that the member will be aware of the complexities around the budget and that it is not quite as clear cut as that. If the member would like more information on that, I am happy to get back to her at a later date.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Colette Stevenson has a supplementary question. Please be very brief.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): The national allowance has been a significant step in Scotland's journey towards achieving the Promise. Reflecting on the Promise implementation plan, what routes is the Scottish Government undertaking to ensure that the Promise is met?

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

Natalie Don: We are working with stakeholders across Scotland to ensure that we are driving forward the change that the Promise demands. To give just a few examples, we have set out our support for families through our whole family wellbeing fund; the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill is presently going through Parliament; and we are collaborating with care-

experienced young people and adults on the support that they need as they move on from care settings.

Keeping the Promise requires a cross-portfolio and cross-policy response, and the work that we are doing is threaded through our recent programme for government. To guide that work, we are also creating a dedicated Promise sub-committee, which will link the cross-portfolio commitments and interdependencies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change.

Online Child Abuse, Grooming and Exploitation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee on tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation.

I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to please press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Audrey Nicoll to open the debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee. You may have around nine minutes.

14:58

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am grateful that the Criminal Justice Committee has been given time to debate the issue of online child sexual exploitation. The committee has taken evidence on the issue on two occasions, and I thank all the witnesses who shared their expertise and knowledge with members.

We heard about the increasing rate at which incidents of online child sexual exploitation are being reported and that the response must go

“beyond one of law enforcement”,

involving justice, health, education, social work and third sector services working together.

Miles Bonfield of the National Crime Agency stated:

“We should be clear that our assessment is that the threat, complexity and severity of offending continue to grow. The challenge is really out there”. —[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 18 May 2022; c 50.]

NSPCC Scotland told the committee that, across the United Kingdom, online child sexual exploitation has

“rapidly increased over the last decade”,

and Police Scotland confirmed that it is dealing with enduring increases in reporting.

The NSPCC provided sobering statistics showing that there has been an 84 per cent rise in online grooming offences recorded since 2017-18 and that girls aged 12 to 15 were most likely to be victims of online grooming. In 2021-22, freedom of information data from the United Kingdom police showed that four out of five grooming cases involved girls. In internet-facilitated abuse, the trend has been towards more serious sexual offences against children.

Alison Penman of Social Work Scotland highlighted the emerging issue of children behaving harmfully towards others and the need to deploy different approaches so that those children

receive appropriate support to recover from trauma, while addressing their own offending.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): The data that Audrey Nicoll marshals paints a troubling picture. Did the committee explore the sensitive and difficult issues in relation to the educational approaches that are required? Given that much of the technology is moving at such a pace, as are the activities, families might struggle to keep pace, so our education system faces additional burdens in trying to equip children and young people to deal with these difficulties.

Audrey Nicoll: I thank John Swinney for a valid question, which I will come on to.

I commend Stuart Allardyce from Stop It Now! Scotland for his insightful evidence, in which he described three key components to prevent online harm. The first is safety by design, which he called

“the stuff that tech companies need to take on board and which the ... Online Safety Bill is driving.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 8.]

The second is effective messaging for young people and parents, and the final one is perpetrator-focused prevention.

On safety by design, witnesses spoke of the need for tech companies to prioritise children’s safety by building platforms that are safe for children. The witnesses want duties to be placed on tech companies to prevent children from accessing harmful material; to co-operate with law enforcement agencies to identify child sexual abuse; and to implement robust age-assurance measures.

Daljeet Dagon from Barnardo’s Scotland said:

“we have spent too long expecting children to protect themselves and to take responsibility for the abuse and harm ... they suffer and encounter. It is about time that we made technology organisations and companies take much more responsibility for preventing abuse from happening in the first place”.—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 8.]

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

Audrey Nicoll: I want to make progress. If I have time, I will come back to Martin Whitfield.

The committee heard about the pivotal role of education in safeguarding children online. NSPCC Scotland told us about the

“lifelong benefits for children and young people by teaching them about healthy and positive relationships, empowering them to recognise abuse”,

while Wendy Hart of the National Crime Agency spoke of the importance of educating parents on engaging with children in a way that avoids blame.

Stuart Allardyce spoke of the support that Stop It Now! offers individuals who are worried about

their sexual thoughts and feelings towards children. He also spoke of the learning, from work with individuals who have committed sexual offences, that has been taken to develop prevention resources and stop sexual abuse before it happens.

In March, Stop It Now! published a report on the impact on partners, children and families after a loved one has been arrested for an online sexual offence. The organisation found that families, who are secondary victims of the crime, typically become aware of offending behaviour when the police arrive at the family home—a time that is known as “the knock”. Family members can experience post-traumatic stress and feelings of guilt or shame, with little or no access to support. Police Scotland’s online campaign #GetHelpOrGetCaught has seen significant success in signposting to Stop It Now! individuals who recognise that their behaviour is concerning.

NSPCC Scotland spoke of the importance of children as experts in this space. They understand the emerging risks that they face and have a key role in developing constructive solutions.

On policy and legislation, the committee heard that there remains a lack of understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland. The Scottish Government has acknowledged the need to improve data collection and is working with analysts and partners to make improvements in that regard. The committee understands that work is under way involving Police Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to consider legislative gaps, including around the growing incidents of self-generated images of children.

Witnesses called for an overarching sexual harm strategy for Scotland. Social Work Scotland said:

“The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 provides a context for tackling issues within the current child protection processes. However, the complexity and continued development of online concerns and increased level of risk for children and young people means that a specific, national, multi-agency strategy would be beneficial for services. Any strategy would need to evolve and develop as new and emerging risks are identified.”

I would appreciate the minister’s views on that proposal. The organisation also asked for a nationally funded training programme. It said:

“Online harm is a challenging and fast changing context and social work services must continue to develop the skills and knowledge to assess and respond to online risk. A nationally funded training programme and for a shared learning would support local areas to maintain expertise and knowledge in a specialist area of practice.”

The committee also wrote to the Scottish Government about the proposal for a sexual harm

strategy. However, the Government has indicated that it does not consider that one is required at this time.

The Online Safety Bill, which, as members will know, was passed earlier this week, creates a provision to protect against risks and harms online, with particular reference to children and young people. The Criminal Justice Committee has engaged with Ofcom and will host a briefing for MSPs so that they can learn more about Ofcom's role in the context of the new legislation. I invite and encourage all members to attend.

I am grateful that we are debating this complex and emerging issue, and I look forward to hearing the contributions of colleagues on how we collectively tackle online child sexual abuse in Scotland.

15:07

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): I welcome the debate and the committee's interest in this important issue. All members in the chamber will be committed to ensuring the online safety and wellbeing of our young people.

Throughout the past two decades, technology has expanded at an unprecedented pace, and it is in our homes and in our hands. In 2000, less than 7 per cent of the world was online; today, more than half the world's population has access to the internet. The same pattern can be seen in use of mobile phones. At the start of the century, there were just under 740 million mobile phone subscriptions in the world; now, the number is more than 8 billion. We have more mobile phones than people.

There is no doubt that the change in internet and mobile technologies has positively transformed our lives and brought vast opportunities. Just imagine the pandemic and lockdowns, for example, without technology to keep us connected. However, with all that comes risk, especially for our young people. Keeping children safe from online abuse and exploitation is a key priority for the Scottish Government. Child sexual abuse, irrespective of how it occurs or how it is facilitated, is an abhorrent crime that can have a profound and long-lasting impact on its victims and their families. The number of images that are being found online showing children being sexually abused rises year after year.

Establishing the true prevalence of those crimes is extremely challenging, due to the crimes' hidden and underreported nature. However, recorded crime statistics provide us with some context. The latest statistics show that there were 765 offences of taking, distributing and possessing indecent images of children in Scotland, which is an

increase of 16 per cent since 2021-22, and the highest total since comparable records began in 2009. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that we ensure that our young people benefit from the online world in safe and secure ways.

Our approach to achieving that is multifaceted. It involves equipping children with the tools and skills that they need to stay safe online, and supporting parents and carers to ensure that they have the information and skills to guide children and recognise when a child is at risk. Professionals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to build children's resilience, to recognise abuse and exploitation and to respond with high-quality support. That must be accompanied by work to detect, disrupt and prosecute perpetrators and to reduce reoffending.

In our schools, teachers deliver the "technologies: experiences and outcomes" area of the curriculum to provide learning on internet safety and cyber resilience. Those things help teachers to support children in learning about safe and responsible use of technologies, including the internet and social media, as part of their broad general education under our curriculum for excellence. We are also committed to ensuring that all children and young people receive high-quality relationships and sexual health education to help them to build safe and positive relationships as they grow older.

Public messaging is key in preventing online abuse. In March 2023, we reran our successful public awareness campaign, which supported parents and carers to keep children safe online, and emphasised the importance of talking regularly to children about online safety, setting safety measures and agreeing boundaries. The campaign had a strong impact on behaviour. Nine in 10 of those who saw the campaign reported taking action as a result. That is the highest rate of any Parent Club campaign that we have seen.

Martin Whitfield: With regard to education, in the curriculum for excellence technology section, the exploration of online communities—the social platforms that the minister is talking about—is not expected to start until the second level, which is at the top end of primary school and into the first year of high school. Is it worth our while to consider introducing it earlier in a young person's education experience, so that they are equipped before they venture on to those platforms?

Natalie Don: I have also alluded to the importance of having such conversations in the home, which is important from an early age. However, that suggestion is certainly something that could be looked at.

John Swinney: I will follow up on Mr Whitfield's question, which was on a very important point that

is worthy of consideration. Does the question not highlight another of the sensitivities in the discussions, which is about how we deal with educational content about relationships in the school setting? The issues cause considerable distress to individuals, but do the risk that Mr Whitfield highlights and the risk of abuse at a young age not reinforce the importance of having such dialogue as early as possible, in an age-appropriate fashion, with young people and children?

Natalie Don: Yes. I absolutely agree with Mr Swinney.

The Parent Club campaign that I was referring to linked to an online safety hub on the Scottish Government Parent Club website, which provides information and advice on how to keep children safe from online harms. We are updating that to include advice for the parents of younger children, who are increasingly exposed to technology. We have also prioritised early intervention by providing funding to the third sector—in particular, Stop it Now! Scotland—to deliver online child sexual abuse prevention work.

In relation to people who seek to cause harm online, we are working with Police Scotland to find effective ways to deter potential perpetrators from committing online abuse in the first place.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Schools and local authorities have roles to play in keeping children safe online, but they are struggling with already-stretched budgets. At the same time, Police Scotland is losing police numbers and is having to abandon planned capacity improvements in the force. Does the minister share my concern that the stretched budget of that institution will impact on its ability to keep up with the complexity of the crimes?

Natalie Don: I recognise the crucial role that Police Scotland officers play. We have recently provided an additional £80 million of funding to the police budget this year, which I think addresses the member's point.

The Scottish Government is a member of the Police Scotland multi-agency group on preventing online child sexual abuse. Through the group, the child protection leads from a number of agencies consider advancements in tackling the problem, emerging trends, including in artificial intelligence and virtual reality environments, and new projects and support for victims.

I intend to visit the Scottish crime campus to discuss the police response to this important issue and whether the Scottish Government or national partners can take other actions to provide support. The Scottish Government has issued national child protection guidance to support local areas to develop effective evidence-based responses to

child sexual abuse and exploitation, and we published an updated version of the guidance at the beginning of this month.

Providing support to victims and their families is vital, which is why we provide funding to a number of third sector organisations that are involved in safeguarding support. This year, that includes £570,000 for Barnardo's Scotland to support children who are at risk of, or affected by, child sexual abuse and exploitation. We have also provided funding to NSPCC's Childline to provide resources, support and counselling to children, and to the Moira Anderson Foundation to provide therapy and counselling for child survivors.

The bairns hoose model gives Scotland the opportunity to provide a genuinely child-centred approach to delivering justice, care and recovery for children who have experienced trauma. This year, we are investing £6 million to establish pathfinder partnerships for our bairns hoose project.

We also need to ensure that the online industry plays a major role in increasing internet safety for children and young people. Although internet regulation is reserved, we have engaged with the UK Government during development of the Online Safety Bill, and we have successfully pushed for stronger protections for children online in the final bill. The bill will require tech firms to remove illegal content quickly from their services, or to prevent it from appearing in the first place. It will also mitigate the risk of platforms being used to commit or facilitate child sexual abuse and exploitation offences.

In response to concerns that were raised by the First Minister in May, the UK Government announced additional measures to protect children online from abuse and bullying, by placing reference to "primary priority content" and "priority content" that are "harmful to children" in the bill, thereby raising the profile of those harms. We will continue to work with the UK Government and Ofcom as the bill is implemented to make sure that it does all that it can to protect children online.

I want all children and young people to be able to enjoy the online world and the benefits that it has to offer, but to do so in a protected, safe and supported way. Let us work together to make sure that, while children and young people are online, they are kept safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I call Sharon Dowe.

15:17

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): The internet has been a positive force in so many ways. It has made information more accessible,

helped our economy to grow and given people new ways to communicate—but there are many downsides and negatives to our increasingly online world.

Of all the difficulties that the internet has created, the most dangerous is the increased risk to children. As digital platforms have expanded into almost every aspect of life, so have the problems that parents encounter when trying to keep their children safe. It has never been easy for parents to protect their children, but these days, it has never been harder.

As a parent of three children, I know how difficult it can be to make sure that young people are safe online. Potentially harmful content is everywhere. Almost every link could lead to something that we do not want our kids to see, and online abuse can come from so many platforms and places. The potential harms online range from verbal abuse to very serious crimes, including child grooming and exploitation.

The Scottish Government's "National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021" provided a broad definition of what online abuse can entail, including online bullying, emotional abuse and blackmail, sharing of indecent images, grooming behaviour, coercion, and preparatory behaviour for abuse including radicalisation, child abuse and exploitation. Those crimes are not only difficult for parents to track, but can be tough for the police to prevent, due to their nature. Those kinds of offences are defined by Police Scotland

"as one of the primary cyber threats facing Scotland".

Official figures show that crimes of this nature are rising rapidly. In 2022-23, 1,928 online child sexual abuse crimes were recorded in Scotland—an increase of 6.6 per cent on the five-year mean.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Is Sharon Dowey aware of the organisation International Justice Mission? It has reflected the fact that the rise in demand in Scotland for such material is fuelling a huge increase in the trafficking of very young children across the world. Supporting the police here to engage internationally and to crack down on the crime here helps to rescue children abroad as well as supporting children in Scotland.

Sharon Dowey: I have only recently joined the Criminal Justice Committee, but I have seen from reading all the information that there is a lack of data on what is a huge problem that is on the increase. We need to know all the data to ensure that we tackle the problem properly.

There were nearly 3,000 incidents of child grooming in the past five years in Scotland, with crimes against under-13s having risen by more than 60 per cent since 2017-18. Recorded crime

statistics show that the volume of indecent photos of children increased by 16 per cent over the previous year and by 50 per cent since the year ending June 2019.

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service has identified potential legislative gaps. I am pleased that that has already been the subject of discussions between Police Scotland and the Scottish Government, and I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs or the Minister for Victims and Community Safety can soon provide an update on the content of those conversations. Parliament would benefit from a timetable for when we can expect to see changes to address any weaknesses in the law.

The UK Government's Online Safety Bill, which has been passed at Westminster, should improve online protection for children. It is positive that the UK and Scottish Governments are working constructively on such issues. The Scottish Government has welcomed commitments from the UK Government, with the introduction of a new communications offence of intentionally encouraging or assisting serious self-harm. Changing the law can be effective at tackling such crimes, but it is not the only thing that the Scottish Government can do.

The Scottish Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee, of which I am now a member, has suggested multiple actions that the Government should consider. First, there is a lack of understanding of the scale, nature and extent of child sexual abuse in Scotland: that data gap must be addressed as there is a clear and pressing need for more information. I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will outline the steps that she plans to take to deal with the committee's concerns and to improve our collective understanding of what are complex crimes. As things stand, the Government seems to have accepted the need for better data in the area but has not identified solutions that would fill the gaps.

Secondly, the committee has identified that an overarching national strategy could be effective. From the response of the cabinet secretary, however, I am not clear where she stands on the merits of such a strategy. She has not rejected the idea, but neither has she appeared to agree that it is an urgent necessity.

Thirdly, there is the problem of violence in schools and the role that online content plays. That needs to be tackled with more urgency by the Government. The number of attacks in schools has risen rapidly—by more than 50 per cent since the previous year for which there are statistics. My party previously secured a debate on the growing scandal of violence in schools, and we welcomed the Government reacting to that debate by

arranging a summit on the issue. That summit has happened, but it appears that there have not been many outcomes from it. I hope that the Government will today outline what specific actions we will take following that meeting.

We can welcome much of the Government's action to date, but those three areas—the data gaps, the national strategy and violence in schools—deserve more focus from the Scottish Government. They must move up the priority list to the top of the Government's agenda.

There is no greater duty on Parliament than protection of the safety of young people. Of all our jobs as MSPs, keeping the public safe is the highest priority. Future generations depend on us to get that right and to ensure that they are protected from harm. My party will support any sensible proposals that keep children safe. I am confident that we can, by working together, find solutions to the complex challenges that are posed by the digital age.

15:24

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Child abuse by grooming and exploitation through the use of the internet, which enables that deplorable behaviour, is a matter that I have made a top priority in my work as an MSP. I believe that it is one of the biggest societal issues affecting children and young people.

I was therefore pleased when the Criminal Justice Committee took evidence from the police, charity leaders and experts about tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation. In particular, the scale of online sexual abuse material, the harm that children face every day, and the desire of abusers to see more of that content, has not abated. Kate Forbes is quite right to point out that such demand has created further crime in human trafficking—as if there was not enough of it in the first place.

News stories in the past few days alone indicate that the problem is worse than ever. If we do not tackle those harms and take appropriate action, children and young people will be harmed and face lifelong implications for their wellbeing. Although we have to tackle the problem here, in Scotland, there should be a global campaign. We are all grappling with new and changing technologies, as the minister said in her opening speech. Never-ending changes to social media platforms shift the behaviour of online criminals who seek to create and distribute child sexual abuse imagery, usually for monetary gain.

The Internet Watch Foundation has reported that it has

“continued to see a high proportion of ‘self-generated’ imagery”

in this context. Just to be clear, self-generated child abuse material means sexual images or videos that are taken by a child themselves because of peer pressure or coercion by an adult. The IWF has been conducting extensive research into the prevalence of self-generated child abuse images and videos. Shockingly, it found 20,000 web pages that included self-generated content of seven to 10-year-old children in the first half of 2022—what could be more alarming than that? The children have been asked to undress in front of cameras by strangers online. The IWF argues that it is a “digital and social emergency” that requires a sustained national prevention effort.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): As someone who works as an ambassador for the Internet Watch Foundation, I am glad that Pauline McNeill is raising its work here today. Does she agree that there is a gap in that, when an image is altered and the visage of a young person is put on to another pornographic image, very little can be done to get redress for that young person?

Pauline McNeill: I thank Clare Adamson for raising that point because I want to address something similar to that. There are gaps in the law around imagery for children, obviously, and also for adults. It indicates that the problem is getting much worse every single day.

We can all agree that child sexual abuse is a heinous crime. Online space gives offenders new opportunities to groom and abuse children, and to exchange child sexual abuse material, and we need a strong response to that. As stated by Christian Action Research and Education Scotland in its briefing:

“Children on both sides of the camera, those able to watch and those forced to participate, need to be protected.”

I whole-heartedly agree with that statement. Those children need to be protected and that protection needs to be provided urgently. Police Scotland is doing an excellent job with better detection and moves towards prosecution, but such vital work depends on the adequate training, funding and staffing of police services.

The technology industry must take responsibility for keeping children safe when they use its platforms. How many times have we said that? I hope that the UK Online Safety Bill will go some way towards doing that but, according to many third sector organisations, it does not go nearly far enough.

A BBC Radio 5 Live and BBC Bitesize survey that was released yesterday found that one fifth of teenage girls who responded had received unwanted nude images and videos from peers.

That illustrates the difficult environment that young people, particularly young girls, are growing up in.

I accept that the crime is not gender-specific, but it is important for the Scottish Government to talk about the connection between the issue and the great work that it is doing on violence against women and girls.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a bit of time in hand.

Pauline McNeill: Okay.

Kate Forbes: Pauline McNeill has made a really important point. Normalising violence against women and girls has allowed this industry to profit and become lucrative. Does she agree that we need to take a zero tolerance approach to all forms of violence against women and girls?

Pauline McNeill: Yes, I do. That is one of the most important points of the debate: we must make the connection and ensure that we do not discuss issues in isolation. It is fundamental that the strategy identifies that.

Young men and boys are being groomed and radicalised into hating women in misogynistic ways. Katy Clark has spoken about that in the chamber before. We do not like to mention the name of the influencer, but members will know who I am talking about. That is an indication of what needs to be tackled online.

Children cannot be expected to protect themselves and to take responsibility for the abuse and harm that they suffer and encounter online. Sharon Dowey and another member made a point about parents having control and trying to understand how to keep their children safe. It must be very hard to be a parent, to see all this happening and to worry about how to keep your children safe. All the different things have to come together in the strategy.

It is about time that we made tech organisations and companies, whether that be Snapchat, TikTok or other platforms, take more responsibility for preventing abuse. From my basic understanding of the situation, Snapchat and TikTok, in particular, need to take more action to safeguard children and young people.

We must remain constantly vigilant to the threats that are posed by an ever-changing online world—it does not stand still for very long, as we have all experienced. I believe that we still do not have a full understanding in Scotland of the scale and extent of child sexual abuse, and we must ensure that we have the full picture. We seem to lack a national strategy to tackle online child sex abuse in Scotland. There is an action plan for

Wales and, separate from that, a Home Office strategy for tackling child sexual abuse in England, but there is nothing in Scotland.

Stop It Now! Scotland, a national child protection charity that is based in Edinburgh, was mentioned by a previous speaker. Stuart Allardyce of Stop It Now! Scotland has said:

“there is no strategic vision ... solutions are often piecemeal, quite disconnected from one another”.—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 13.]

That is a point that I made earlier.

We must ensure that, in tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation, we work across the parties as an absolute priority. On Clare Adamson’s point—I am thankful to her for mentioning this—I have been working with Professor Clare McGlynn, who raised with me the issue of image-based sexual abuse. I am due to have a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs on that, because I believe that there is a gap in the law.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms McNeill, I have been quite generous with time.

Pauline McNeill: I will close on this point.

For far too long, images on the internet that no one has consented to have used and exploited by people who do that kind of thing.

15:32

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There have already been, and I am sure that there will be more, powerful speeches on the horrific and abhorrent nature of these crimes.

I am not on the Criminal Justice Committee, and I have not followed the debate in the detail that other members clearly have. However, I have been working with the families of those who are accused of online sexual offences. It has been difficult and, until now, it has been a private experience. In part, that is because of the public focus that comes with the subject, but, as a Liberal, I have never shied away from a difficult debate.

Following an introduction by a constituent, I have been working with the charity Stop It Now! Scotland, which has been mentioned several times in the debate. Stop It Now! does some tremendous work with offenders and also with families. I recently attended and spoke at an event in its offices, which was attended by social workers, policy researchers, the police, Government officials, other charities and, most importantly, the partners of offenders.

The partners were part of a research project that captured their experiences, thoughts, dreams and nightmares, which were expressed artistically in

images, posters, cards, letters and—most powerful of all—theatre. The theatre piece was entitled, “The knock”, which is a phrase that has already been mentioned. “The knock” obviously refers to the knock on the door when the police arrive and then when social work follow up. It also refers to “non-offending carer” or NOC. As if the knock on the door was not already traumatising, those people now have an official acronym for life—they are depersonalised in an instant.

First, was the physical intrusion, with the police turning their home—their children’s home—upside down. However, much worse was the verbal intrusion, not only from the social work department but from the rest of the family, the neighbours and everyone and anyone from across cyberspace. There are the questions: “What do you know?” There is suspicion: “You must have known.” There is doubt: “Are your children safe with you?” There is shock: “Your partner still lives with you?” There is stigma: “Oh God, you are that family.”

There is conflict deep in the soul between disgust at what has happened and the desire to grasp on to something from when life was good. There are the interests of the children to consider. They deserve a father in their life—but should it be this new, offending father? “What will everyone say if he stays?” There is concern for his life: “Will he try to kill himself?” and “I still love him.”

There is the natural desire to minimise what has happened, in order to grasp on to that better time. “But can I say that publicly to anyone? And, if I do, am I complicit with the events?” There is isolation for the family and the children. There are playground taunts and bullying. Can they ever go out for a meal again without being stared at, gossiped about and pitied? There is the financial future to consider: “Will he lose his job? How will we survive?” There is fear: “Will I ever be able to sleep at night not knowing whether my house will be attacked by some vigilante?”

Everything that I have just said is what the partners who took part in that research told that audience in that meeting on that night. They said that they lived with that fear, loathing and stigma all day, every day. However, their spirit was striking. Before the event, they were laughing together, partly in relief that they had the friendship of people who understood—friends who could share without judgment.

The harm that is caused by viewing indecent images of children is huge, and the crime is abhorrent. That should not be understated. However, we should not overlook the fact that there are secondary victims: the families who are traumatised by the investigations into a loved one. It is, indeed, a trauma. In a study that was published recently about the experiences of around 120 partners of offenders, around three

quarters had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It is estimated that such an event happens to one family every day in Scotland. Half of those whom Stop It Now! Scotland works with who were arrested for an online offence were in a relationship, and many have dependent children.

I want to bring to the Parliament the exhibition from that night, and from that research project, involving the partners. I am trying to persuade the partners to come and meet members of the Parliament. I want members of the Parliament to listen and talk to them. The reason is simple: I want a justice and social work system that acts with more care and sensitivity and that considers non-offending carers as people—as humans, often with children and with needs and hopes. I want it to be more supportive and less judgmental. We need to fund services to produce better outcomes for families and to help them to move on from the distress and trauma when a loved one is arrested. I want the public—the neighbours and the communities—to understand and care, too. Thank you for listening to me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:39

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I commend Willie Rennie for such a powerful and fascinating speech, as I do all the speakers so far, who have been excellent.

As a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I am pleased to speak in this important and timely debate. We all know how toxic social media sites can be, with women and children being targeted and bullied to an abhorrent level. For my contribution today, I will focus on the harm that online abuse does to children and young people.

A recent NSPCC report warned that online child sexual abuse has reached astronomical levels, with thousands of kids being targeted. Children are being traumatised daily and we must act to stop that trauma. That fills me, and everyone in this chamber and in wider society, with utter horror. How can we protect our children from those invisible and despicable predators?

The UK Government’s Online Safety Bill has been delayed for years but is finally ready to be passed into law this week, having gone through its final stages at Westminster. Platforms must now commit to removing images relating to child sexual abuse, controlling or coercive behaviour, extreme sexual violence, illegal immigration and people smuggling, promoting or facilitating suicide and self-harm, animal cruelty, the sale of drugs or weapons and terrorism.

That is, of course, all very welcome, but does it go far enough? The bill could have introduced stronger age-verification requirements for providers of pornography, including a requirement for confirmation that individuals depicted in pornographic content have given consent. With technology changing at an eye-watering pace, there could have been greater consideration of how to future proof legislation against the threats posed to children and young people by emerging technology, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Also, as convener of the cross-party group on men's violence against women and girls, I would have welcomed a mandatory code of practice on violence against women and girls to ensure that providers recognise, and act to prevent, the disproportionately gendered impact of online abuse. I completely echo the comments made by Kate Forbes and Pauline McNeill.

During the time that politicians have spent talking about the UK bill, Police Scotland has dealt with an astonishing 3,500 online grooming crimes, with more than half the victims being under 13, which defies belief. The new legislation will compel global tech companies to take responsibility for the content on their sites. The time for thinking about profit is long past: the loss of our children is far more important. Online safety campaigner Ian Russell has said that the test of the legislation will be whether it prevents other young people seeing the horrible images that his daughter Molly saw before she tragically took her own life.

Disappointingly, online messaging services, such as WhatsApp and Signal, seem to be refusing to provide access to encrypted messages. I hope that that can be resolved, as the issue will take a concerted effort by all stakeholders if it is to work effectively.

This Criminal Justice Committee debate is a timely opportunity for a cross-cutting and wide-ranging discussion about how to tackle abhorrent crimes. As we heard the convener say, we took evidence on the issue on two occasions, in May 2022 and then a year later. We heard that there is a steady increase in the scale, complexity and severity of online offending. Witnesses told the committee that tackling the issue requires a co-ordinated approach across the justice, health, education and social work services and I absolutely agree with that. We are living in an age when bullying does not stop at the school gates.

The Scottish Government is taking a range of actions to ensure that robust child protection measures are in place across Scotland. A members' business debate led by Christina McKelvie some years ago highlighted the emerging issue of revenge porn and we are doing as much as we can now to combat the scourge of online abuse, despite those powers being

reserved to Westminster. We are working closely with partners, including Police Scotland, social workers and civic society to deliver a multi-agency response to preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. We are also working with excellent third sector organisations on awareness training and victim support.

Martin Whitfield: Would Rona Mackay agree that it is disappointing that, when we are talking about working together, we never see social media platforms coming forward to offer their assistance?

Rona Mackay: I completely agree. We must work together on the issue, which will be the only effective way to combat it.

Prevention and early intervention must be a key focus, as must education, as we have heard in several speeches. That will ensure that the risks to and harming of children can be dealt with quickly and effectively.

Raising public awareness is an important element of the Scottish Government's approach. In the past three years, we have run national public awareness campaigns about child sexual abuse.

I am running out of time, Presiding Officer. During a members' business debate that I led earlier this month on the joyous opening of the first bairns hoose in Scotland, I said that, although we cannot stop bad things happening to children, we can do everything in our power to help them to heal. In the case of the online safety of children and young people, we must do everything in our power to protect them from that which can harm them and undoubtedly is harming them.

15:45

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am not on the Criminal Justice Committee, but I wanted to speak in the debate on this difficult topic both because of the powerful and deeply concerning contributions of the participants in the committee's round-table sessions, which I read, and because, as Audrey Nicoll said at the outset, this is a cross-portfolio issue. Reading the evidence and listening to the debate today has brought home to me not only the scale of the issue, but the fact that there is so much that I do not know but that I need to know as a legislator, as a parent and as a citizen.

I echo Rona Mackay's comments. We all find it horrific that Police Scotland has said in evidence that it continues to see rises in online child sexual abuse, recording nearly 2,000 such crimes last year. I have also looked at newspaper reports from June 2022 that suggest that there were nearly 3,000 incidents of child grooming in

Scotland in the previous five years. Sickeningly, the “Recorded Crime in Scotland” statistics show that indecent photos of children increased by 50 per cent from the year ending June 2019. We should also bear in mind that those figures are only for the crimes that are recorded.

Kate Forbes: Given that we find this debate difficult enough, I wonder what more the member believes we can do to support those who are responsible for hunting and prosecuting predators, who often have to view some of the most ghastly and heinous material in the process of doing that.

Liam Kerr: That is a really important point. I remember, when I held the justice portfolio, visiting one of the centres where we have some extremely brave people who have to view that stuff. I was deeply affected by what they were having to go through. The Government needs to be, as I am sure it is, interrogating what those people are going through and what support they need to deal with what I understand to be very harrowing situations, and making sure that they are okay as they deal with it. My friend Kate Forbes makes a very good point.

I also read the submission from Barnardo’s Scotland, which talks about a 10-year-old, who it has named “Lisa”, from its “Invisible Children” report. It is horrific. Barnardo’s suggests some helpful actions that it would like the Scottish Government to take, including a national working group and action plan, investment in specific research for Scotland and enhanced training for those who work with children.

I would like to discuss something that John Swinney raised in an important intervention earlier when he spoke about education, families and the speed of technological advances. I recently attended a presentation at a school that included a slot on internet safety for children. I confess that my initial feeling was that I knew all about being abused online, as we all do, and getting pelters on Twitter and Facebook. I have read about Snapchat and bullying, and I took part in Gillian Martin’s really important debate a while ago about, among other things, the risks of Roblox. I thought, “I don’t really need to listen to this,” but I did listen and it became clear that I did not know about these things.

Natalie Don made a really important point in relation to parents knowing about the issues and having conversations in the home, but they can do that only if they have the knowledge. I did not know that TikTok, which is apparently the most popular app in the world, is not just about silly dances and lip-synching. It is also presenting inappropriate content such as sexual discussion, profanity and violence.

I had heard of but did not know much about Omegle, which sounds like what Lisa from Barnardo’s might have been exposed to. It is an anonymous video chat platform where the user is paired with a complete stranger somewhere in the world and they can be exposed to nudity and sex acts.

I had never heard of Discord, which is a kind of chat room in which kids can be exposed to all sorts of inappropriate content. It turns out that Discord is consistently in the top five platforms for bullying, suicidal ideation and body image. On Hoop, which is apparently like Tinder meeting Snapchat, the user can form connections with total strangers by swiping through profiles. Yarn is a reading app—

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: Do I have time, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes. There is a bit of time in hand.

Audrey Nicoll: What the member eloquently describes is absolutely pivotal to where we need to go in relation to safety in the home in Scotland. I simply wanted to flag up the fact that there are fantastic resources on the Child Exploitation and Online Protection website, particularly for parents, which I had a look at yesterday. However, I think that the member is indicating that we need to go much further on parent education.

Liam Kerr: Absolutely. I am very grateful to Audrey Nicoll for bringing up CEOP, whose website I will mention shortly, for exactly that reason.

I will finish off my point about the apps, because I think that it is important that parents know about this. I came across something called Yarn, which is a reading app that tells stories using fake text messages. “What’s the problem with that?”, I thought. Some of the titles that you can access are “Send nudes?”, “He’s watching me”, “Serial slasher” and “Sexting 101”.

I then heard about vault apps, which are used to hide content on phones and tablets. They often look like harmless apps—apparently, a popular one is a fake calculator, which grown-ups would not usually think twice about. Sometimes, those apps require a passcode to gain entry. I knew nothing about that before that session.

I say this in case it helps members or people watching these proceedings: the session concluded by making the point that, fundamentally, people need to stop thinking about the internet as a thing and to start thinking about it as a place. It was suggested that if I would not allow a child to be unaccompanied in the city

centre at 3 am due to where they were, whom they might meet while they were there and what they might be exposed to, surely I should protect them from similar things on the internet.

I am really glad that the committee has brought this issue to the chamber and is shining a light on it. The cross-party nature of the debate and of the committee's report is key. To me, it seems obvious that the Scottish and UK Governments must work together to ensure that any legislation to tackle the issue is sufficiently robust.

If what I have said in my contribution today has made anyone who has tuned in to watch the debate worried about online sexual abuse or the way in which someone has been communicating with them online, or if they just want more information and support, I direct them to the website that is run by the National Crime Agency, which Audrey Nicoll mentioned. It can be found at www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre. It even has a button that enables you to crash out of it immediately if anyone comes in.

I say well done to the committee for holding the debate. I really hope that it and the committee's report will help us to tackle this vile scourge.

15:52

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Child abuse is one of the most sickening crimes, and we must do everything that we can to prevent it. The internet has brought new challenges with regard to exploitation, so keeping children and young people safe online is absolutely vital. Following the passing of the Online Safety Bill, this debate is a timely opportunity to discuss the cross-cutting approaches that must be taken to tackle online child abuse, grooming and exploitation.

As a former member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I heard the evidence that the committee took from stakeholders on the issue. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence have rightly been mentioned as adding to the challenge of online abuse. However, AI can also play an important role in identifying and, ultimately, tackling sexual exploitation. NSPCC Scotland highlighted that fact in its evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee. It said that such technology can enable tech companies to find and remove such material and report abuse to police.

Other tools are available. For example, I asked Stuart Allardyce from Stop it Now! Scotland about the work that child protection charities are doing with online platforms to prevent people from accessing illegal images. He told me about work with Pornhub to develop warnings and a chatbot to divert people, as well as work with Google to block access and signpost potential offenders to organisations such as Stop it Now!. He highlighted

the fact that some tech companies were very proactive in wanting to work with the organisation. Those examples highlight the positive actions that can be taken through a collaborative approach.

The consequences of child abuse and neglect are themselves cross-cutting, as we have heard. Child abuse and neglect can have significant effects on the physical and mental health of children, as well as having an impact on their social development and education and their future employment.

Committee witnesses told us that tackling online child abuse requires a co-ordinated approach across justice, health, education and social work services. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is taking a range of actions to ensure that robust child protection measures are in place, with a key focus on prevention and early intervention.

That includes refreshed national guidance for child protection and multi-agency approaches, such as Police Scotland's group on preventing online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The third sector also does admirable work on awareness raising, safeguarding and supporting victims, some of which has already been touched on.

Given the nature of online child abuse, the committee heard about some of the challenges regarding collecting data to fully understand what is going on, which is possibly a universal problem. In 2016, a crime audit by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland highlighted some concerns on data capturing

"the scale of cyber-enabled sexual crime and associated victimisation".

Following that, Police Scotland improved its systems, which will, I hope, help it to better understand what is going on and ramp up work to tackle and eradicate the abuse.

We have some data. The audit found that a significant proportion of online sexual incidents involved children, noting that

"Children and young people are increasingly experiencing sexual crime online via commonly used apps".

Recent Police Scotland data show that reports of online child abuse are continuing to rise, with more than 1,900 offences recorded between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. Investigations led to nearly 500 arrests, and 776 children were protected in that period.

Children's social work statistics also show that, since the category was introduced in 2016, 595 concerns of child sexual exploitation have been identified at social work case conferences in Scotland. Furthermore, in its evidence to the committee, NSPCC Scotland highlighted a recent

35 per cent increase in calls to Childline about online grooming across the UK. Those figures combined give some idea of the impact of online child abuse, grooming and exploitation. They paint a tragic picture but underestimate the true scale of these abhorrent crimes.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government is keen to ensure that data are gathered in a trauma-informed way that is respectful of survivors of abuse. As Barnardo's pointed out, gathering evidence to show the scale of child sexual exploitation is hampered by stigmatisation and victim blaming. As is often the case, particularly with sexual and/or gender-based crimes, the consequences of victim blaming are severe. We must all commit and recommit to tackling that, too.

Wide-ranging action is being delivered across Scotland to tackle online child abuse, grooming and exploitation, with involvement from multiple stakeholders, including the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, social workers and the third sector. We must ensure that we do everything possible to tackle the scourge of online child abuse, grooming and exploitation. These crimes are not inevitable—we can eradicate them.

15:58

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I start with an apology to the Deputy Presiding Officer, the chamber and to Sharon Dowey for having had to step out for a short moment during her contribution, which I will go back to read.

All the contributions that we have heard today have been powerful in different ways. I compliment the committee for bringing before Parliament a debate on this hugely challenging matter, which straddles so many areas of life. There is a need for a strategy—indeed, a sophisticated strategy—if we are to address all the small areas that need to be addressed, so that we can stand up for our young people and fight back against people who have no idea or care about the harm that they do to our young people.

I want to pick up on Rona Mackay's fascinating comments about age verification and, in particular, how we can reach out to people on that. It is the responsibility of platforms to oversee the age verification of the people who are involved, many of whom are overseas. As we move into the age of artificial intelligence, the fact is that those individuals may not exist other than as a string of ones and zeros hidden in some database. This is a significant problem and it presents a significant challenge. It is a scourge on the young people in our society. For that reason alone, we should aim to fight back on it.

I want to pick up two matters in particular—not that any of the others are not important. All the

earlier contributions from members have shown the importance both of the victims of violence, who are mainly women and girls, and of society's expectation that such violence should not exist.

I want to talk about the role of boys as victims of such practices, and the sextortion scams that are happening. I do so on the back of a very powerful BBC investigation into those aspects. I also do so because of the effect here, in Scotland, and because of the identification, across large areas of this country, of how damaging that can be. In part of my region, in the Lothians and the Scottish Borders, Scottish police had identified that the victims were, in the main, boys aged between 13 and 18 years old. That speaks to my interventions, and that of Mr Swinney, about the role of education.

In Dunfermline there were 16 victims aged between 16 and 20. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of sextortion cases reported to police in the UK rose by more than 40 per cent, with nine out of 10 victims being male. Those are frightening statistics that sit on top of the truly appalling ones about girls and women. However, they should make people sit up and try to address such problems.

That leads me to the area of education. Mr Swinney raised a fascinating dilemma—it perhaps sits not in the sphere of education but in the journey of a young life—about where the responsibility for introducing such discussions to young people lies. Is it at home, in which case, as we have heard so powerfully, do we need to provide information to parents so that there is an understanding of the extent of the risk that our young people are exposed to? We must ask questions such as: would you allow your young son or daughter to go, unaccompanied, into the centre of town at 3 am? Schools also have a responsibility to educate young people about information technology, hardware, the devices that are used and the role of AI.

In my earlier intervention, I deliberately mentioned the curriculum for excellence. Education Scotland's document "Benchmarks: technologies", which these days has some age to it, is fascinating for the indications that it gave our teachers about the journey that we expect a young person to go through, from nursery and primary 1 all the way through to the end of their broad education and beyond, into the examination period. I used to go back to that document frequently, but this time I went back to read again about the journey that is expected. Those who first start school are expected to

"explore, play and communicate using digital technologies safely and securely".

That speaks to the huge benefits that technology has given us. We have heard mention of the role of technology during the Covid pandemic and the absolutely essential platform that it offered to allow educationists to reach out to young people, and sometimes for adults to come back to the teachers.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member take an intervention?

John Swinney *rose*—

Martin Whitfield: I will give way first to the convener and then to Mr Swinney.

Audrey Nicoll: I am fascinated by the member's contribution. On the matter of technology, an issue that flagged itself to me during the committee's evidence-taking sessions was the idea of the profile of a perpetrator as being, for example, someone who is considered to be a paedophile. However, organisations such as Stop It Now! find that many offenders simply drift into more extreme and transgressive materials. Would the member agree with that organisation that technology provides huge opportunities for more deterrence and disruption by tech companies, which they really must address?

Martin Whitfield: I will respond to that in a moment. I will let Mr Swinney come in and I will deal with both questions as swiftly as possible.

John Swinney: Mr Whitfield opens up a significant issue, which Parliament has to consider, which is the sensitivity of some of the educational dialogue that has to take place. The world today is very different to the world of even five years ago. I suspect that the document to which Mr Whitfield referred is a few years older than that, and the world will have changed dramatically since. Engagement between families and schools about the material that children might well be exposed to is important, because children must be given the ability and capacity to handle really difficult and challenging circumstances and to know what is right and what is wrong, and that is changing in front of our eyes.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for those powerful interventions, which I can simply say are both right.

An identifier of human nature is that it has within it an element whereby exposure to something only continues to be pleasurable if it gets more and more extreme. That applies even when one falls in love with playing a musical instrument or that kind of thing. However, there is a darker side, which is the desire to find ever more—I do not even know what the word is, but I would say obscene material.

On Mr Swinney's powerful intervention, there is a conversation to be had as to where responsibility

lies and about the ability for a parent to say, "No," or, "Maybe, but I need to find out"—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I ask you to conclude, Mr Whitfield. Thank you.

Martin Whitfield: I will do so very shortly. I stand by the submission, and I wish that we had more time.

The journey that young people take through the requirements of education is broad, from that initial stage of play and communicate, all the way through to exploring the impact of technology. I thank the Presiding Officer for her patience. This is a fascinating start and I compliment the committee on the debate.

16:06

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The scale and complexity of tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation feels entirely overwhelming. It is a difficult thing to think and talk about, but it is an issue that must be out in the open. I thank the Criminal Justice Committee for introducing the debate and I am also grateful to all the witnesses who contributed to its discussions. Although I was not at the round tables, I have read the transcripts of the meetings and found them informative.

This subject is complicated and vast, so I intend to remark on three things that stood out for me: children and what adults might term the online world; the impact of pornography; and the role of tech companies in the law.

For children, there is no such thing as the online world. No differentiation exists between the online and real worlds for our children and young people—they are the same place. That is a fact that we middle-aged policy makers and legislators who were lucky to have a childhood free from the internet absolutely have to get our heads around if we want to make a difference.

During the round table, Stuart Allardyce of Stop It Now! Scotland remarked that there is

"an assumption that those involved in online offending are motivated paedophilic serial offenders."

However, the organisation's current understanding is that there are

"different pathways that lead to such behaviour"

and that there is

"a shift towards more transgressive and ... illegal material over time",

with

"those ... who often view large amounts of legal pornography initially"

shifting

“towards more illegal materials.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 27.]

That being the case, there is, as the convener has stated, obviously huge scope for preventative work to happen. Awareness needs to be raised and action taken promptly.

The statistics that Stuart Allardyce quoted about the percentage of males who had looked at illegal images of children were shocking—indeed, they were pretty gut-wrenching. There is obviously a much wider debate to be had around pornography in relation to tackling commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, but that is perhaps for another day. However, the situation that Stop It Now! Scotland articulated provides a stark illustration of one of the many potential serious harms to individuals and society as a whole. It is crucial that men who are concerned about their behaviour know that they can do something about it and that help is out there.

I recently read a very interesting article by a playwright called Abbey Wright. She had spoken with 10,000 children—in a child-friendly way and not, as she said, using the P word—about the impact of pornography on their lives. She found that children as young as six are encountering pornography. For nine to 11-year-olds, exposure to pornography is frequent. She also met a boy of 12 who was dealing with a pornography addiction and she found that, across the board, pornography is confusing the issue of consent. We will have to be cognisant of those uncomfortable truths as parents, teachers and legislators, and in any discussions about the quality and content of relationship, sexual health and parenthood education.

Another finding of note was that children and young people were using pornography to plug the gaps in their education, which is concerning for the obvious reasons of the violence and lack of consent depicted in much pornography. Also, really importantly, it reflects just how important inclusive approaches are, where children and young people can see themselves reflected in what they are taught.

I hope that the UK Online Safety Bill will go some way to making children safer online, with the commitment to make age-verification measures compulsory for pornography sites and social media. That is very welcome. I would, however, join Barnardo's and others in asking for those measures to be put in place as soon and as robustly as possible, to help to protect children from viewing pornographic content.

There is further work required in that regard to keep children safe. We need to ensure that the parity of regulation between online and offline content exists, and age and identity checks have

to be there for anyone appearing in pornographic content online. It is critical that those two issues be dealt with if children are to be kept safe from exploitation online.

Online platforms should be held liable for content that is non-consensual or depicts anyone under 18. As Pauline McNeill said, children on both sides of the camera—those able to watch and those forced or coerced into participating—need to be protected with robust regulation and enforcement.

Age verification and consent are part of the terms of service for financial institutions and credit card companies. It was reported that, when Mastercard stopped processing payments for Pornhub due to concerns over age verification and consent, almost two thirds of the content on that site was removed.

Tech companies can and must do more to keep everyone, but particularly children and young people, safe while on their platforms, and where they do not our Governments must step in.

16:12

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the Criminal Justice Committee for its work on this important issue, and for this afternoon's debate. I also extend thanks to those from the third sector and statutory agencies who gave evidence with such care and sensitivity.

I refer colleagues to my entry in the register of members' interests. I previously worked for a rape crisis centre, and in that capacity I managed the prevention project that involves workers going into some schools to speak to young people about relationships, consent, sexual violence, safety and so much more. Such education and awareness-raising programmes are so important, as has already been highlighted by many others this afternoon.

I will focus my remarks on just a few of the important points that were raised during the committee's evidence sessions. First, and perhaps most importantly, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are talking about actual harm to actual children. What matters is preventing and intervening to end that harm, and also helping children to recover from their pain, trauma and distress.

Expressing revulsion and talking tough may make us feel better, but they do not always help anyone else. For example, zero-tolerance policies on sharing self-created images can make it much more difficult for worried children to express their concerns.

If tough legislation is not always the answer for young people and their mistakes, it is a different

matter when it comes to wealthy corporations and those who profit from them. The committee heard very clearly how important it is to make senior managers in technology companies responsible for failures to protect children on their platforms. The committee learned of the striking parallel with the construction industry, where introducing such responsibility has been transformational in saving lives and preventing serious injury. We cannot yet tell whether the UK Government's long-delayed Online Safety Bill, which was finally passed this week, will have the impact that it needs to have.

This is a moral issue, but not in a prudish or puritanical sense. It was interesting to hear that adult entertainment sites are often the most proactive in working to protect children, while mainstream social media—notably Snapchat and the service formerly known as Twitter—have been much more reluctant to engage.

Online abuse does not exist in a vacuum. The distinction between virtual and physical worlds that older generations make is not experienced by children and young people, as others have highlighted. That is why retaining a hierarchy in which contact offences are more serious than online offences can be unhelpful, as that fails to recognise the ways in which profound harm can be caused without physical presence. Issues of online safety, trafficking and child criminal exploitation all need to be addressed together, rather than being confined to separate silos.

Those interconnections affect how we view and treat children who cause harm to others but whose behaviour may often be the consequence of their own traumatic experiences. They, too, need care and support as well as to have their own offending addressed. The committee heard that Westminster's strategy barely recognises that—a failure that is now compounded by Westminster's abdication of all responsibility for trafficked asylum-seeking children.

We can and must do better here. That includes acknowledging the reality of how much child abuse takes place at home, within families, where children should be safest and most secure. We cannot allow culture war rhetoric to rob children and young people of the support and help that they need. The noisy clamour against confidentiality for children's gender identity is dangerous in its transphobic tendencies but also in how it potentially undermines the safety of home—a vital space. Children and young people must be able to talk to responsible professionals about their lives with the assurance that information will not be shared with possibly abusive family members.

Professionals such as teachers and social workers need the capacity, space, time and experience really to listen and really to hear.

Sexual abuse is often much harder for children to disclose than other forms of violence or emotional abuse. The committee heard that it can be difficult to overcome the assumption that abuse simply does not happen in nice middle-class families.

Finally, against the backdrop of our continued work to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we need to remember that this is not only an issue of care and responsibility and a criminal justice matter but a public health problem and a human rights question. Children and young people need not only protection but recognition, trust and age-appropriate agency and autonomy. They are the experts in such harm and in its rapidly changing context.

As many of the expert witnesses testified, children and young people are often best placed to advise lawmakers and support one another. Perhaps our role is to listen to children and young people more, to amplify their informed voices and to join them in calling the powerful—in Governments and corporations—to urgent and effective account. I wish the committee well in its on-going work to that end.

16:18

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I draw members' attention to the fact that I am the convener of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I put on record my thanks to Anne Macdonald and other members of the group's secretariat.

The debate has provided us with an excellent opportunity to have an open discussion about repulsive crimes such as online child abuse, grooming and exploitation, while outlining the Scottish Government's commitment and the extensive range of actions that it is taking to protect children and young people.

It has been obvious that the debate has generated much consensus—as it should—among all the parties in the chamber. We can all agree that every child and every young person in the world has the right to be protected from all forms of abuse and neglect. Unfortunately, as we all know and have heard today, that does not always happen, and such crimes can have a catastrophic impact on a child's emotional and physical health, social development, education and future employment.

The Criminal Justice Committee, of which I am a member, first began to hear evidence on the issue just before summer recess 2022. I was disheartened to hear the mounting evidence that not only was the scale of online abuse growing, but the severity of it was, too. One thing that was

made abundantly clear to us was that this is not solely a justice issue, and that the response should reflect that. It is important that we have ministers from two different portfolio areas in the chamber for this debate, which shows that the Scottish Government's response is reflecting that. The issue requires a co-ordinated response from our health, education and social work services. All of that ties into the need for greater public awareness of the issue of online child abuse, grooming and exploitation. The Scottish Government has acknowledged that through the awareness campaigns that it has run each year since 2021, which have advised parents and carers on how to spot the signs of child sexual exploitation and how to help keep children safe online.

In addition, as we have already heard, the Scottish Government developed the child sexual abuse and exploitation hub and has established an online safety hub. Those resources can be found at www.parentclub.scot. In 2020, the Scottish Government published a delivery report on its progress, and that of statutory and third sector organisations, against those actions. Since then, it has also revised the national child protection guidance to support local areas to develop effective, evidenced-based responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

I welcome the minister's opening remarks about the Moira Anderson Foundation, which is a fabulous organisation. Although it is based in Airdrie, which is in my neighbouring constituency, Moira Anderson was a girl from Coatbridge who went missing 60 years ago. The work that is done in her memory by Sandra Brown, Gillian Urquhart and others is fantastic.

I will also comment on Willie Rennie's speech, although I know that he has left the chamber. His speech came at the issue from a slightly different angle, which I felt was powerful. He said that, when offences are committed and the police become aware of them and make an arrest, the impact on any children who are in the house, as well as the non-offending carer—which is the term that he used—must be absolutely dramatic, because they have done no wrong. He put it in a very powerful way. That is something that our organisations and services need to think about when dealing with these issues.

Just last June, the Scottish Government published practitioner guidance on criminal exploitation on behalf of the serious organised crime task force. That guidance sought to give clear advice on questions such as “What is Criminal Exploitation?”, “What is human trafficking and why is this relevant when talking about criminal exploitation?”, “Recognising and understanding the complexity and impact of

Criminal Exploitation”, “What does Criminal Exploitation look like in practice?”, “Whom does Criminal Exploitation Affect?”, “Who is perpetrating Criminal Exploitation?” and “Identifying Criminal Exploitation”.

As we know, and as has been said in the debate, the regulation of internet services is a reserved issue. The Scottish Government will continue to press the UK Government to use its powers to protect children from harm online. In May this year, the First Minister wrote to the UK Government, stressing the need to make changes to the Online Safety Bill to make social media platforms more responsible for their content. To be specific, I believe that any legislation that is introduced to protect children and young people must introduce stronger safety by design duties on companies to actively eliminate or reduce the risk of exposing children to harm. As the committee convener said, that was advocated for strongly by Stuart Allardyce from Stop It Now! Scotland during our evidence sessions. Any legislation should also contain stronger age verification requirements on the part of pornography providers, including confirmation of the consent of individuals; greater consideration of how to future proof legislation against threats to children and young people posed by emerging technology including AI and immersive and virtual reality technology; and the introduction of a mandatory code of practice on violence against women and girls to ensure that providers recognise and act to prevent the disproportionately gendered impact of online abuse against girls and women.

Talking about those actions takes me to Ruth Maguire's contribution and to one of Kate Forbes's interventions. It is all very well saying that we want legal pornography sites to abide by certain standards, and I think that we do need to say that, but there also needs to be a wider conversation about pornography in general. As Ruth Maguire said, perhaps that is for another debate.

Although the committee heard that both the prevalence and severity of online abuse was increasing, we still do not have a full and comprehensive data base in order to best understand the issue.

The final report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales acknowledged that data collection must be improved, and there is an issue with Scottish data collection, too. On that point, I stress that data must be collected in a trauma-informed manner, as there can be a massive risk of retraumatisation of children and young people. That has been made clear to me in my work as the convener of the cross-party group.

This is a very real and present issue, which requires a huge effort to overcome. The Scottish

Government has invested in many useful policies, but more will be required. The Online Safety Bill that was passed in Westminster could have taken a more protective approach, and increased data collection will be required to better inform our policy makers. With all of that in mind, we must remember that, in looking at policy, the children and young people who are affected by this abuse must always come first.

The Presiding Officer: Meghan Gallacher is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:25

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's committee debate. I grew up at the same time as the rise of the social media giants. Bebo, MySpace, Twitter and Facebook were the main social media forums then, although there are many more platforms today. I must admit that they could only be described as the wild west.

Random chat rooms and websites were also doing the rounds; however, young people had begun to move to MSN, and although that was not completely safe, you at least had to know a person's email address to talk to them. However, just because you knew the email address and the person you were speaking to, that did not stop the bullying. Many children and young people at that time were subjected to all sorts of online abuse. After all, it is easier to be a bully hiding behind a screen than to be one in person.

Looking back, I am glad that my mum and dad supervised the time that I spent online when I was a child. Back then, there was no real protection in place for young people, and not knowing the dangers, young people were exposed to all sorts. However, that is nothing compared with what children and young people are faced with now. AI is an example of those new dangers. During the debate, I was sent an article about a recent incident in a Spanish town, where police are currently investigating naked images of dozens of young girls, which have been shared around schools. The youngest victim is 11 years old.

However, it is social media content and its dangers that I want to focus on today. A global report in August 2022 found that the number of incidents of children aged between seven and 10 being manipulated into recording abuse of themselves has surged by two thirds over a six-month period. Through grooming, deception and extortion, self-generated abuse is typically created using webcams or smartphones, and then it is shared online. Almost 20,000 reports of self-generated child sexual abuse content were seen by the Internet Watch Foundation in the first six

months of 2022, which was up from just under 12,000 the previous year.

That is a trend that should worry us all, and it is incumbent on us all to try to address the problem across the UK. The IWF's chief executive, Susie Hargreaves, has said that self-generated abuse is "entirely preventable" due to where the abuse takes place. It takes place in the home, and homes are meant to be a safe place for children. Therefore, I have a great deal of sympathy for the UK Online Safety Bill, which is trying to address that worrying trend.

There is more that we can do to keep children safe online. Before allowing children to access the internet, parents should be aware of the privacy settings and age limits for certain websites, which have been discussed in previous contributions. When on social media, they should make sure that children are not befriending or interacting with people whom they do not know. However, I wish that it was only education that we needed to worry about when it comes to online child abuse, grooming and exploitation—we also need to be concerned about the approach that social media platforms are taking.

We have yet to find the right balance between young people accessing social media and protecting them. Social media can be used as an access tool for false information—I have raised the issue of misinformation about contraception on social media and how that might be contributing to Scotland's record-high abortion figures. Videos on TikTok have included false claims about hormonal contraception, such as the pill, the implant, the jabs and some types of coils. The misinformation online often focuses on the side effects, with one video posted by a so-called influencer claiming that birth control is this generation's cigarettes and that it ruins our bodies.

Hashtags including #naturalbirthcontrol and #quittingbirthcontrol have also been viewed hundreds of millions of times on the app. I would argue that that is a form of online abuse, because it is telling young women that they do not need to protect themselves during sex. I believe that influencers have a duty of care to their audience, and that one should be ashamed of themselves for spreading false information and putting young women's health at risk. If the Scottish Government can do anything to help protect young women online when it comes to sexual health, it will have my full support.

In short, I do not think that we have found the right balance between access for children and young people to social media and protecting them from online abuse. However, social media can be a force for good. After all, 800 predators a month are arrested by UK law enforcement agencies, and up to 1,200 children are safeguarded from

sexual abuse because of social media handing over vital data. That is why I agree with the Home Secretary, who has urged Meta not to roll out end-to-end encryption on social media platforms without robust measures. I hope that the Scottish Government will join in those calls.

We need to have more conversations about this issue, because social media is still the wild west, it still harms young people and we must work collectively to continue to put safeguards in place to stop online child abuse, grooming and exploitation.

The Presiding Officer: We move to winding-up speeches.

16:31

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I thank my colleagues on the Criminal Justice Committee for bringing this important issue to the chamber, and I welcome the wide-ranging and cross-party nature of the discussion.

The committee's convener and many others have outlined the increasing scale of the problem and the levels of online child abuse and grooming. As Audrey Nicoll said, a number of witnesses gave evidence to the committee on the need to develop a sexual harms strategy.

We all know that young people use social and digital media as a part of almost every aspect of their lives, and that has led to predators exploiting and taking advantage of children. For that reason, Scottish Labour included questions on online crime and on young women and sexual harassment as part of our consultation on fighting violence against women and girls. We hope to report on that work later this year.

Sharon Dowe spoke clearly about not just the scale of the problem but the difficulties that parents face in dealing with the wide range of cyberthreats and the many forms that online child abuse takes. She also highlighted the lack of data. Martin Whitfield spoke about the importance of discussions on the issue taking place in both the home and education settings. Pauline McNeill spoke about the ever-changing nature of both the technology involved and the behaviour of predators, which reinforces the point that parents often are not adequately equipped to deal with these difficult challenges. Pauline McNeill also spoke about the scale of self-generated content from very young children, in the age range of seven to 10 years. Ruth Maguire spoke powerfully about how simple steps, such as not allowing certain websites to use financial payment methods such as Mastercard and Visa, can have a massive impact.

The National Crime Agency estimates that, across the UK, there are likely to be between 550,000 and 850,000 people who pose varying degrees of sexual risk to children. That sets out the potential scale of the problem.

Rona Mackay spoke about the Online Safety Bill. I agree with her about its inadequacies, but we need to keep under review how that legislation is used. We need to come to a view on what further legislation is needed as well as do everything that we can to ensure that that legislation is used to its full capacity.

I am pleased that Liam Kerr focused on the role of education in online safety, which can equip children to know the risks and educate adults, whether they are parents, carers or others.

This whole debate links very closely to the debate around violence against women and girls and, indeed, around misogyny and violence in schools. It is clear that the current legislative framework is inadequate, and that the way we are dealing with those problems across government and the public sector is woefully inadequate. I say that on a cross-party basis, as I do not think that anybody has all the answers. It is the nature of the debate that the solutions are far from simple.

In an intervention, Kate Forbes referred to the normalisation of violence against women and girls. Research by the University and College Union and the University of Kent found that the sending and receiving of unsolicited sexual images is becoming "dangerously normalised". We need a genuinely national, joined-up strategy to address all the points that have been made in the debate, and I think we can genuinely say that there has been a cross-party consensus, both regarding the scale of the problem and regarding the number of actions that are needed to tackle disturbing behaviours from those who are targeting children and that are needed to protect children and young people online. Indeed, those threats do not stop when young people reach an older age; they still exist for many in society. It is also a matter of ensuring that parents and carers are fully educated and informed of the risks and dangers.

Today's debate must not just be about paying lip service to the issue. I hope that it will form part of a continuing discussion that enables us to develop a strategy to address the scale of the challenge and make the issue a thing of the past.

16:37

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, am not on the Criminal Justice Committee, but it is no surprise to anyone in the chamber that, as we are discussing children, I really wanted to speak in the debate.

Online child abuse, grooming and exploitation is a growing epidemic, which must be tackled. I hasten to add that I did not attend the same school meeting as my colleague Liam Kerr but, going back 10 years, when my eldest daughter was at secondary school, we were invited to discuss concerns about online mobile phone security. I want to highlight some of the points that have already been raised by John Swinney, Martin Whitfield and Liam Kerr, and I want to congratulate educators and schools in trying to be proactive in getting in touch with parents, so that they can get information out regarding some of the online concerns.

I should mention that the concerns expressed back then, 10 years ago, were regarding different apps that gave access to exact locations of the person messaging. Those apps would analyse landmarks in real time from video calls to identify the exact location of where somebody was talking with pinpoint accuracy. They secured anonymity for the sender but allowed access to all the details of the receiver. Those apps were legal, approved and targeted, and they went out to the younger end of the social media market, actively providing platforms where groomers could do their worst. The meeting was intended to be informative—an attempt for the school to address the issues proactively and to give as much information to parents as possible.

The point has been well made today: as much as children are part of the discussion and a part of how we move forward and help to combat the issue, it is important that parents, young people and schools are all included, so that we can raise awareness and work together to combat these online problems.

I mention all that because the statement that was given by the police at the meeting that I attended was that there was no way to get ahead of technology. Every time the app in question became concerning enough for police recognition, or when parents started to use the app themselves, it rendered the app so uncool that young people moved in droves to newer, more advanced and “cooler” ways to contact friends across the globe.

It is important to recognise that that is being taken into consideration in the UK’s Online Safety Bill, which will give parents, guardians and carers more power over the content that young people see by requiring the platforms to offer tools that give those people greater control. For me, the realisation that it was not just a small section of society that was the problem but the applications themselves was a loud and clear wake-up call.

A point that was well made in an intervention by Kate Forbes was that online apps know no borders. They cross international boundaries of

geography, language and culture. It is a global issue that needs Governments to come together for the collective good of our children. That is why it is of paramount importance that the Scottish and UK Governments work together to ensure that legislation to tackle online abuse, grooming and exploitation is robust. I am delighted to hear from the minister about the co-operative approach that has been taken so far. Trying to stand alone and be seen as superior in the fight against online abuse will have only one loser—the children whom we are charged to protect.

I have learned so much today that I was unaware of, and some very poignant speeches have been made. Ruth Maguire and Meghan Gallacher made some poignant points about child pornography and highlighted the problems that we now face now. I will be taking an awful lot of that away with me.

However, I want to highlight the fact that Police Scotland recorded 1,928 crimes of online sexual abuse in 2022-23, a point that Sharon Dowey raised earlier. We know that the problems have no borders, so the solutions must also recognise that.

It is important that we also realise that the Scottish Sentencing Council’s report, “Public perceptions of sentencing”, which was published in September 2019, advised that more than three-quarters of the Scottish public believe that those who are in possession of indecent images of children should go to prison. Seventy-seven per cent of the Scottish population is so incensed about the issue that it thinks that people who are convicted of possessing indecent images of children should be given a custodial sentence. I wonder whether that same percentage would be happy to know that current sentencing guidelines state that they will not go to prison. It is important that Police Scotland has the ability to deal with that.

Bullying and the abuse of children is the act of a coward. Preying on the young and the weak to wield power is the act of a spineless individual who further hides behind the veil of online apps, which only proves their cowardice. It is essential that more is done to catch and sentence people who go out of their way to entrap, endanger and exploit our children.

Today’s debate seems to be only the beginning. Many members have made the point that we need to do more and we need to bring more discussion to the chamber, and I really hope that we can do that. Let us take the opportunity to protect and secure our children and young people in online spaces where the perpetrator is unknown and shielded, supported by technology that was designed for good but is being used for criminal intent. We need to give the police the tools and support for the work that they do to bring down the

numbers, work across borders, and ensure that those who actively go out of their way to abuse, groom and exploit young people online properly repay their debt to our children.

16:43

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank the committee for bringing the debate to the chamber today, and I also thank all the members who have taken part. They have raised quite a few issues that I will try to address later in my speech.

Online safety is an important issue for the Parliament, as has been reflected in the powerful contributions from across the chamber today. The debate has provided us with a chance to highlight the dangers that our children and young people face online, and to reflect on how we might better protect them.

Online child sexual abuse is now a national threat and the reality is that it is happening to children and young people now, right here in Scotland, in the UK and across the world. What happens to us as children shapes who we are and can have a huge impact on us throughout our lives, especially if those experiences are adverse and involve exploitation or abuse. We have a responsibility to do all that we can to protect our children and young people from harm whenever it occurs, whether online or offline, and we have a responsibility to equip our children and young people so that they are informed and prepared to make the most of digital technologies.

We work with Police Scotland and other partners to find effective ways of deterring potential perpetrators from committing online abuse in the first place. The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise has already set out the range of actions that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the threat.

Kate Forbes: I have already made a similar point, but I just want to get a commitment from the Scottish Government that we are maximising the support for Police Scotland, for example, to work at an international level. I am extremely burdened by the fact that demand in Scotland is driving the abuse of not just our own children but children in other parts of the world.

Siobhian Brown: I was going to come to that point at the end of my speech, but I will go into it now. Pauline McNeill raised the issue, too.

We recognise that this is a global issue and that we have to work together through international collaboration. In June 2022, alongside all our UK Government counterparts, Scottish Government officials attended the WeProtect Global Alliance summit on online child sexual abuse. We will

continue to explore how we can strengthen Scottish representation internationally to promote our policies on online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

We want our children and young people to enjoy the internet and all that it has to offer and to do so in a safe and supported way. We want them to stay in control and to know what to do and to whom they should go if they feel at risk. That is why we are prioritising work with our partners and schools to encourage safe and responsible use of the internet. For those children who have experienced trauma, including but not limited to child sexual abuse, the bairns hoose affords Scotland an opportunity to provide a genuinely child-centred approach to delivering justice, care and recovery.

It is important to emphasise that current laws leave no room for ambiguity that child sexual abuse and exploitation—online and offline—are criminal, and the most serious of those offences carry with them a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

Pauline McNeill: Does the minister agree with the statement that I made at the beginning of my speech? The law is one thing, but we are dealing with a huge societal issue, and the extent of the problem might be greater than we think. For that reason, perhaps she will address the question of how we wrap up legislation with how we tackle societal change. I am sure that she agrees with me, as not tackling that means that we will be accepting the widespread harm of our children and wider society.

Siobhian Brown: I will come to that later in my speech.

It is important that any Government keeps criminal laws under review to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and to provide police and prosecutors with the tools that they require to tackle all forms, both online and offline, of child sexual abuse and exploitation as they emerge. That is why Police Scotland, the Scottish Government and the justice agencies are considering Police Scotland's proposals, to assess whether changes are required. It might be helpful if I explain a bit more about the Scottish Government's current position on that.

The proposals can be broadly split into different categories. The first category is on extending the criminal law to cover images of children that do not directly include actual children—for example, cartoon images of child abuse. Current law does not cover that explicitly, with the focus of the law being on images of actual children or what appear to be photographs of actual children that might have been generated using software. It does not extend as far as cartoon images of children.

It is worth noting that it would be rare for such materials of cartoon images of child abuse to be found without the person also having illegal images of actual children. As such, that person could be brought to justice. However, I understand the concerns that some people have expressed about whether such material could be used by those seeking to groom children for abuse, and we will consider whether there is a case for extending the current law to cover illustrations and cartoon depictions of child sexual abuse.

Secondly, Police Scotland has suggested that consideration be given to modernising the law to reflect the emergence of the internet. That has been reflected by a number of MSPs, in view of the fact that much of the existing law was developed prior to the internet's widespread adoption. The Scottish Government has discussed the issue with prosecutors, who are not aware of any practical issues that have arisen as a result of the way in which the legislation was developed. Our initial view is that the current law provides an effective tool for prosecuting those who use the internet to commit offences that relate to child sexual abuse material, but I assure members that we will continue to reflect on that position and to consider further the views that have been expressed today.

Thirdly, Police Scotland has suggested the consideration of legislation to criminalise the possession of child-like sex dolls. I understand the concern that is caused even by the existence of such dolls. It is useful to bear in mind that legislation already bans their sale, display, distribution and importation, as they would amount to obscene material. However, we will carefully consider whether legislation is merited to criminalise their possession.

Finally, Police Scotland have raised concerns about the use of online encryption tools by child sex offenders to hide their criminal activities from the police. More generally, the use of encryption by organised crime, in particular, is a growing challenge that the police face across a wide range of criminal activities; it is not limited to child sexual online offending. Any proposed solution must certainly require careful consideration to ensure that it is effective and does not inadvertently interfere with the legitimate uses of encryption—for instance, to protect customer data for online commerce.

The power to legislate on matters that relate to the regulation of internet services is reserved to the UK Parliament under the Scotland Act 1998, but the Scottish Government will play our part in assessing the challenges that encryption can bring to law enforcement.

Presiding Officer, do I have a bit of time?

The Presiding Officer: You are currently a minute over, and I would be grateful if you would conclude.

Siobhian Brown: My ministerial colleagues and I are absolutely determined that Scotland's children and young people are afforded protection from online harm, wherever that harm is caused. I thank all members for their thoughtful reflections throughout the debate.

The Presiding Officer: I call Russell Findlay to wind up the debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee, for up to eight minutes.

16:51

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the committee. The word "priority" is used a lot in the Parliament and in politics generally. The more it is said, the greater is the risk that its meaning becomes diluted, because the more priorities there are, the less of a priority each becomes.

However, I argue that protection of a country's citizens—especially protection of our children—is the fundamental priority: it is priority number 1. I am therefore pleased that the committee has staged the debate. I pay tribute to the convener for making it happen and, of course, to the clerks, who do all the unseen heavy lifting.

The debate follows two committee sessions, in May 2022 and May this year, which focused on the issues of child online abuse, grooming and exploitation. Those sessions were important and informative, but they were also disturbing. Members were grateful to hear from a wide variety of experts, including from policing, from social work and from child protection charities. On behalf of the committee, I thank them for their time. Each provided fascinating insights into the horrors of online child abuse, grooming and exploitation. Truly, those are the dark side of the internet age—which, as Sharon Dowey observed, has positively transformed our world in so many other ways. It is strange to think that, in 2005, just 16 per cent of the planet's population was online. The figure is now more than 90 per cent, although I note that my statistics differ somewhat from Natalie Don's.

This week, I have reread the Parliament's *Official Report* in order to remind myself of all the evidence. A lot of ground was covered. Issues that were discussed include online grooming of children. When that is committed by an adult, it is criminal, but what about explicit content that is self-generated by a teenager then shared with a peer? Pauline McNeill asked a series of questions about that. Daljeet Dagon of Barnardo's Scotland told us that children as young as 11 years old are affected. She also warned of children being drawn

to platforms on which provision of sexual content is monetised. She told the committee:

“we need to think about how we can respond to young people in terms of harmful behaviours, rather than criminalising them.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 39.]

As Audrey Nicoll said in her opening speech, this is an issue not just of law enforcement but of health, education and social work. Fulton MacGregor also made that point very well.

The digital world does not stand still. People who work in child protection explained the challenges of the fractured and opaque landscape that is moving at a pace that we struggle to keep up with. During our evidence sessions, some committee members displayed astute self-awareness by questioning whether we, as middle-aged politicians, could really know what life is like for today’s young people, whose real and digital spaces are seamless—a point that has been made by Maggie Chapman and Ruth Maguire.

As I re-read the *Official Reports* of the committee meetings, it occurred to me that a few short years from now, or perhaps even sooner, those evidence sessions might seem to be dated—a point that Martin Whitfield also made about the education curriculum.

Let us take artificial intelligence, which has been mentioned only once, by my colleague Jamie Greene. Which of us can predict how it will impact on society, for good and for evil?

During the evidence sessions, there was one mention of the truly depraved and disgusting concept of childlike sex dolls. Although I hoped that it was not really happening, Scotland has, in just the past few weeks, seen the first man being convicted of trying to import one of those dolls from overseas.

There was also, in the sessions, just a single mention, by Wendy Hart of the National Crime Agency, of haptic suits. To be honest, I did not even know what those were. Essentially, they allow the user who is wearing them to feel interactions through physical sensation. As Wendy Hart told us:

“We are looking at a range of technologies and how they may affect and manifest in the CSA space.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 38.]

Some of the statistics about the potential scale of online child abuse are terrifying. As was noted by Katy Clark, statistics from the National Crime Agency suggest that up to 850,000 people in the UK pose some degree of sexual risk to children. Extrapolating that for population share would suggest that around 70,000 of those people are in Scotland—70,000. What is perhaps even more terrifying is that the very nature of online offending

means that the true extent cannot be properly quantified, as we heard from Liam Kerr.

What can be stated with certainty is that the vast majority of people who seek to harm children in this way are men. Stuart Allardyce of the charity Stop It Now! Scotland told us that, in a typical year, 98 or 99 of the 100 offenders that they work with are men. He also cited studies suggesting that up to

“2 per cent of males have looked at illegal images of children”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 31 May 2023; c 26.]

That is a huge number.

The subject of the debate is a difficult one. Willie Rennie’s contribution on offenders’ families was important and truly thought provoking. All the evidence suggests that protecting our children will only become even more challenging. How can we begin to prepare for the unknown technologies of tomorrow’s world?

However, I believe that there are reasons for optimism. First, I have faith in our young people. They are smart, savvy and adaptable—way more than I was at that age. Secondly, there are many determined people out there who are working day and night to keep children safe. We were fortunate to hear directly from some of them at our committee meetings.

Thirdly—and fortuitously for the timing of today’s debate—the Online Safety Bill has just completed its passage through the House of Lords. The chief executive of the NSPCC described the bill’s passage on Tuesday as “momentous” and the UK Government’s minister for digital, Lord Parkinson, stated:

“The intention of this Bill is to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, particularly for children.”

The broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, will have the ability to impose meaningful fines on big tech companies, which have far too often been disgracefully negligent. Crucially, according to the online safety charity 5Rights Foundation,

“the mantle of responsibility for child online safety now falls firmly on the shoulders of the tech sector.”

I find it gratifying that ministers in Edinburgh and London worked constructively together to ensure that the legislation will be strong and effective.

In conclusion, I urge all members to attend the forthcoming briefing session with Ofcom. We can all strive to play our part in keeping Scotland’s children safe.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation.

Urgent Question

17:00

Net Zero Targets (United Kingdom Government Announcement)

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the Prime Minister's announcement on delaying a range of net zero targets will have on Scotland's target to become net zero by 2045.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The Prime Minister's statement yesterday was an unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations and it has again put the United Kingdom Government on the wrong side of history. His reckless plans have been branded "shocking and really disappointing" by Al Gore and "hugely damaging" and "a colossal error" by business and consumer groups. However, I would like to be crystal clear that, despite the UK Government reneging on its key net zero commitments, the Scottish Government will remain firmly committed to tackling the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

We have always been clear that the delivery of Scotland's climate ambition is contingent on action by the UK Government in reserved and shared areas, and yesterday's announcements will undoubtedly have serious implications for the delivery of climate ambition here, in Scotland.

Despite the far-reaching implications, we were given no notice by the UK Government yesterday, so we are currently urgently assessing the impact on Scotland. It is right that we take the time to do that. Right now, however, Parliament will recognise that the sheer scale of the Prime Minister's astonishing policy reversals will have a potentially significant impact on developments here, in Scotland, not least on the preparation of our draft climate change plan.

Sarah Boyack: I agree with the cabinet secretary that yesterday's announcement by the Prime Minister is a complete abdication of leadership and it sends the wrong message to world leaders, businesses and our constituents.

However, even before this retrograde step by the Tories, the Scottish Government was failing to meet its climate targets for homes and buildings, transport and land, and the output from the green finance task force has now been delayed from this autumn to next year. Will the Scottish Government give certainty to business? Will it accelerate its green industrial strategy and not leave businesses waiting for months so that we get the certainty in crucial supply chains and investment that will

deliver a just transition for workers and businesses across Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: I remind Sarah Boyack of two things. First, Scotland's climate change emissions reduction framework is one of the most stretching in the world. Although we have met some targets and missed others, at our last count, we missed the target by only 1.2 per cent. That told me two things: that the actions of this Government are helping us to track very closely where we need to be against the backdrop of some of the most stretching targets in the world, and, equally, that we have a great deal left to do.

My officials, my colleagues in Government and I have been, and we continue to be, hard at work developing Scotland's next climate change plan, which will demonstrate how we will meet our targets across our society and our economy. However, there can be no hiding from the fact that the 11th-hour upheaval of some of the most important climate objectives across the UK, which the Prime Minister announced last night, creates a great deal of uncertainty. It is right that I now take the time, with my officials, to assess the impact on Scotland, and I will be glad to update Sarah Boyack and others after the conclusion of that.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary is prepared to provide an update, but we must make sure that we get the change that we need. We in Labour have the ambition, with a deliverable plan, to establish GB energy, which will be headquartered in Scotland and backed up by £28 billion a year by the mid-term of a UK Labour Government. That will reduce people's bills and create the green jobs that we so urgently need.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that there is an urgent need to act now. Does she accept that the Scottish Government will need to redouble its efforts to tackle the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis by investing to support small businesses across Scotland, and give people in our communities the opportunity to get the low-carbon jobs and training that we need? Does she accept that the Scottish Government needs to ramp up the retrofitting of people's homes across the country, given that 38 per cent of our households now live in fuel poverty, and that it should not let people down and fail to deliver by underspending by £133 million, as happened last year?

Màiri McAllan: I think that I said this at the top of my original answer, but I repeat that this Government remains absolutely committed to tackling the twin crises of climate change and nature loss, and we remain committed to doing that via a just transition.

I want to make two points in response to Sarah Boyack. First, Labour's position here is not credible, given the major commitments that its leader, Keir Starmer, has been so keen to shed as he seeks to ready himself to enter number 10. It seems that the closer that Keir Starmer gets to number 10, the more he abandons Labour principles. That includes the scrapping of Labour's £28 billion green investment fund, which the shadow chancellor was keen to do over the summer, and the party's flip-flopping on low-emission zones. Let us not forget that low-emission zones are one of the key ways of improving air quality in our city centres, and that it is the most vulnerable people in our society who are affected by poor air quality.

My second point to Sarah Boyack is that we will keep working to realise our ambitions, but she does not appear to understand that we are having to make up for Westminster failure. The sooner Labour wakes up to that fact and joins us in realising that Scotland can tackle climate change only when we are a normal independent country, the better.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): It is really galling that, while the First Minister shows leadership on the climate change agenda in New York, the Prime Minister has ripped up what little policies the United Kingdom Government had on climate change. That is extremely serious for Scotland and for our entire planet. Today, the Trades Union Congress said that 800,000 jobs are at risk across the UK because of Mr Sunak's changed plan.

What analysis will the Scottish Government undertake on the impact of those changes on Scotland, how we can alleviate them and what can the Scottish Government do to boost business confidence to ensure that we have investment from companies both here and abroad?

Màiri McAllan: Kevin Stewart is absolutely right. When we had the spectacle of the impacts of climate change ripping across the globe over the summer, as well as being an abandonment of environmental principles and ambition, what we have had from the UK Government is economic illiteracy—and not for the first time. We cannot deliver a just transition if we are the last to do it. Once again, Scotland is being held back on not only our environmental ambitions but our economic ambitions.

We need only look at some of the comments from industry yesterday. Lisa Brankin, the chair of Ford UK, said:

"Our business needs three things from the UK government: ambition, commitment and consistency. A relaxation of 2030 would undermine all three."

That is exactly what has transpired.

I assure Kevin Stewart and members across the chamber that my officials and I are urgently undertaking work to assess all the matters that he rightly raised, as they pertain to our climate goals and the opportunities for jobs and skills in Scotland.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)

(Con): The Scottish National Party provides a perfect example of why net zero targets need to be realistic, which is what our Prime Minister recognises. The SNP Government missed its own climate change targets in eight of the past 12 years, it is failing to roll out enough electric vehicle charging points and it has failed to say where the £33 billion that will be needed to decarbonise our buildings in Scotland will come from. When will this Government start being honest with people, explain to them how much the journey to net zero will cost them and accept that not everyone can afford a swift transition?

Màiri McAllan: It is just incredible to hear the Scottish Tories try to lecture me and the Scottish Government on this subject. On one of the areas that he mentioned, EV charging, I remind him that, thanks to the action of this Government, Scotland now has the most comprehensive EV charging network anywhere in the UK outside London. That is just one demonstration of the success that we have had to date.

A cynical line is being taken—that ordinary people cannot afford to worry about climate change—so let me be clear that it will always be the most vulnerable in our society who will suffer from inaction on climate change.

Equally, through the interventions that we make in some of the areas that the UK Prime Minister abandoned yesterday, such as transport and heat in buildings, we have the opportunity to improve the lives of ordinary people with, for example, warmer and more energy-efficient homes.

I acutely understand the balance between those two issues, but I say to the Tories that, when things are challenging, we do not turn back—we work harder. That is exactly what this Government is doing—rising to net zero via a just transition.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Rishi Sunak's decision to row back on his environmental commitments has caused widespread confusion and anger, including among many in the business community, as the cabinet secretary has acknowledged. Facing defeat at the next election, the Prime Minister has embarked on a reckless scorched-earth policy. This Government was already regularly failing to meet its climate targets, but Mr Sunak's decision has certainly made that task more difficult.

In the light of yesterday's decision, as well as the repeated calls from the UK Climate Change

Committee, can the cabinet secretary advise the chamber when she expects to bring forward a revised and detailed action plan for getting Scotland on track to meet our targets?

Màiri McAllan: My officials and I had been working on a draft of Scotland's climate change plan, which I intended to lay before the Parliament this year. Because of this 11th-hour significant policy revision—of which we had absolutely no warning and which no UK Government minister has thus far reached out to discuss with me—there is no doubt that we will require time to consider the implications. As I already said in response to Sarah Boyack, that will have an effect on when I can lay the draft plan.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): We have all paid the price of Liz Truss's extremist economic agenda and now we will all pay the price of Sunak's extremist anti-climate agenda. Businesses have invested and households have begun to prepare, but we have all been let down. The Prime Minister has, incredibly, managed to unite the Ford motor company and Greenpeace in condemnation of his climate climbdown. Will the cabinet secretary now request urgent advice from the UK Climate Change Committee, ahead of the drafting of Scotland's next climate change plan, so that we can deliver the policies with, in the words of Ford, the "ambition, commitment and consistency" that we all need?

Màiri McAllan: I echo Mark Ruskell's sentiments. The Climate Change Committee, which is a statutory adviser to both Governments, has already commented on yesterday's announcements and made it clear that it considers that the policy revision will make it more difficult for the UK to meet its targets. I await what I am sure will be further analysis from that committee.

Equally, as we do the work to assess the impact on Scotland, I will, as ever, reach out to the Climate Change Committee, as I will to Scotland's just transition commission, which is the first in the world to focus its work on the delivery of net zero in a fair way that leaves no one behind.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The Tories' lukewarm commitment to dealing with the existential threat to our planet is now beyond question. With Labour flip-flopping on climate, the alternative to Tory intransigence is red Tory U-turns. How will the Scottish Government make it clear that Scotland's dedication to the future of our planet must not be undermined by Westminster's indifferent attitude to climate change?

Màiri McAllan: Again, I absolutely echo Jackie Dunbar's sentiments. The difficult truth of the matter is that Scotland, much to the chagrin of this Government, has two Governments, one of which

retains a great deal of economic and fiscal power over Scotland. It also has power over energy and a great number of the principal levers that we would wish to use to decarbonise our economy and society.

I have significant concerns about the implications for Scotland of what was announced yesterday. The UK Prime Minister might be content to do late-night press briefings and back-of-an-envelope policy developments that leave business and industry reeling, but we are a serious Government that is dealing seriously with serious matters, so I will take the time that is required to look into those matters and come back to Parliament with an update.

Sarah Boyack: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The Labour commitment is for £28 billion by the mid-term of a Labour Government, should we get elected.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I gently remind Ms Boyack that points of order are not for such matters.

Decision Time

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business, so that concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:15.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba