



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 5 October 2023

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 October 2023

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

## General Question Time

### Rail Services (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

**1. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to improve rail services in the Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley constituency. (S6O-02608)

**The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** In May 2023, ScotRail increased the number of services that it operated between Ayr and Kilmarnock. A train now operates between the two towns every two hours throughout the day, with additional services at peak times. Clearly, that service is currently suspended following the fire at Ayr Station hotel. Connections were also improved to make it easier for passengers to interchange at Kilmarnock to services running to Dumfries and Carlisle.

ScotRail will continue to monitor how passengers use the services and will keep the timetable under review to best meet local needs.

**Willie Coffey:** I particularly welcome the reduced peak-time fares that came into effect this week, which will help thousands of my constituents and more people across Scotland. That is in sharp contrast to the shambolic U-turns on rail service commitments down south.

Can the minister give an indication of any further improvements to the service that we might expect over the coming years, particularly in electrification and rolling stock, and any planned improvements to the railway station at Kilmarnock?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Full electrification of the line to Barrhead is under way, with completion planned for December 2023. No date has yet been set for electrification and the associated change of rolling stock on the line from Barrhead to Kilmarnock and Dumfries. That will be considered for future electrification in line with the decarbonisation action plan.

I am pleased that Willie Coffey has recognised the Scottish Government's funding support for the removal of peak fares, which reduces the return fare from Kilmarnock to Glasgow from £12.80 to £8.10.

### Rail Services (Milngavie)

**2. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, particularly a small financial donation from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers.

To ask the Scottish Government what consideration has been given to any proposals to increase the frequency of services on the Milngavie rail line. (S6O-02609)

**The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** The Milngavie railway line is served well, with two trains per hour throughout the day, which increases to four trains per hour at peak times. That is sufficient to support demand on that route. However, ScotRail monitors passenger numbers continuously to best match resources to where they are needed.

**Ross Greer:** The argument for not reinstating more frequent services and pre-pandemic timetables on a number of rail lines is that passenger numbers have still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. I am delighted that the trial removal of peak-time fares for six months began earlier this week. That was a key Green priority in this year's budget, and it has been long campaigned for by rail unions such as the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. A constituent of mine on the Milngavie line who commutes to Edinburgh could save up to £2,000 during the pilot period. Removing peak-time fares will support people through the cost of living crisis, help us to hit our climate targets and drive up rail use to the point at which, I hope, more frequent services can be reconsidered.

Does the minister have any early indications of how the first few days of the pilot have gone? What would the Scottish Government and ScotRail consider to be a success six months from now?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I, too, thank the rail unions for their campaigning. The Scottish Government's initiative is, indeed, bold. It is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, and the trial is intended to discover whether it will encourage people to travel by train instead of car. We expect that it will take at least four weeks for any changes to travel patterns to be established. However, ScotRail is monitoring services and passenger numbers closely, and I look forward to seeing and hearing about how the initiative is benefiting the people of Scotland.

We will assess, using standard techniques, whether the approach represents value for money at the end of the pilot before any decisions on its future are taken. That will involve looking at how changes in the behaviour of existing customers and the travel patterns of new users have impacted on reducing car use and comparing that

with the final cost of the pilot to the Scottish Government and other transport operators. Of course, the approach also provides financial savings to many commuters, who face rising costs at this time.

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** In the first six months after its nationalisation by the Scottish National Party Government last year, ScotRail accumulated more than 9,000 complaints about poor train services. Rail lines are vital for local growth and access to services, especially when cities become more hostile to cars. Can the minister offer any concrete assurances to people in communities such as Milngavie about when they can expect that mismanagement to end?

**Fiona Hyslop:** There is a certain lack of self awareness on the part of the member when it comes to mismanagement of the railways. The cancellation of HS2—an initiative that, in any case, was never going to support Scotland—has betrayed the north of England. Meanwhile, ScotRail is one of the best-performing rail services in the United Kingdom in terms of customer satisfaction, we do not have any rail strikes on ScotRail-run trains, and none of our rail ticket offices are closing. Therefore, I would say that the constituents of the Milngavie area would much prefer their railways to be run by this Scottish Government rather than by the Conservatives in England.

### **Net Zero Policy (Impact of UK Government Announcements)**

**3. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the potential impact on net zero policy in Scotland, ahead of the announcement by the UK Government of its decision to delay key net zero targets. (S6O-02610)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):** Despite the far-reaching implications of the announcement and the fact that delivery of climate ambitions, generally, across the four nations of the UK is linked, the Scottish Government was given absolutely no notice of the Prime Minister's announcement, which was extremely disappointing. It was made even more disappointing by the fact that I was in attendance at an interministerial group meeting on net zero with UK ministers and the Committee on Climate Change just six days before that announcement.

The decision to renege on the UK's key net zero commitments is an unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations, but the SNP will continue to lead on climate action, and we will insulate

Scotland from the repeated failures of UK Governments.

**Keith Brown:** Given the undoubted detrimental impact that those decisions will have on Scotland's ability to meet its net zero targets, does the cabinet secretary agree that that complete lack of consultation or respect in the approach of the UK Government exposes the utter hypocrisy of the Tories and their calls for the Scottish Government to, in the words of Donald Cameron's amendment in Tuesday's debate,

"work collaboratively and constructively with the UK Government",

and is yet another example of a complete lack of respect for the devolved Administrations? Does she also agree that we would think that the Scottish Conservatives would condemn and apologise for the lack of consultation and respect if they truly wanted to see collaborative and constructive working between the two Governments?

**Màiri McAllan:** Keith Brown is absolutely right. Clearly, if the UK Government is prepared to make announcements as serious as the one that we are discussing with no consultation and no notice, despite having met Scottish ministers a matter of days before, the current arrangements for co-operation are not working. Further, I would add that, frankly, the United Kingdom is not working—it is certainly not united and it is not working for Scotland.

Along with my ministerial counterparts in the Welsh Government, I have written to Michael Gove to highlight the weakness of the current arrangements and to call for greater collaboration across all UK nations on agreeing a pathway to net zero. I also called for a four nation summit on reaching net zero, to be chaired by the Committee on Climate Change, and I await a response from Michael Gove on that.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I agree that Scotland needs to lead the way and that we need co-operative work, but most of the powers to decarbonise our homes lie with the Scottish Government. How confident is the cabinet secretary that the Scottish Government will meet its target of 124,000 low-carbon heating systems installed in people's homes by 2026, given that, by May this year, only 11,341 homes had zero-emissions heating and that funding for solar panels has been removed from Scottish Government grant funding?

**Màiri McAllan:** I have been quite clear on two things. First, there is no doubt that the UK's renegeing on these key areas—including the area of heat in buildings, which Sarah Boyack rightly refers to as being a critical part of the net zero journey—will have an impact on Scotland. We are

currently assessing the flat emissions reduction impact of that, but I also have to consider the impact in terms of affordability, supply chain availability and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which this Parliament did not wish to be imposed on us.

Secondly, at the same time as doing that, the SNP and the Greens in government will continue to do everything that we can and will strain every sinew to pursue our ambitious plans to decarbonise our economy and our society. I cannot pretend that the UK Government's actions will not have an impact on that, but I commit to continuing to do everything that we can in Scotland to tackle climate change.

### Joint Projects with UK Institutions

**4. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in the light of reports that the V&A Dundee has generated £304 million for the Scottish economy over the past five years, whether it will be pursuing any further joint projects with United Kingdom institutions. (S6O-02611)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):** The Scottish Government has long been a supporter of V&A Dundee. I recognise the V&A Dundee's important work and the positive impact that it is making in supporting the city, the wider region and Scotland. The Scottish Government would welcome exploration of further joint projects with notable institutions, subject to robust business cases.

**Liz Smith:** It is good to hear that. The UK Government has earmarked £140 million for Scottish towns as part of its levelling up fund. Will the cabinet secretary agree that those efforts demonstrate the great value to Scotland of the shared United Kingdom?

**Angus Robertson:** Presiding Officer, I am sure that you would be reminding me that I should be answering questions about the V&A, rather than about UK Government announcements that bypass the Scottish Parliament—[*Interruption.*] I know that members on the Tory front bench do not like to hear that.

The Scottish Government intends to continue to support to V&A Dundee in order to enable it to continue to deliver, including on its ambition of being Scotland's national design centre. Exact funding levels will be confirmed during the budget process.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** Although joint arts projects with the UK have helped to generate income, it is impossible to know the economic and cultural impact of the loss of opportunities within the European Union. Can

the cabinet secretary provide some detail regarding the cost of Brexit with regard to opportunities for the arts and culture sector in Scotland?

**Angus Robertson:** In relation to the V&A Dundee specifically, Brexit has had an impact, especially on European Union citizens who may not be able to work there. We know that, within the artistic and wider cultural community, there are all kinds of issues relating to freedom of movement. I am very keen that we make sure that we fully embrace the opportunities that have been created by the V&A's outstanding tartan exhibition and its ambition that that should tour internationally. I will be looking very closely at how we can work with the V&A in order to make sure that that happens.

### Anti-Racist Curriculum Principles

**5. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to implement the anti-racist curriculum principles, which were published in June. (S6O-02612)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I was delighted to support the publication of the principles in June. The Scottish Government is leading a national group working with Education Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities to promote and embed those principles into policies and practice at all levels of education. To achieve that, we are investing in the development of new curriculum resources for teachers, in a school-level pilot activity working with Intercultural Youth Scotland and in leadership and professional learning through Education Scotland's national building racial literacy programme. The programme for government set out plans to further advance inclusive education in our schools, including the promotion of a decolonised curriculum and the recognition of Scotland's role in the transatlantic slave trade.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** The teaching slavery in schools programme has been designed to support educators who are committed to developing new and sensitive approaches to an inclusive curriculum. Given the goals that were outlined in the curriculum reform principles, can the cabinet secretary advise whether the Scottish Government has considered creating a specific programme for teachers to address Scotland's colonial past?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The member raises a hugely important point, particularly in relation to curriculum reform. I know that he has been a keen champion for equality and inclusion in our education system and I commit to working with him to that end and on the suggestion that he has promoted.

More broadly, we have supported professional learning. Since December 2022, we have supported the building racial literacy project, which is an award-winning programme that is making a real difference in our schools. From next month, it will support more than 400 educators from all over the country. I am more than happy to engage with Foysoyl Choudhury on that, because as we move forward with curriculum reform, there is an opportunity to better embed these practices across the school curriculum.

### **Early Learning and School-age Childcare Profession (Strategic Framework)**

**6. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its timeframe is for the implementation of the strategic framework for Scotland's early learning and school-age childcare profession. (S6O-02613)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don):** The programme for government for 2023-24 set out major new commitments on childcare, including commitments on how we will test in six council areas what an all-age childcare system would look like for Scotland. We will work closely with those communities and with our partners and providers to consider how the early learning and school-age childcare workforce can support such systems and what they will need to do so. That will include consideration of regulatory issues, qualifications and professional development, which will take time to do fully and is why we will now set out our plans in 2024.

In the meantime, we will continue to work with the framework steering group and other partners to implement a range of support for the profession. Action that has already been taken includes development of a range of new learning resources and the introduction of the protection of vulnerable groups scheme fee waiver for all new entrants to the sector. We are also working on a new national portal for professional learning.

**Gordon MacDonald:** I welcome the Scottish Government's continued support for our early years and childcare sector. However, in the past few months, two breakfast and after-school clubs in my constituency have faced closure because of issues in recruiting and retaining staff—particularly for roles that require a degree-level qualification. Will the minister consider any changes to regulatory compliance requirements, such as supporting degree-qualified peripatetic roles, which might go some way towards addressing the recruitment problems that the sector faces?

**Natalie Don:** I thank Gordon MacDonald for raising an important question. I know from ongoing discussions with stakeholders that there is a lack of consensus on the type and level of

qualification that is most appropriate for the school-age childcare workforce. I also recognise that, to meet the needs of children and families, we need a workforce that brings diverse experience from across the childcare, youth work and activity sectors.

As we build our new system of school-age childcare, we will seek to understand the possibility of recognising and developing a wider range of qualifications that are relevant to school-age childcare, as well as the value of other complementary qualifications and skills. We are also working to understand more about the impacts of different staffing models and, where possible, we will use our early-adopter communities, including those in rural areas, to test them. Through working with stakeholders, including regulatory bodies and other key partners, we will ensure that the regulation framework is fit for purpose, supports quality provision and supports a diverse and sustainable workforce.

### **Local Authority Services (Areas of High Population Growth)**

**7. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support the delivery of public services by local authorities, such as Midlothian and East Lothian, where the population growth has been higher than forecast, having risen by 16.1 per cent and 12.6 per cent respectively between 2011 and 2022. (S6O-02614)

**The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests that notes that I was a councillor until May 2022.

The annual local government settlement is distributed in full under the needs-based formula, which is discussed and agreed each year with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on behalf of all its local authority members. The formula uses the most up-to-date information for the full range of indicators, including population.

The 2024-25 local government settlement will use the latest population census figures, which were published on 14 September. The 2023-24 local government finance settlement provides East Lothian Council with an additional £8.1 million for vital day-to-day services; Midlothian Council has an additional £6.7 million compared with the figure for 2022-23.

**Colin Beattie:** The current funding model, which allocates a larger share of resources to areas that are experiencing population decline, presents a challenge to regions where the population is steadily increasing. Following the signing of the Verity house agreement, will the

minister confirm that the needs of areas that face significant population growth have been considered in discussions with COSLA about a new fiscal framework?

**Emma Roddick:** The settlement is distributed on the basis of a range of indicators, which include population. All else being equal, that means that councils with growing populations receive more funding over time than those with declining populations. However, to ensure funding stability for local services, the formula that is agreed with COSLA caps budget changes from one year to the next. Ministers are clear that we are open to considering changes in the funding formula, but any changes to the current model would need to come through COSLA, as is proper.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** I call Christine Grahame for a brief supplementary, please.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I add my concerns to those of my colleague Colin Beattie, as I represent Midlothian South, which has substantial population growth in Gorebridge, Penicuik and Newtongrange. I welcome the minister's answer and I appreciate that the issue involves agreement with COSLA, but the distribution model needs to be revisited.

**Emma Roddick:** I am not sure that I can add much to my previous answer, but I reassure the member that we are working within our population strategy to support our local government partners to cope with increasing population as well as declining population across Scotland.

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

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Police Scotland

**1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind members that my wife is a serving police officer.

Serious failures in the Scottish National Party's centralisation of Police Scotland contributed to tragic deaths on the M9 in 2015. The deaths of Lamara Bell and John Yuill were a tragedy that the Government vowed would never happen again. However, this week, David Kennedy of the Scottish Police Federation said:

"We might see more M9 cases appearing where people actually die because that's the harsh reality if there are not enough police officers".

Under the SNP, police numbers have fallen by more than 700 since the creation of Police Scotland. How much lower will Humza Yousaf let them fall?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, my thoughts remain with the families of Lamara Bell and John Yuill, who were affected by the tragic incident on the M9 in 2015.

In relation to the facts about Police Scotland, I will remind Douglas Ross of a few important facts. First and foremost, the SNP-led Scottish Government has increased police numbers since we came to power; they have increased by more than 300. We have increased police numbers and have continued to see more officers per head in Scotland than there are in England and Wales. Scotland has 30 officers per 10,000 of the population, compared with 25 in England and Wales.

Let me also address the point that was made by the Scottish Police Federation, which Douglas Ross mentioned. We are investing in our police service and that is why we have invested £1.45 billion this financial year, which is an increase in the resource budget of £80 million.

I remind Douglas Ross that, as the SNP-led Scottish Government has increased police numbers, between 2010 and 2019, his party decreased police officer numbers in England by almost 19,000.

**Douglas Ross:** It was a very simple question. How low will Humza Yousaf let the police officer numbers fall in Scotland? They have fallen by 700 since the creation of Police Scotland. He speaks about investing. The Scottish Police Federation said:

"If the Scottish Government properly funded the police service then it wouldn't be bleak, but they are choosing not to."

Those are not my words but the words of the Scottish Police Federation.

At the recent Scottish Police Authority meeting, Police Scotland officers described the cuts that they need to make as "slash and burn". Deputy Chief Officer David Page said:

"It used to be every pound is a prisoner, now it's every penny".

That is why Police Scotland has been forced to launch a pilot in which many crimes will not be investigated. I have previously asked the First Minister to come clean about which crimes will be overlooked, and he refused to answer. Will he now finally publish the full list of crimes that police in Scotland will not investigate?

**The First Minister:** Douglas Ross says that public services across Scotland are facing funding pressures. Of course they are, because of his party's economic mismanagement of the public finances. That was an economic mismanagement and torpedoing of the economy that Douglas Ross demanded that we copy. Thank goodness we ignored him, much like the people of Scotland continue to ignore him, day in and day out.

On the substance of the issue in relation to Police Scotland, I make it clear once again to Douglas Ross that, under the SNP-led Scottish Government, we have more bobbies on the beat than there are in England and Wales. We have increased revenue funding for Police Scotland by an additional 6.3 per cent.

What is important to people is ensuring that their communities are safe. That is why, under the SNP-led Scottish Government, recorded crime is at one of its lowest levels in almost half a century—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Members.

**The First Minister:** There has been a 41 per cent decrease in recorded crime since the SNP came into government.

I am not going to take lectures about the public finances from Douglas Ross, when his party has completely decimated the economy and public finances of this country.

**Douglas Ross:** That is another straightforward question that the First Minister should be able to answer but refuses to. It is not just police officer numbers that have been slashed. The First Minister just said that it is important that communities feel safe, but we learned recently that SNP budget cuts mean that the police will have to close a further 30 stations across

Scotland. Understandably, that is causing a lot of concern in local communities, which want to know whether their police station is safe. Will Humza Yousaf be up front and honest with people today about policing in their local community and tell us which stations will be closed?

**The First Minister:** It is not news that Police Scotland published a document about its estate in 2019, which gave details of where, for example, it would seek to replace some of its estate that was underused. It did that because, for modern policing purposes, it can often make sense to co-locate with partner organisations in modern, well-equipped accommodation. However, what people in Scotland are interested in is whether there are more bobbies on the beat under the SNP Government, and there absolutely are. In comparison with Conservative-led England or Labour-run Wales, we have more officers per head.

People also want to know whether crime is reducing. Under the SNP Government, crime is at an historically low level compared with the past 50 years. It is 41 per cent down since we came into power in 2007. They also want to make sure that their police officers are being paid well. I am pleased to say that, because of a recent acceptance of a very fair offer to police officers, police officers of every single rank are better paid here in Scotland than they are in Conservative-led England.

I say very clearly that we will leave the operational decisions to Police Scotland, but people across Scotland should be in no doubt whatsoever that their communities are safer because of the SNP's investment in Police Scotland.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister flipped through his folder a lot there, but he could not find an answer, which seems to be the only thing that is constant in this session. Humza Yousaf is forcing Police Scotland to close dozens of stations, but he will not say where. He is leaving it with no option but to stop investigating every crime, but he will not say which crimes. He is forcing the police to cut officer numbers to the lowest level on record, but he will not say how low. For a First Minister who loves the sound of his own voice, it seems quite stark that he is silent when it really matters. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Members!

**Douglas Ross:** He is silent on all those questions. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear Mr Ross.

**Douglas Ross:** Let us be very clear: Humza Yousaf is a criminal's dream. He does not want them stopped, he does not want them caught and

he does not want them in jail. Why is he being so sly, sleekit and secretive about the consequences of the SNP's cuts to Police Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I think that Douglas Ross is just jealous because nobody likes the sound of his voice. *[Interruption.]*

I know that the Conservatives are in their post-truth stage. The United Kingdom Government is out of ideas and will, I hope, be out of time very shortly.

Let us stick to the facts, because the facts tell us that there are more officers per head in Scotland than there are in Conservative-led England and Labour-led Wales. Crime is down under this Government. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** Officers are paid more fairly and are the best paid in the entire UK. I know that Douglas Ross, despite having three, four or five jobs—I have lost count, Presiding Officer—was down at the Conservative Party conference this week, or as others have rightly dubbed it, the “conspiracy party conference”, but his post-truth and his lies about the police service simply will not wash here in Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister, as all members are aware, it is wholly inappropriate to suggest that another member of the Parliament has lied. I would be grateful if you might apologise.

**The First Minister:** I am happy to call it a deliberate inaccuracy, because that is clearly what it is.

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister, I must ask that you apologise, please.

**The First Minister:** I am happy to apologise to anybody who has been offended by the post-truths that have come from the Conservative Party and to anyone who has been offended by my remarks.

**The Presiding Officer:** I ask that you apologise to me and to the chamber.

**The First Minister:** I am happy to apologise to the chamber for any offence, Presiding Officer.

### Police Scotland

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** My question concerns a serious issue that is important to people right across our communities. Earlier this week, when I was in Cambuslang, I met a distressed woman who was trying to report a serious incident to the police. Her local station in Blantyre was closed, so she had travelled several miles to Cambuslang only to find that the station there was also closed. Our conversation was a heartbreaking example of what the loss of local

policing means for communities. Soon, people all across Scotland will be faced with the same situation, because Police Scotland is being forced to consider closing 30 stations. When will residents be told which local police stations are closing? Will the First Minister tell us why he approves of the plans to decimate the police presence in Scotland's communities?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** I am afraid that that is just another inaccuracy. We have not approved the plans. Neither the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs nor I have seen any finalised plans for the police estate in Lanarkshire.

I go back to my earlier answer to Douglas Ross. Police Scotland's estate strategy was published in 2019 for everyone to see. It outlined plans to replace outdated and underused properties and replace them—“replace” being the key word—with modern, fit-for-purpose spaces after consideration of a number of options, including co-location with partner organisations.

What people in Scotland—including those in Rutherglen and Hamilton West—will be interested to know is whether their communities are safer. The answer to that is that they absolutely are, as they have been since the Scottish National Party entered government. People will want to know whether there are sufficient numbers of bobbies on the beat. There are. I am pleased to say that there has been an increase in police officer numbers since the Scottish National Party took power.

Any changes to the estate will be operational matters for Police Scotland. I will continue to ensure that Police Scotland is fairly funded.

**Anas Sarwar:** The woman who had to go to two police stations but was still unable to speak to a police officer will not feel any safer after having heard what was, frankly, a head-in-the-sand answer from the First Minister.

Last month, the SNP's mismanagement of our police service was laid out in starker terms. Police Scotland said that it will need to lose another 600 police officers and 200 staff next year, and 2,000 staff over the next four years. That is on top of the 600 officers it has already lost. Front-line officers are being overworked, are missing out on rest days and are struggling with their mental health. That means that, in parts of Scotland, the police are piloting the approach of not investigating some crimes. The Scottish Police Federation has warned that people “may die” if further cuts go ahead. Those are its words, not mine.

Why will the First Minister not listen to police officers who are serving on the front line and trying to keep our communities safe?

**The First Minister:** We do listen to them. Both the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I listen to police officers regularly.

Police Scotland has already recruited almost 600 officers this year alone, which means that it has recruited just shy of 1,500 officers since the beginning of 2022. I go back to the point that I made to Douglas Ross a moment ago. We have invested in Police Scotland. That is why there are more police officers in Scotland than there are in England or in Labour-run Wales.

We also invest in our police officers to ensure that they are paid fairly. That is why they remain the best paid in the entire United Kingdom in every comparable rank—certainly in comparison with those in England and Wales.

We will continue to invest in our police service. Of course, determining how many officers the service will have in each role is an operational decision for the chief constable. As First Minister, I will ensure that the Government that I lead continues to invest significantly in police officers and in Police Scotland right across the board.

**Anas Sarwar:** The First Minister might not choose to believe the police, but I believe them when they say that they are worried about their resources and the loss of staff. The first duty of any Government is to keep its citizens safe. When the police tell the First Minister that communities will be put at risk, he should listen to them.

The current situation is the direct result of 16 years of SNP incompetence and mismanagement. When Humza Yousaf was Cabinet Secretary for Justice, the police were “stretched to breaking point”. Those were the words of the SNP member whom some members sitting behind the First Minister wish they had elected as their leader.

As is the case with our national health service and every other Scottish institution, our police service is weaker after 16 years of SNP failure. We can see it, the people sitting behind the First Minister can see it and the people of Scotland can see it, so why can the First Minister not see that it is time for change?

**The First Minister:** I tell you what, Presiding Officer, the back benchers behind Anas Sarwar certainly did not seem to believe it.

When it comes to the facts, since the SNP has been in government, recorded crime has been at one of its lowest levels in almost 50 years—it is down 41 per cent. Since the SNP assumed office, there has been a 53 per cent fall in cases of robbery, a 71 per cent fall in cases of house breaking, a 65 per cent fall in cases of theft of a motor vehicle and a 70 per cent fall in cases of vandalism. There has been a significant reduction in crime across a number of crime types.

The situation around the funding of our public services has, of course, been difficult not because of the SNP but because of the Conservatives’ complete and utter economic mismanagement. The difference between Anas Sarwar and me is that I want to ensure that we have the power over our finances while he wants to keep that power in the hands of the Conservatives.

### **Climate Emergency Measures (Poverty)**

**3. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the First Minister how the measures in place to tackle the climate emergency will also help to address poverty. (S6F-02429)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** A fair and just transition to net zero means aligning our climate action to address existing poverty and inequality across Scotland. A truly just transition to heat decarbonisation can help to reduce fuel poverty, through measures such as tackling poor energy efficiency, which is why we are investing £1.8 billion in the heat transition over the course of this session of Parliament.

In addition, our on-going support for public transport—especially our work to expand concessionary travel to under-22s and our pilot in removing peak fares, which just launched—demonstrates that we are already taking very serious action to both alleviate poverty and cut emissions.

Fairness and equity will be key considerations in the development of our just transition plans. We are working with the Poverty Alliance and people with lived experience of discrimination, poverty and wider inequality to co-design those plans.

**Maggie Chapman:** Globally, we have just had the hottest July on record, then the hottest August and the hottest September. According to climate scientists, those temperatures are “gobsmackingly bananas”—a bit like this week’s Tory party conference, perhaps.

Scottish Greens know that the systemic causes of the climate emergency cause poverty and inequality, too. In this challenge poverty week, can the First Minister confirm that the work that we do to shift from a carbon economy to a renewables economy, through policies such as free bus travel for under-22s and the ending of peak rail fares, is all vital to the twin missions of tackling the climate emergency and tackling poverty, and that such policies are instrumental in building the clean, green, equal and caring economy that we all so desperately need?

**The First Minister:** I agree whole-heartedly with Maggie Chapman. Anybody who pays attention to the science—which, I think, covers most of us in the chamber—will know that climate injustice and the climate catastrophe do not impact us equally.

The climate catastrophe impacts people who are poorer, the most vulnerable and those who live in areas of higher deprivation more greatly than it impacts others. It is therefore important that we have a just—I emphasise “just”—transition to a low-carbon economy, which is vital in delivering both our environmental obligations and our social and economic objectives.

As I have said, we are clearly demonstrating that commitment through policies such as the £1.8 billion investment in heat transition and the expansion of free bus travel, and we will continue to ensure that we make progress in meeting our obligations for the planet and, importantly, for the people of Scotland.

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** Decarbonisation of our housing stock is critical to Scotland meeting its ambitious net zero targets, but residents are rightly concerned about the cost of installing new heating systems, which will far outweigh any Government grant support that is available. They are also often unsure about the range and applicability of the various technologies on offer. Does the First Minister agree that the most cost-effective way to decarbonise much of our existing housing stock might be through accelerating the deployment of district heating solutions, centralising much of the investment and technology choices and making the process of decarbonisation much easier and cheaper for home owners?

**The First Minister:** Ivan McKee is absolutely right. Heat networks will play an important role in changing how we heat our buildings; they could grow to meet anywhere between 17 and 32 per cent of our heat demand.

It is also fair to say that it will be important for us to attract private investment for our decarbonisation journey. That it happening worldwide. Over the Atlantic, there is the Inflation Reduction Act and, to the east, in Europe, there is the green deal industrial plan. Unfortunately, we have the United Kingdom Government sitting on its hands, not taking action and not helping us to attract private investment. We continue to demand that we have full financial powers so that we can attract that investment to Scotland to help us in our journey to net zero.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** With an all-day bus ticket in Glasgow costing £5, I agree that free bus travel is an environmental and social good. For people who are seeking asylum in Scotland, who receive just £6 a day from the Home Office, public transport is simply not an affordable option. During challenge poverty week, civil society organisations are calling for free bus travel to be extended to people who are seeking asylum. Will the First Minister confirm that his Government will deliver that?

**The First Minister:** The Government is certainly considering that. We will seek to do anything that we can do within our powers to make the lives of asylum seekers easier. Paul Sweeney knows well that we do not have those powers in our hands and that they still lie in the hands of an inhumane Conservative Government.

Yesterday, I met an asylum seeker who has been in the asylum system for 12 years—12 years—without the right to work. That is an absolute disgrace, and I know that Paul Sweeney agrees with me on that.

Yes, I will consider the proposals to see whether we can extend concessionary bus travel. There are real limitations on our budget, but we will consider it.

### Creative Scotland

**4. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what support the Scottish Government is providing to Creative Scotland. (S6F-02433)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** The Scottish Government provides significant funding to Creative Scotland each year, and it will continue to do so. In the financial year 2023-24, that included £27 million to support Creative Scotland’s regularly funded organisations, £5.77 million for Creative Scotland’s operating costs, £9.5 million for the youth music initiative, £7.25 million for Screen Scotland and £2.5 million for festivals.

**Michelle Thomson:** There are considerable challenges in the arts and culture sector. The sector and the Scottish Government are struggling to operate in a post-pandemic, post-Brexit, high-inflation and constrained-budget environment that is not of Scotland’s making. Nevertheless, the scale of funding for the arts and culture sector is comparatively low at around 0.1 per cent of our overall budget.

The Scottish Government has set out its stall in creating a wellbeing economy, and the arts and culture sector is one of the primary contributors to that ambition. Will the First Minister and his cabinet secretary redouble their efforts to make sure that the sector is supported by whatever means possible during what will undoubtedly be further challenges in the years ahead?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I can do that. Michelle Thomson makes some important points in her question. Culture and the arts are important for the economic contribution that they make to this country, but they are also important for other reasons. They can and will be part of the wellbeing economy. When we think about social prescribing in the health space, we know that they can be exceptionally important. Culture and the arts are also intrinsically important for their own sake and

for the joy that they bring to the people of this country—and, as we have seen over the summer, in particular, to people right across the world.

We will ask Creative Scotland, as we ask other public bodies, to help and assist, and if that means using its reserves, we will ask it to do that. However, I can give an absolute commitment that, even when our finances are constrained, we will look to support our culture and arts, as we have done over the years, because they are so valuable to us all in Scotland and to the rest of the world.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)**

**(Con):** Last week's decision to reinstate a cut of £6.6 million to Creative Scotland's budget not only represents the complete reversal of a commitment that the SNP made in February but has caused irreparable damage to the trust that was placed in the Government by those who work in culture and the arts. Lori Anderson of Culture Counts has described it as

"beyond disappointing ... a massive knock in confidence for the sector".—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 28 September 2023; c 30.]

What does the First Minister say to her and to the thousands of people who are working in the creative sector who feel completely let down by the mixed messages and broken promises of his Government?

**The First Minister:** It is astonishing for Donald Cameron to talk about broken promises 24 hours after his Government scrapped the high speed 2 railway line. When he stands up to ask us about the difficult financial circumstances in which we find ourselves, does he never reflect on who the architects of those have been? His party has been the architect, through its decimation of the public finances, and, of course, it was his party leader, Douglas Ross, who demanded that we follow suit. Thank goodness we did not. If we had done, we would have been facing far more severe financial pressure than we currently are.

Let me make it absolutely clear—I will be unequivocal—that every single regularly funded organisation will continue to receive the funding that it was expecting this financial year. There will be no detriment to them, because we have asked Creative Scotland to use a portion of its reserves of £17 million to help us with the financial challenge. Subject to parliamentary approval, we will seek to restore that in the next financial year.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** The First Minister and Angus Robertson, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, have claimed that a £6.6 million cut to Creative Scotland will have no detriment to cultural organisations this year, yet it is quite obviously the case that it will have a detriment of £6.6 million to

the sector in the future. The Scottish Government promised in February to provide that essential funding, but it has now broken that promise.

The cabinet secretary has given a gold-plated assurance that funding of £6.6 million will be given to Creative Scotland next year. What on earth is that assurance worth when the previous Government assurance turned out to be worth absolutely nothing? How does the cut match with the First Minister's words last month, when he said that the Government "values the role" of the culture sector?

**The First Minister:** Neil Bibby really should have thought about revising his question after I answered that very point in response to Donald Cameron. Let me explain it to Neil Bibby once again. Every single regularly funded organisation will receive the funding that it was expecting this financial year. There will be no detriment to those organisations, because Creative Scotland, which has reserves of around £17 million, is being asked to use a portion of those reserves to ensure that there is no detriment. Subject to parliamentary approval—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** —and, I hope, Neil Bibby's approval, when it comes to next year's budget, we will ensure that we restore the £6.6 million to Creative Scotland's reserves.

**Crime and Antisocial Behaviour (Retail Premises)**

**5. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take to tackle the reported rising rates of crime and antisocial behaviour at retail premises. (S6F-02441)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Although the latest recorded crime data for shoplifting shows an increase, the levels remain below pre-pandemic levels. However, I absolutely recognise the disruption and harm that it has caused to businesses in terms of theft and antisocial behaviour. Police Scotland and partners are taking action to tackle and reduce it.

The Scottish Government fully supports the innovative Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime, which is led by Police Scotland and includes a number of other organisations, including retailers. Anyone who is affected by such an incident should report it to Police Scotland, which remains absolutely focused on keeping our communities safe from harm.

**Sharon Dowey:** I have met various retailers in my area who have all discussed the challenges that they are facing with the rise in crime and

antisocial behaviour. That has escalated significantly over the past year and, in their words, is out of control. Police numbers are falling, police funding is stretched and the Government's approach to justice is not working. What action will the First Minister take to protect retail workers?

**The First Minister:** As I have said to Douglas Ross and Anas Sarwar, police officer numbers have increased since the Scottish National Party came into government, recorded crime has reduced—in fact, it is at one of its lowest levels in almost 50 years—and we have more police officers per head in Scotland than there are in England and Wales. We will continue to invest in our police service.

It is worth noting that, over the past 10 years, from 2013-14 to 2022-23, there has been a 3 per cent increase in shoplifting. I was very interested in the comments that were made in an interview by Dr Sinéad Furey, who is a senior lecturer in consumer management and food innovation at Ulster University. She said:

"We have seen this before in previous times of austerity or economic downturn. The return of 'stealing to eat' instead of being able to 'afford to eat' is yet more proof that we need effective policy solutions that put sufficient income in people's hands in a dignified way so that poverty and resorting to crime do not become a mainstream means of securing the most basic essentials of living."

That quote is not from me but from a professor and an academic. The Conservatives would do well to listen to that.

### **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Impact of Operational Changes)**

**6. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of any impact of operational changes in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on response times to recent incidents, including the fires at the Ayr Station hotel and Kitty's nightclub in Kirkcaldy. (S6F-02428)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** As I said last week, I want to thank our emergency services and partners for their responses to those incidents, which were rightly operational matters for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Both fires took place in derelict buildings. There was no risk to life, there were no casualties, thankfully, and they were not rescue situations. At Ayr Station hotel, the SFRS deployed 15 appliances at the peak of the fire. A decision was made not to tackle the blaze internally, due to the building's structure and to ensure that firefighters were not placed at risk.

The SFRS has confirmed that the recent operational changes did not impact on the outcome of the Ayr Station hotel incident, and the

Kirkcaldy fire occurred before any of the operational changes came into effect.

**Katy Clark:** I associate myself with the First Minister's tribute to our firefighters. He will be aware that the appliance at Kirkcaldy was taken out of operation at midnight later on the day of the fire.

Is the First Minister aware of the serious concerns that the Fire Brigades Union has raised about the impact of the withdrawal last month of 10 appliances, which included the withdrawal of a specialist appliance at Ayr, which the FBU says meant that local firefighters had to wait for an appliance to arrive from Castlemilk, given that the Kilmarnock one had broken down? Will he meet FBU Scotland to discuss its concerns about the impact of budget cuts on public safety?

**The First Minister:** The cabinet secretary regularly meets the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and I am sure that she would be pleased and happy to meet the FBU, for which we have the utmost respect and with which we have regular engagement, to address some of the points that Katy Clark made.

Let me address the point about funding. Despite the fact that we face very difficult financial circumstances—that has been well rehearsed in the chamber—we are providing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service with more than £368 million this year, which is an increase of £14.4 million compared with last year. We are also continuing to invest in firefighters up and down the country. As of March 2022, in Scotland there were 11.3 firefighters per 10,000 of the population. That is in stark contrast to the position in England and Wales, where there were, respectively, 6.1 and 8.4 firefighters per 10,000 of the population.

We will continue to invest in the fire service and in our brave firefighters for the exceptional work that they do. We will also continue to make sure that dialogue continues with the fire service and the Fire Brigades Union when that needs to happen, because, collectively, we all want to ensure that we have a fire service that is well resourced and well equipped.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Will the First Minister outline what more can be done to take action against private owners who leave buildings derelict and at risk of antisocial behaviour, including fire raising, which has a significant impact on our councils and public services?

**The First Minister:** Audrey Nicoll raises a very important point indeed. Derelict buildings are a blight on our communities and, as we have seen, they can pose a risk to the wider public. The best solution is, of course, for owners to maintain their

properties or to dispose of them so that they are not a drain on our public services.

The control of dangerous buildings is primarily the responsibility of local authorities. Under the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, a council can serve a notice on the owner to require them to carry out the necessary work, or it can secure the site and carry out the work itself to make the building safe, right up to demolition.

The police, local authorities and the SFRS all work together to minimise the risks that are posed by derelict buildings. The public can also play a part by reporting to Police Scotland, the SFRS or their local council any concerns that they have about derelict buildings that do not seem secure.

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

### **Chest, Heart and Stroke Conditions (Support)**

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I am sure that the First Minister will have seen the “No Life Half Lived” report from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, which makes a number of recommendations to enable the one in five people in Scotland who live with chest, heart and stroke conditions, including in my South Scotland region, to access to rehabilitation and support. For transparency, I co-convene a number of health-related cross-party groups, including the cross-party group on lung health. Will the First Minister outline how the recommendations in the report align with the Scottish Government’s stroke improvement plan?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** I have read and welcome Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland’s report, which rightly challenges the Government on where we can and should go further. We, and the cabinet secretary, will continue to engage with Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland in relation to the report.

We are committed to ensuring that people who live with chest, heart and stroke conditions receive the best possible care. We have a stroke improvement plan that requires national health service boards to demonstrate provision of stroke rehabilitation in a variety of settings and with a range of intensities. The plan also says that boards must demonstrate a clear pathway for patients to engage with stroke rehabilitation services and must offer a formal six-month review to everyone who has had a stroke.

I will end where I started, by saying that I welcome the report and will continue to engage with Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland to see how we can continue improving the patient experience.

### **NHS Fife (Gynaecological Treatment Waiting Times)**

**Roz McCall:** Endometriosis Fife has advised me that the situation regarding waiting times for gynaecological services in NHS Fife is appalling. Patients referred with conditions such as endometriosis are having to wait for more than 63 weeks for treatment, which is a wait of one year and three months, rather than the three months promised by this Government. What is the Scottish Government doing right now to address those appalling waiting times for my constituents?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Roz McCall is right to raise the issue and I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care looks into the specific matter raised by Endometriosis Fife in relation to that particular health board.

We have a women’s health plan and have ambitious plans to reduce the far-too-long time taken for diagnosis for women suffering from endometriosis and other such conditions. I will ask the cabinet secretary for health to write to Roz McCall about the specifics of the issue in Fife to see what more we can do, so that women in particular do not have to wait long for access to diagnosis, let alone access to treatment thereafter.

### **University Hospital Wishaw (Neonatal Intensive Care)**

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Does the First Minister support the downgrading of the neonatal intensive care unit at University hospital Wishaw, or does he agree with experienced midwife Elsie Sneddon that

“this would not just be a disaster for Lanarkshire, but a disaster for Scotland.”

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** I tend to believe the experts, the clinicians and those in the third sector who have worked with young babies who often need that care. We believe, and clinicians certainly believe, that the model that is being put in place will ensure the best possible care for the sickest babies. I would be more than happy to have the cabinet secretary write to Richard Leonard to furnish him with the detail, but, as I say, we are, rightly, being led by the expert voice of clinicians and by many of those in the third sector who also support the changes.

### **Rail Fares (Net Zero Targets)**

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** The pilot of the removal of peak rail fares is another example of the Scottish Government’s commitment to the role of sustainable transport, such as rail travel, in achieving our net zero targets. What might that initiative mean for emissions reduction?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** It could be absolutely significant. As I said in my response to Maggie Chapman's question, we hope to have more people using our rail services and I am delighted that there has been such a positive response to the Government's funding of ScotRail for a six-month pilot to abolish peak fares. The move has been welcomed this week by many people who have been using our railways. Part of the evaluation of the pilot will be to calculate the savings in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are generated by removing car journeys from Scotland's roads.

There is a stark contrast between two Governments. In Scotland, we have a Government that is cutting rail fares, while the United Kingdom Conservative Government is cutting railway lines.

### **Aberdeen Hospital Projects (Delays)**

**Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** Further design faults have again delayed completion of the Baird family hospital and the Anchor centre in Aberdeen. Those projects are now three years late and almost £100 million over budget, with costs expected to rise further. Has the First Minister met NHS Grampian to discuss those deeply concerning delays? What financial support will the Scottish Government provide to the health board to ensure that those much-needed projects can go ahead?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Tess White is right to raise the challenges around those two projects. The entire purpose of setting up NHS Scotland assure was to help to assure us all that the capital projects that were being undertaken were meeting the high standards that we would all expect for all our capital projects, particularly for NHS projects such as the Anchor centre and the Baird family hospital.

NHS Scotland assure is doing its job. As Tess White rightly says, concerns and issues have been raised and need to be rectified. The cabinet secretary and the Government will remain close to the health board, and I am more than happy to ensure that Tess White is kept up to date on those discussions.

### **College Sector Pay Negotiations (Compulsory Redundancies)**

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** Yesterday, Educational Institute of Scotland members attended the Scottish Parliament with a letter for the First Minister. It read:

"Compulsory redundancies are already a reality in Scotland's college sector ... To continue to allow the abandonment of the Scottish Government's own 'no public sector redundancy' policy in the Further Education sector is nothing short of a betrayal of hard-working staff."

Will the First Minister accept that compulsory redundancies are now a reality on his watch and, in challenge poverty week, can he explain how treating the college sector with such disdain is compatible with supporting it to continue being a route out of poverty for people living in our most vulnerable communities?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** The Government will respond to the EIS and other trade unions more formally, but we have been clear that those discussions are taking place between the employer, the colleges and trade unions. In any discussion that the Minister for Higher and Further Education has had on the matter—he has communicated this face to face and in writing—he has made it abundantly clear that the guiding light should be our fair work principles. Those principles are important to me as First Minister and to the entire Government. I urge college principals and those who are negotiating on behalf of the employer to make sure that they do everything that they can to ensure that they are guided by those fair work principles.

### **National Islands Plan**

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** Orkney Islands Council has called for the Scottish Government's national islands plan to be scrapped after "little or no progress" has been made on its 13 objectives, notably on inconsistencies in island authority funding and the improvement of lifeline transport links.

Does the First Minister accept that a more tightly focused plan would offer more chance of objectives being met, rather than the Scottish Government continuing to overpromise and underdeliver for Orkney and other island communities?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** We have invested significantly in our island communities, and I am always happy to speak to the leader of Orkney Islands Council—in fact, we engaged in conversation at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities conference just last week.

I do not think that there is merit in scrapping the national islands plan. We have to ensure that we as the Scottish Government make good on the commitments that are in the plan, and we are absolutely committed to doing that. I will give Liam McArthur an example. In my previous conversation with the leader of Orkney Islands Council, I reaffirmed the fact that the Government is very open, in the spirit of the Verity house agreement, to considering models such as a single island authority. Let us have that conversation about the art of the possible. The Government has made significant commitments on the funding and assisting of funding to interisland ferries. We will continue those

discussions and that engagement, not only with Orkney Islands Council but with all our island local authorities.

### **High Speed 2 Cancellation (Impact on Scotland)**

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** The First Minister is obviously aware of the cancellation of high speed 2, or a large part of it, by the Conservatives, who are clearly interested only in London and the south-east of England. Will that have any impact on Scotland—for example, on our climate targets and the fact that it will be more difficult to take rail travel through and to England?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** That will undoubtedly be the case. The Scottish Government has always strongly supported a high-speed rail programme that benefits Scotland, and it is clear that the latest United Kingdom Government decision and latest broken promise will negatively impact on Scotland's ambitions for net zero, our economy, and enhancing our rail capacity and, indeed, our connectivity.

We need to take time to fully understand the implications of the impact of the cancellation of the HS2 project and to consider the significant impact that it will have on our economy and, importantly, on our climate change targets. It goes without saying that long-distance rail travel in the UK will now continue to struggle to compete with domestic air travel. That will not help us to deliver on the important climate change targets that we must achieve.

I reflect on the fact that, in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, the Prime Minister put up a map and said that he will be investing in the north. That map excluded Scotland almost entirely. It managed to go up to Stranraer, but it excluded the rest of Scotland. Forget investing in Scotland—the Tories cannot even find Scotland on the map.

### **Winchburgh (Rail Station)**

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** On the subject of rail travel, I have been made aware that ScotRail has made provision in its timetable to allow trains between Edinburgh and Dunblane to stop at Winchburgh. When will Winchburgh get its station?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** We have an excellent record in investing in rail infrastructure.

It is remarkably brave—some might use a different word—of Sue Webber to stand up here to talk about rail investment 24 hours after the Prime Minister scrapped high speed 2. I will ensure that the member gets the detail on our rail infrastructure.

As I have said, it is a tale of two Governments. This week, we have invested in cutting rail fares, while the Conservatives have cut railway lines up and down the country.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's question time—

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I did not raise a point of order during First Minister's question time, because I understand that it is the convention of the Parliament not to do so. During your exchanges with the First Minister, when he was asked to apologise to you and the member whom he falsely accused of lying, he did neither. What steps will be taken to tackle the First Minister's wilful disrespect of your office and of the Parliament?

**The Presiding Officer:** I dealt with that matter at the time, Mr Kerr.

We will move on to members' business, which is a debate in the name of John Swinney. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so before the debate begins.

12:47

*Meeting suspended.*

12:48

*On resuming—*

## Climate Cafés

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I ask members of the public who are leaving the gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible, and those who are remaining also to be quiet as we resume business.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10435, in the name of John Swinney, on welcoming the impact of Climate Cafés. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes the growing number of community-led Climate Cafés emerging across Scotland and around the world; values the role of a Climate Café in creating what it sees as a welcoming, inclusive, safe space within a community that is open to everyone to chat and act on climate; believes that Climate Cafés benefit from being creative, intergenerational spaces, creating space for connections right across a community and leadership from children and young people; considers that local chat and climate action sparked by Climate Cafés has already had significant positive impacts, including, it understands, initiating engaging projects to reduce waste and energy costs, music events, fashion shows, swap shops, films, as well as international engagement, dialogue with local authorities and lots of collaboration across communities; understands that the home of the original Climate Café Dunkeld & Birnam, which was founded in 2015, hosts the Hub to support Climate Cafés to start up and to connect with other Climate Cafés to share ideas, support and learning; values the Climate Cafés across rural and urban Scotland, as more emerge in the Highlands, while established in Aberdeen, with vibrant new Climate Cafés in Inverness and Dundee, and notes that more communities, schools, workplaces and campuses are encouraged to consider establishing pop-up Climate Café spaces to chat and act on climate.

12:49

**John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP):** This is the first members' business debate that I have led in nearly 17 years. That is not because I have been twiddling my thumbs for some time but because other obligations have prevented me from doing so.

I am delighted that its topic is the celebration of an initiative that emerged from one of the wonderful communities that I have had the privilege of representing for more than a quarter of a century, Dunkeld and Birnam, and is now spreading across the globe. The Climate Café movement was started in Dunkeld and Birnam in 2015 and, like many great things in Scotland, is anchored in the sharing of tea, coffee and cake. Local residents were involved in action to tackle climate change but increasingly felt that more had to be done. There was a deep concern, which I suspect is now shared even more by people in Scotland today, that individuals felt dwarfed by the scale of the climate crisis and people sought a

way to work together to make a greater impact on the issue.

Many people in Dunkeld and Birnam were involved in establishing the Climate Café—a venture that involves people meeting together to plan local action and initiatives—but the leadership to bring it all together was provided by a local community activist, Jess Pepper. Jess has a formidable record on climate action; she made a significant contribution to formulating Scotland's approach to tackling climate change and has collaborated with The Climate Reality Project, which was founded by former United States Vice-President Al Gore.

Jess's late father, Simon Pepper, was the founding director of WWF Scotland and a pioneer of climate action. He would be so proud of the pioneering activity that Jess and her family are contributing to this most important of topics. The Climate Café concept has spread throughout Perthshire, with gatherings now held regularly in Blairgowrie and Rattray, Pitlochry, Aberfeldy, Kettins, Crieff and Perth. One of the greatest joys of that development has been the involvement of so many young people in this work, marked by the recent establishment of a Climate Café in Breadalbane academy, an encouraging signal of the commitment of our youngest citizens.

The concept has spread beyond our county boundaries to other parts of Scotland, including Dundee, Kinross-shire, Govan, Lairg, Kelvin, North Berwick and Aberdeen. During the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—virtual Climate Cafés took place involving people in Benin, Alaska, India and Mexico. The concept is now spreading widely across the globe, with inquiries coming in thick and fast to the hub in Birnam about establishing Climate Cafés from the United States to Australia to Finland.

Positive initiatives to deliver climate action are being taken as a result of that community dialogue. For example, the Dunkeld and Birnam community collaborated with Scottish Water to encourage local residents to reduce water consumption. That involved households being given advice and information about simple measures to reduce water use. The outcome was formidable: the small community of Dunkeld and Birnam reduced its water consumption by 1 million litres.

The Climate Café has now spawned a food-share initiative that involves surplus food being collected from local stores at the end of the day and, with the support of a substantial and expanding list of volunteers, being made available to local residents. The initiative provides assistance to individuals at a time of huge pressure on household incomes, avoids the

unnecessary disposal of perfectly good food and also reduces the contribution to landfill. There is also now a repair cafe, perhaps modelled on the much-lauded television programme, that provides a space for the restoration and repair of items that would previously have been replaced with newer versions. The saving of resource and energy is beneficial.

Promotion of the work of the Climate Café is important, and there is no greater symbol of that than the local taxi in Dunkeld and Birnam, run by the formidable Marian Wallace. Known as “Lady Driver”, Marion drives visitors from the station to the hotels and venues in the village in an electric taxi emblazoned with the branding, “Dunkeld and Birnam: Home of the Climate Café”. There is just enough time, I am told, on the journey from the station to the village for visitors to hear the explanation from Marian of the importance of climate action and the steps being taken locally to put it into effect.

The work of the Climate Café in Blairgowrie and Rattray has led to the creation of the HEAT Project, which is now an established organisation that has delivered direct energy saving advice to more than 700 households in north-eastern and highland Perthshire, helping achieve significant savings in energy bills. It is a regular source of free advice for communities across the local area.

The thinking behind Climate Cafés is to create a space in which people with shared interests and common purpose can come together to make community, regional and global connections, and to create the political space in which that action can be emphatic. I suppose that that last component is critical at this moment in time. The political environment in which we all live just now is highly charged and intensely contested. Today, I want to avoid getting bogged down in why we find ourselves where we are. What I want to do is make an appeal for us to find the space to have the essential conversations that we must have to deliver the long-term societal change that is necessary to deliver net zero. Without that realistic and urgent discussion and the necessary action that must follow, we run a very high—if not inevitable—risk of failing in the mission to achieve net zero. If we fail in that endeavour, we will have made the sustainability of our planet and of our communities very precarious.

We must find places where people can be drawn together and barriers can be broken down, and take collective action. We cannot allow ourselves to be dwarfed by the enormity of the challenge, and we cannot think that it is the responsibility of somebody else to act. We all have to be involved.

That is the great strength of the Climate Café initiative. Climate Cafés serve as a welcoming

forum for all, irrespective of people’s initial stance on, or knowledge of, climate issues. By cultivating a spirit of unity and building bridges in our communities, the initiative shatters the paralysing belief that, if we cannot do everything, we should do nothing. Instead, it champions the idea that every single step counts and that every individual’s action can accumulate to a powerful collective response to the environmental challenges that we face.

In conclusion, one of the many thought-provoking projects that the Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café has taken forward was to enlist the community in the creation of bunting to be displayed at COP21 in Paris. Local residents were invited to create images on the theme of love of the planet. One that caught my eye was that of an oak tree accompanied by the message “For the Love of Birnam Oak”, which was a reference to the oak tree in Birnam wood that is celebrated in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”.

I think that we are entitled to conclude that the Climate Café that was started in Dunkeld and Birnam is a profound example of the old saying “From tiny acorns mighty oaks will grow.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** For what it is worth, Mr Swinney, I think that you coped admirably with your first members’ business debate in 17 years.

12:57

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** I congratulate John Swinney on securing his first members’ business debate in a very long time, and I thank him for educating me today. I came into this debate not really knowing what a Climate Café is. I assumed that it is an actual cafe but, of course, it is not. It can be a series of local projects or forums, as Mr Swinney said, that address environmental concerns. I see behind me in the public gallery a number of people who are, I assume, involved in the movement.

Having come into the debate not knowing very much, I thank the Climate Café for sending members a briefing and outlining some of the really good projects that are around. One that struck me was one that Mr Swinney mentioned, which is the HEAT Project in Blairgowrie and Rattray, which gives direct energy-saving advice to more than 700 households in Perthshire. That seems to me to be a really good example of how the Climate Café movement can work.

I accept that the movement started in Perthshire, but it has expanded and has gone beyond there. We had Climate Cafés at COP26 in Glasgow and there is one in Aberdeen. I see from the briefing that there is one in Oregon and that there are others elsewhere in the world.

Having started off as a bit of a sceptic who thought that the idea seemed to be a bit vague and woolly, I find myself warming to it. If the Climate Café movement wants to get in touch with me with a view to doing something in Lanarkshire, I would be glad to hear from it.

13:14

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I thank John Swinney for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is interesting that, as politics becomes increasingly divided, and this Parliament does likewise, I find that these members' business debates are where we can have more rational discussion of what are serious issues. This morning, I had the pleasure of meeting Jess Pepper and the volunteers who are here today—as well as an old, dear friend of mine—and I learned a lot more about the thinking behind the initiative, and the engagement and involvement that goes on. I also met pupils from Breadalbane academy in Aberfeldy and Dunkeld primary school, and I think that ensuring the involvement of people from that age range, as well as from the rest of the community, is the right way to go forward.

On the point about the vision, even over these past weeks, we have seen climate change becoming a dividing issue between political parties—I never thought that that would happen, but, sadly, it has. I often think that the issue is not about my generation; I have children and grandchildren, and it is about their future. How do we tackle the issues that they face?

Listening to what people were saying this morning, I was reminded of my time as a councillor in Fife, when I was proud of the fact that Fife Council had the best recycling rates in the country. I put that down to the work that had been done in schools, which had driven that agenda and done a load of work around why it is important to recycle and have a clean environment. I was convinced that those pupils were going home and saying to their parents that they should do things differently and recycle. That was a bottom-up approach and, eventually, if the successes to date continue, all these politicians can be turfed out and we can put people in their place who will put the issue first, rather than party politics or their personal political careers.

As I say, I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate. The fact that Climate Cafés are community led and are places where, as John Swinney says, local people can have a cup of tea, a biscuit and a chat means that they will be more successful in building a movement to demand action on climate change. Sometimes, people say, "Look at China and India. How are we in Scotland going to make a difference?" My first reply will

often be that it is about providing leadership, and that those countries, which are much bigger than us and have massive populations—there are more than 1.5 billion people in China—are making massive investments in renewables, and, when the point comes at which they turn the corner and make progress on the issue, we do not want to still be sitting back and arguing among ourselves about the greatest threat to our future.

Through discussion with the volunteers this morning, I heard about various things that they can do. There can be pop-up Climate Cafés in schools, churches, pubs and so on to generate a discussion around climate change, so that people are less sceptical and more willing to see that they can take action.

I have also looked at Grow West Fife, which is similar to some of the projects that are described in the briefing that members received. It has talked about having a climate garden where people can grow food. That kind of initiative, which is similar to the allotment movement, can have an influence on local authorities.

In my view, local authorities and the Scottish Government could do a lot more on initiatives such as allotments. However, taking a bottom-up approach and getting resources into communities so that they can lead will be helpful. This week, I highlighted the postcode lottery around Scotland for electric car chargers: some places have more than others. In highlighting that, I was making the point that we should involve communities in the process, as they will know best where chargers should be, as well as what kind of chargers, and how they should be operated and run for the benefit of the community. Models such as the Climate Café will lead to that kind of approach, as it talks about swap shops, reducing food costs and supporting people in that way.

In conclusion, I am very pleased that we are having this debate. There needs to be a bottom-up approach. I congratulate everyone who has come to the chamber and everyone who is involved in those projects. I wish them the best for the future.

13:06

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I congratulate John Swinney on securing the debate. The motion recognises the role of his constituents in establishing the first Climate Café in Scotland, the role that Climate Cafés play in facilitating conversations and action on climate, and how their reach has grown. Having spent much of my childhood living in Perthshire with my grandparents in Stanley, I am delighted that the Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café is leading the way.

As the motion describes it, Climate Café's create a

"welcoming, inclusive, safe space within a community that is open to everyone to chat and act on climate".

I do not need to tell anyone that the north-east is home to a shifting energy industry. Therefore, the narrative on climate can often be framed within an industrial context, through discussions about opportunities in green jobs, green industrial development or new infrastructure supporting the energy transition. I do not need to tell anyone about the impact of those changes and how, often, they are most keenly felt in communities and businesses, and in employment, as well as through changes to the nature and structure of neighbourhoods.

A just transition seeks to ensure that all voices are included in the process of change. Just last week, the Minister for Energy and the Environment updated the Parliament on the forthcoming energy strategy and just transition plan. She stated:

"The views of local communities are of the utmost importance. It is vital that everyone has the opportunity to engage in decisions about future development."—[*Official Report*, 28 September 2023; c 59.]

Climate Cafés are an important and accessible vehicle to make that happen. I acknowledge the commitment of the North East Scotland Climate Action Network and Aberdeen Climate Action in bringing people in the north-east together to talk about climate and supporting local action groups and projects. Earlier this week, with help from Jess Pepper, who has been mentioned already, I had the pleasure of joining the Aberdeen Climate Café, where members heard from the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, Lorna Slater, as well as from Skills Development Scotland and Borders College. Participants asked a wide range of questions, covering everything from hydrogen to skills passports, women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and what a circular economy is.

I cannot talk about community participation in the context of climate without acknowledging Professor Tavis Potts, the dean for environmental sustainability at the University of Aberdeen, for his work on the social dimensions of climate and energy, as well as his commitment to deepening social participation in the transition in the north-east through climate assemblies and participatory engagement.

The reach of Climate Cafés goes much further than just local communities. In that regard, I thank one of John Swinney's constituents—a member of Blairgowrie Climate Café—who kindly sent me beautiful photos of St Fittick's park, which is a green space in the heart of my constituency that is under threat from industrial development linked to

the energy sector. That lovely gesture reflected the wider investment that Climate Café members have in our world, beyond their communities and neighbourhoods.

Given the choices that we face about how we live and the legacy that we want to leave our children and grandchildren, Climate Cafés will continue to play their part in important community conversations, engagement and action, and I look forward to seeing them develop and expand across Scotland. I thank John Swinney again for bringing forward the debate.

13:10

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I thank John Swinney for bringing forward this members' business debate, which I gather is his first in 17 years. I was trying to remember what the previous debate was about—I might even have spoken in it. It is clear that he has been a strong advocate for the communities in his constituency and for community action in his constituency for many years. I am delighted that he chose Climate Cafés as the topic for the debate, because they are a Perthshire success story that has spread around the world.

I notice that many people who have been involved in Climate Cafés in Scotland are with us in the chamber. I have met a number of those wonderful people, who do fantastic work in their communities. I pay tribute to Jess Pepper, who has been an astonishing climate leader in Scotland for many years, following on from her father's work, and a fantastic community activist in Dunkeld and Birnam.

I would like to mention a young woman called Ruby Flatley—a young activist who came through Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café. At the age of 13, she led and spoke at the huge climate march that took place here in Edinburgh just ahead of the Paris conference of the parties. At that time, she was running a series of youth projects through Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café. I am pleased to say that I understand that she is still involved in the Climate Café movement today. I welcomed her to the Parliament in 2016, when she was my nominated local hero at the opening ceremony. It is wonderful to see the movement nurture and empower young people.

It is clear that communities need to be at the heart of climate action. Over the past couple of weeks, we have seen climate action undermined and we have seen conspiracy theories being given a platform at the highest level of United Kingdom politics. The need for public discussion, education, awareness and empowerment is so important.

We can never take it for granted that some kind of implicit social licence comes with climate action.

The conversation will change over the years. I notice that the conversation in Dunkeld and Birnam about the A9 dualling project, for example, is very different and has changed over the years.

Climate Cafés are important for education and as a laboratory of ideas for action. I do not know whether Mr Swinney remembers the first agreement between the Scottish Greens and the Scottish National Party, which was back in 2007. It was quite thin, but we did agree to establish a climate challenge fund to provide effective funding and seed action in communities. That fund was successful and ran for more than a decade. The Government is now investing in climate action hubs to take action up to the next level and pull together initiatives on the ground. Last week in Stirling, the minister, Lorna Slater, announced a range of hubs.

Such hubs can build only on what is established on the ground. The role of Climate Cafés is to incubate new ideas and get the conversation going to build the innovation. An excellent example of that, which Mr Swinney mentioned, comes from the HEAT Project in Blairgowrie, which emerged from a Climate Café conversation that recognised that those of us who live in properties in rural Scotland that are hard to heat need support and bespoke advice. That is exactly what the HEAT Project has been providing.

Perhaps the cabinet secretary can respond to the following points in her concluding remarks. I urge the Government to look at how we can make room within that community climate funding to support that kind of initiative because, important as it is to scale up initiatives that are already there on the ground, even mighty Perthshire oaks have to grow from acorns. The important role of the Climate Cafés is to seed those ideas around Scotland and around the world, so that they can be built on and scaled up and really deliver the action that we need to tackle the climate emergency. I hope that the Government can find ways to support and to grow that movement and to inspire future generations of people such as Ruby.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I invite Màiri McAllan to respond to the debate.

13:15

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):** It is a pleasure to do so. The discussion today has demonstrated that, even in the face of the magnitude of the global climate emergency, our people and communities can have a substantial impact when they get the opportunity to come together and act.

I thank John Swinney for bringing forward this debate, which is centred on the people, places

and issues that he is so passionate about. After 17 years of Mr Swinney's doing one or two other things, it is great to have the debate today, and I know how thrilled he was to be able to bring the debate and his constituents to the Scottish Parliament. I am grateful to them for all the work that they have been doing to date and I very much look forward to seeing them all when I visit Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café later this month.

Moving towards becoming a net zero nation will require all aspects of Scottish society to embrace significant change. Imposing a one-size-fits-all approach will never create the desired outcomes and nor will it secure people's buy-in to the net zero transition. Instead, it is essential that, as we change, we empower people to develop solutions that are appropriate for them and their local circumstances. That is why I warmly welcome the commitment of those who are involved in Climate Cafés to provide that safe space for people from all backgrounds and across generations to come together—we know that great things happen when people get the opportunity to do that.

Climate Cafés in Scotland are led by a network of dedicated volunteers. I am grateful for their hard work and for John Swinney's continued support of them, which has enabled the network to grow in all the ways that we have heard about today. For my part, I would like the Scottish Government to provide more practical support, and I have asked my officials to explore with the leaders of the Climate Cafés ways in which we can do that, including through providing funding. I will discuss more of that with them when I visit them in the coming weeks.

Last week, during Scotland's climate week, I got the chance to spend time with the Fountainbridge Canalside Community Trust and I was also fortunate enough to visit the incredible children of St Bernard's primary school in Glasgow, which is one of the many schools that is supported by our climate action schools programme and which runs its own Climate Café in partnership with the local community. As well as those groups and Dunkeld and Birnam Climate Café, I am privileged to work alongside groups in my constituency, including Climate Action Strathaven, the One Carlisle Area Network, WATIF—the Woolfords, Auchengray and Tarbrax Improvement Foundation—and Biggar Area Climate Care.

The passion of the individuals who give up their time and come together to work on these matters is a real inspiration for us all. In Scotland, that demonstrates that our communities are uniquely placed to play that critical role in shaping and driving action, which is why we are putting considerable support behind them.

Mark Ruskell was absolutely right to mention the climate action hubs. The programme is designed to enable that essential collaborative approach to driving the behavioural change that we know needs to come, and which is not always easy. Mark Ruskell mentioned that we are expanding the network. Last week, a further four climate action hubs were commenced, for Forth valley, Dumfries and Galloway, Inverclyde and Dundee. That brings us to 10 hubs across the country, with more proposals currently being assessed. We have committed to delivering a national network of climate hubs in this year's programme for government. I believe very strongly—this is particularly reinforced by my experience of working with them—that those hubs, which are designed by and for our communities, will be one of the significant drivers of progress on the climate front in the coming years.

Beyond the hub programme, we are supporting action in a number of other ways. Our climate action towns initiative, which is led by Architecture and Design Scotland, is supporting nine small towns, which were selected because they had, historically, been less engaged in climate action and are at particular risk from the impacts of a changing climate.

The communities in those towns are being supported to develop local plans that focus on climate action, give them a voice and help to ensure that the transition, as they make it locally, is most suited to their needs and lived experiences. The initiative, now in its third year, has provided learnings that we in Government—as well as local authorities, as Alex Rowley rightly identified—and other public bodies can draw on in the way that we create our policy pathways.

We are also supporting partners to build capacity for collective action at local level. For example, the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network has been supported to lead conversations about climate change in its local areas. In the past financial year alone, 54 new climate conversations facilitators have been trained, and conversations have been held with 400 people across Scotland. That is backed up in many ways by the Scottish Government's plans on public engagement for climate change. Our public engagement strategy clearly sets out three core aims that we hope to enable the people of Scotland to achieve. First, we want them to understand how climate change relates to their lives. Secondly, it is important that they actively participate in shaping a fair, just and inclusive approach. Lastly, we want them to take action.

It is in line with those objectives that, as members will be aware, the Government recently launched the climate engagement fund, which is a £0.5 million pot to support trusted messengers to

engage directly with their audiences on the climate emergency. The fund has received a huge amount of interest, as I am sure members can imagine, and we will shortly publish details of how we plan to allocate that funding.

The reason why we are here—the reason why the volunteers at our Climate Cafés do this work—is that the recent United Nations stocktake report underlined the urgency of what it called

“a systemic transformation of every aspect of society”,

if we are to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. We must be committed to responding to that need and to ensuring that we support households and communities to embrace the quite rapid change that is now required. On that point, I echo John Swinney's appeal that we continue, very proactively and determinedly, to find space for those realistic and urgent discussions and the requisite action that will help us to combat climate change.

There can be no greater task than helping to foster a safe, secure and green future for generations to come. The truth is that Government and business must do the heavy lifting in this regard, but no one person is too small to make a difference in and of themselves. Equally, we are far greater when we come together in our communities and in our cafes, and when we work together to make a difference. I will certainly continue to give all my support in this role, which I am fortunate to occupy, to our Climate Café network in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, cabinet secretary. That concludes the debate. I encourage Mr Swinney not to wait a further 17 years before bringing his next one.

13:23

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## Portfolio Question Time

### Social Justice

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions on social justice. I remind members that questions 3, 4 and 7 are grouped, so I will take any supplementaries after all three questions have been answered. As usual, any member who wants to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. The usual appeal for brevity in questions and responses applies. I call Alasdair Allan, who joins us remotely.

#### Low-income Households (Green Energy)

1. **Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how its housing strategy is supporting people on low incomes to move towards greener energy use in their homes. (S6O-02600)

**The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie):** We support people on low incomes to move towards, and benefit from, greener energy through our local area-based schemes and our national warmer homes Scotland service. The new warmer homes Scotland service relaunched earlier this week and aims to reach many more vulnerable households.

We support social landlords and their tenants to benefit from energy efficiency and heating improvements through our social housing net zero heat fund. We support every household in Scotland with free and impartial advice about greener energy use and lower energy bills from our Home Energy Scotland service.

**Alasdair Allan:** The vast majority of homes in my constituency, as the minister knows, rely on heating oils, liquefied petroleum gas—LPG—or electric storage heaters because they cannot connect to the gas grid. My constituency also has some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country. Is any additional support available to households in rural and island areas to help them to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and to move to greener heating solutions?

**Patrick Harvie:** Yes, indeed. We recognise that households in rural and island communities face higher costs and experience some of the highest rates of fuel poverty in Scotland. The targeting and level of support that is available reflects that situation: since last December, we provided an extra £1,500 on top of our £7,500 Home Energy Scotland heating energy efficiency grants, due to the higher costs in rural areas. Fuel-poor

households in off-gas areas benefit from higher levels of funding, too, as part of the area-based schemes and warmer homes Scotland service, and our social housing net zero heat fund, which makes £200 million available up to 2026 to support social landlords in that agenda. Rural areas will benefit from an 11 per cent uplift, while remote areas can get 22 per cent more funding.

I visited many social housing providers including, most recently, Argyll Community Housing Association, which has already installed almost 1,400 air-source heat pumps, which covers more than a quarter of its housing stock. A great many of those organisations are leading the way.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** A recent parliamentary question that the minister answered showed the massive disparity between Edinburgh and Glasgow in respect of the number of homes that have been retrofitted through the social housing net zero heat fund. In the past two financial years, Edinburgh has been awarded a total of 116 grants, in comparison with Glasgow's 7,260—Glasgow accounts for 65 per cent of all grants that are delivered in Scotland. I appreciate that Glasgow has a higher number of social housing landlords than other parts of Scotland, but that does not seem to account for the disparity. Why has Glasgow received a disproportionately high number of grants, and what is happening for other parts of the country?

**Patrick Harvie:** The social housing net zero heat fund is available throughout the country and requires organisations to bid. We work very well with social housing providers throughout the country. I am happy to explore those figures, if Mr Briggs wants to write to me about them particularly.

The most important thing is that social housing providers in all parts of the country—urban, rural, east, west, north and south—are already benefiting, and will continue to benefit, from that investment, and we are keen to continue to work with them.

#### Victims of Domestic Abuse (Leavers Fund)

2. **Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how and when it will introduce a leavers fund for victims of domestic abuse, which would provide a social security payment for those who feel the need to flee their homes. (S6O-02601)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** We strongly believe that financial uncertainty should not be a barrier to women leaving an abusive relationship, which is why we are firmly committed to looking at what we can do to provide financial support when needed.

We continue to work closely with organisations, including Scottish Women's Aid and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to explore how a fund that provides immediate financial assistance could work in practice and be best targeted. We hope to be able to provide further detail of that work very shortly.

**Sharon Dowey:** Domestic abuse crimes have risen to record levels in recent years. A leavers fund to help survivors of abuse to leave their homes safely would be a big step forward, and charities say that it would save lives. It was agreed to by the Scottish Government in 2020, but we still do not have a timeline for its implementation. Is it still going to go ahead and, if so, when does the cabinet secretary expect the fund to be operational?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** As I said in my original answer, we expect to make an announcement on the fund very shortly. The Government remains committed to recognising that we need to support women, and to ensuring that they have any support that they require to leave an unsafe or abusive relationship. I repeat that we will make an announcement shortly.

### Social Housing Shortage (Edinburgh)

**3. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it is considering specific solutions to support the City of Edinburgh Council, and other relevant organisations, to address Edinburgh's social housing shortage and growing population pressures, including providing additional resources in its 2024-25 budget. (S6O-02602)

**The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan):** I have met Edinburgh's housing convener on a number of occasions and have invited bespoke proposals to address the specific challenges facing the capital city that have formed the basis of in-depth discussion about potential areas of Scottish Government support for Edinburgh. My officials regularly engage with the City of Edinburgh Council on additional expenditure capacity that it might have, which depends on the overall availability of resources and delivery of its existing programme. We are making £234 million available in Edinburgh during the current parliamentary session to support affordable housing delivery. Decisions about capital spending for 2024-25 will be presented to Parliament in due course.

**Ben Macpherson:** I appreciate that there are severe pressures on public investment, and that the Scottish Government has made significant investment in housing nationally since 2007 and is making investment in the period ahead. I also appreciate the minister's communication about

discussing bespoke solutions with the City of Edinburgh Council.

As part of that, can the Scottish Government commit to altering the way in which the affordable housing supply programme funding is allocated through the strategic housing investment plan, to build more social houses in Edinburgh more quickly, considering population pressure and the city's specific issues? Will the minister consider how additional resource could be provided to the City of Edinburgh Council to address the serious issue of homelessness?

**Paul McLennan:** The strategic housing investment framework, which is the mechanism for allocating funding to local authorities, was agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in 2012. It covers 30 of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland, with Edinburgh and Glasgow sitting outwith the framework. If Edinburgh wishes to open up that discussion, it should do so through COSLA.

In the current parliamentary session, funding for Edinburgh is 21 per cent more than it was during the previous session and, last year, we were able to direct an additional £10 million to investment in Edinburgh. Officials continue to engage regularly with council partners to discuss programme capacity for now and for areas of future development.

### Housing Shortage (Edinburgh)

**4. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the City of Edinburgh Council regarding funding to address the housing shortage resulting from population growth. (S6O-02603)

**The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan):** I probably answered that in my answer to the previous question. Affordable housing supply programme investment in Edinburgh is at a record level, at £234 million. My officials are in regular discussion with the City of Edinburgh Council about additional capacity that it might have, not just for now but for strategic areas of investment in the future. As I said in my answer to the previous question, in 2022-23, the Edinburgh council area benefited from a further £10 million. Resource planning assumptions are in place for each year up to 2025-26.

**Sarah Boyack:** I thank the minister for his answer and declare an interest—my former work with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations.

I am sure that the minister will be aware that, in the past three years, the amount of housing that has been built for social rent is way below the level that is needed, and that the city has been underfunded for years. Will the minister commit

today to addressing the fundamental issue of increasing the share of funding for Edinburgh?

Does the minister agree with the City of Edinburgh Council's estimate that 1,000 new social rented homes are needed every year over the next decade? Will he accept that Scottish Government funding is critical to delivering the required level of growth, given the population increases that we have and the fact that the house-building sector needs confidence and certainty to deliver the supply change, the staff and the land that we need to build that housing?

**Paul McLennan:** I go back to the point that I made to Ben Macpherson. We are in discussions with the council about its capacity to look at that in the coming years of this parliamentary session. On looking at other strategic development sites, we are in discussions with the City of Edinburgh Council about what we can do to work with it in that regard. As I said, we are in regular discussions and are talking about bespoke solutions not just in resource funding but in capital funding.

#### **Housing Shortage (Edinburgh)**

**7. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what additional resources are being allocated to help to support the City of Edinburgh Council to address housing shortages, including the number of families in temporary accommodation, in light of figures showing that over a quarter of all children in temporary accommodation are in Edinburgh. (S6O-02606)

**The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan):** This year, as I have said, the City of Edinburgh Council is receiving a record £234 million to address its housing priorities. I refer members to the answers that I gave to Sarah Boyack and Ben Macpherson.

The number of households with children that are in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh is concerning. I do not dispute that. Households with children spend longer, on average, in temporary accommodation, due to the demand for larger homes.

We are in bespoke discussions about what we need to do for Edinburgh, specifically. We are working to acquire more housing for use as permanent homes and to maximise the use of existing homes. We will invest at least £60 million this year, through the affordable housing supply programme, to support our national acquisition plan, which will help to boost affordable housing supply in Edinburgh. We invite applications for that.

**Miles Briggs:** I am not sure whether the minister or the cabinet secretary are aware of the emergency situation that we are seeing in

Edinburgh. The latest figures show that 2,265 children are living in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh, which is up 20 per cent on last year and is an increase of 930 per cent since 2002. We need more action than what we have heard in the minister's three answers today.

As Ben Macpherson said, the capital faces unique challenges, with higher land costs and greater demand for housing. Will the Scottish Government consider a temporary accommodation fund specifically for Edinburgh, to look at new solutions and models to try to address the challenges?

**Paul McLennan:** I have a number of points to make on that. I have talked about the bespoke conversations on capital and resource that are going on. On making people fully aware of the situation, I have met the City of Edinburgh Council's housing convener three or four times since being in post, and I have another meeting coming up shortly. I met Shelter on the matter very recently, and I have met Crisis in that regard, as well.

The temporary accommodation task and finish group has made recommendations, and I have talked about the £60 million for acquisitions, and about allocations. Those are parts of the discussions that we are having with the City of Edinburgh Council at the moment. Discussions are on-going and will continue. Scottish Government officials meet the council every week and, as I said, I regularly meet the council and will meet it again very shortly.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I note that these are questions about the City of Edinburgh Council's budget and housing. I call a supplementary question from Audrey Nicoll.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** The £60 million national acquisition plan that was announced this summer looks set to accelerate the Scottish Government's work to get people and families out of temporary accommodation and into a space that they can call their own. Will the minister provide an update on the roll-out of the fund and the work that is being done with experts and local government to ensure that it is effective?

**Paul McLennan:** At the moment, the £60 million is available for local authorities to apply for. A number of authorities have indicated an interest, and discussions are on-going in that regard. We work very closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as well as with key partners: I have mentioned previous meetings with Shelter and Crisis. There have been significant discussions about the fund.

### Families in Poverty (Energy Costs)

**5. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the social justice secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the support available to families experiencing poverty, including as a result of high energy costs. (S6O-02604)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** Tackling poverty is at the heart of what we do as a Government. I recently convened the first meeting of the new tackling child poverty ministerial oversight group, which will meet regularly to drive action where required. We know that households are struggling after years of austerity, a hard Brexit and economic mismanagement at the hands of the Conservative Government in Westminster. That is why we have allocated almost £3 billion to tackle poverty and protect people from harm during the on-going cost of living crisis, with the fuel insecurity fund tripled to £30 million this year.

**Michelle Thomson:** I welcome—especially during challenge poverty week—the significant interventions of the Scottish Government using the limited devolved powers that are at its disposal. Does the cabinet secretary agree that poverty reduction in Scotland is undermined by the, frankly, illogical approach to social security in Westminster and that an essentials guarantee from the United Kingdom Government would go a long way to alleviating the disproportionate pressure that is being placed on devolved budgets?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Michelle Thomson raises a very important point, and I absolutely agree with her on it. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that if, this year, the universal credit standard allowance were set at £120 per week for a single adult and £200 for a couple, that could lift 1.8 million people out of poverty, including 600,000 children across the UK. Levels of universal credit have been too low for too long, and the Scottish Government has called on the UK Government to introduce an essentials guarantee. In addition, I have written to my UK counterpart on the issue.

It is very important that we all do everything that we can to ensure that social security benefits adequately cover the cost of essentials and better protect our most vulnerable people.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** In “Shetland’s Local Annual Child Poverty Action Report”, it was estimated that a household in Shetland would need to earn £104,000 a year to avoid being in fuel poverty. Shetland’s cooler and windier climate, poor insulation levels and lack of availability of the cheapest energy options further compound the effect on families of high energy

costs. What is the Scottish Government’s support strategy to prevent children and families who are experiencing poverty from living in cold and unheated homes this winter?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I direct Beatrice Wishart to the answer that my colleague Patrick Harvie gave to Alasdair Allan earlier, which dealt with many of those issues. In summary, this year, we have allocated £350 million to heat, energy efficiency and fuel poverty measures, £119 million of which is targeted at fuel-poor households. Funding for our updated warmer homes Scotland service, which restarted on Monday, stands at £55 million, which is its highest-ever level. The budget for our local authority area-based schemes also continues at the record level of £64 million this year.

### Social Justice Interventions (Independent Analysis)

**6. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will commission independent analysis of the impact that its interventions, including the Scottish child payment, carers allowance supplement and the baby box, have had on social justice. (S6O-02605)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** We have published evaluations of the Scottish child payment, carers allowance supplement and the baby box. Those evaluations, which included research by independent contractors, showed a positive impact on social justice in Scotland, with the Scottish child payment contributing to the overall aim of reducing child poverty, the young carers grant having a positive impact on carers’ finances and their feelings of wellbeing, and the baby box having a positive impact on families, particularly for first-time, younger and lower-income parents.

**Christine Grahame:** The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s annual “Poverty in Scotland” report, which was published this week, highlighted the significant impact that the increased Scottish child payment is likely to have had on child poverty levels. I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and ask her how I can access that data, which would be useful in showing the impact that not just the Scottish child payment but all the Scottish Government’s interventions are having on child poverty.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** We know that our actions are making a difference, because 90,000 fewer children are expected to live in relative and absolute poverty this year as a result of Scottish Government policies. That includes lifting an estimated 50,000 children out of relative poverty through the investment in our Scottish child payment, which Professor Danny Dorling has

described as the biggest fall in child poverty anywhere in Europe for at least 40 years.

I would be happy to provide Christine Grahame and, indeed, other members with further details of the work that we are doing to ensure that we are on the right track to meet our statutory targets and eradicate child poverty in Scotland. The Scottish Government's policies are making a difference. What a shame that, at the same time, the UK Government's welfare policies are pushing children into poverty.

### Cladding Remediation

**8. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on cladding remediation in Scotland. (S6O-02607)

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

We are undertaking a robust programme of single building assessments. Those assessments are being completed and remediation work is already under way. We are committed to undertaking a stock survey and ensuring that buildings in the pilot programme are on a single building assessment pathway.

**Tess White:** The reality is that progress on removing dangerous cladding has been pitiful. The Scottish Government has the financial resources that it needs but has spent barely 4 per cent of the United Kingdom Government's allocation for cladding remediation, and we now hear that more powers are needed in order to make progress. Can the minister provide a timeline for the proposed cladding remediation bill and explain what action will be taken to expedite the process in the meantime?

**Paul McLennan:** Obviously, I disagree with the member's assessment of the progress that has been made so far. It is key that we work with developers as we develop our programme. I have met with them on a number of occasions, both in round-table meetings and individually. It is important to work extensively with them, and we are working closely in that regard.

We are going through the bill process at the moment. I met the member's colleague Miles Briggs a few weeks ago to talk about the principles of the bill. I agreed to meet him again, and I will be happy to meet Ms White, when full details of the bill are available in order to discuss them further.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** The cladding remediation bill is a welcome addition to the programme for government. Will the minister elaborate on how the new powers in the bill will build on the groundwork that has already been carried out by the Scottish Government and its local partners to identify high-rise buildings in need of remedial work?

**Paul McLennan:** We have had a number of meetings with developers. We will introduce a bill to support the delivery of the cladding remediation programme, which will prioritise the safety of home owners and residents. My discussions with home owners and developers, as well as the evidence from our pilot work, have highlighted key issues, which include the challenges of securing consent for assessment and remediation work—especially when dealing with non-resident home owners—and of delivering on the commitment to create a register of buildings that have undergone assessment and require remediation work to be carried out.

We are committed to ensuring that developers make a fair contribution to the programme and to identifying buildings in order to understand the scope of the challenge.

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

## Veterans and Armed Forces Community

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10743, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button. I call the minister, Graeme Dey, to speak to and move the motion.

14:53

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** I am delighted to present the Scottish Government's seventh annual update to Parliament on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland. This year's update is particularly special for me because it is the first since I began my second stint as the minister responsible for veterans, a role that I was honoured to return to some six months ago.

Since 2017, members of the Scottish Parliament have gathered annually to reflect on the work being done in Scotland to improve support and access to services for our veterans, their families and the wider armed forces community. Members have heard my predecessor and me say this before, and I know that such phrases can sometimes sound quite trite, but the Government is truly committed to ensuring that our veterans and their families are not disadvantaged because of their service in the armed forces, and we really do want Scotland to be their destination of choice when they leave the military. I know from previous iterations of this debate that that aspiration is shared across the chamber.

Today, we published our annual progress report, which details fully the work that we have undertaken over the past 12 months. I am sure that members will already have read it from cover to cover. The debate takes place against the backdrop of the veterans commissioner's assessment of the progress that has been made against her recommendations.

Returning to the role of Minister for Veterans, I have been struck by two things. The first of those is the continuing dedication of our veterans charitable sector, without which Scotland could not make the offering that it does. The second is the impacts of Covid and the cost of living crisis, which have set new challenges for the delivery of support and for the income streams of the organisations at the forefront of providing some of that.

On a personal note, it has been good to meet up again with some familiar faces. I was pleased to be asked to speak at a Veterans Housing Scotland event in Glasgow city chambers in June. In July, I visited Erskine veterans village, and that was followed by an absolutely brilliant visit to Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company. Last month, I was hosted at HMP Shotts, where I met some of the veterans there—individuals in custody—and unveiled a fantastic painting at the entrance to the prison's remembrance area.

I was also humbled to attend this year's memorial gathering with the McCraes Battalion Trust at Contalmaison, in northern France, to honour those who fell during the battle of the Somme and to participate in marking the 70th anniversary of the Korean war at the Scottish Korean war memorial, in a peaceful and beautiful setting in the Bathgate hills.

We should never forget such sacrifices. In that context, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Keith Brown, who was behind the Scottish Government's launch this year of the medals replacement scheme, under which we will fund the cost of replacing lost or stolen medals for eligible veterans who are resident in Scotland.

Collaboration is essential to ensuring that different organisations, each of which brings something unique to the table, can come together to deliver a coherent approach to the provision of support and services. That is all the more important in the current financially challenging circumstances. The Scottish Government has sought to encourage collaboration through our annual £500,000 Scottish veterans fund, which I was delighted to launch at Community Veterans Support in Glasgow earlier this year. We have further demonstrated our support for collaboration by agreeing to fund the unforgotten forces consortium to support older veterans for an additional three years.

This year's veterans fund prioritised support for veterans who have been impacted by the cost of living crisis and for early service leavers. In total, 17 projects have been funded for 2023-24, six of which offer support to veterans impacted by the cost of living crisis and two of which support early service leavers.

This year, I also welcomed the publication of Lord Ethernan's "LGBT Veterans Independent Review", which examines the effects of the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the United Kingdom armed forces. The review is an emotive and, at times, extremely difficult read, but it is hugely important that people have had the opportunity to share their experiences, and I want to acknowledge the bravery of those who did. It is imperative that action is taken on the report's recommendations, and we are looking closely at

how best to deliver on the two suggestions that were directed at Scotland, which are around improving diversity and inclusivity in relation to healthcare and housing providers, to ensure that veterans do not face a repeat of the homophobic policies that they suffered in the armed forces.

I will talk more about the future work of the Scottish veterans commissioner later. I was pleased that her annual progress report was published last week. It is important to note that Susie Hamilton highlighted that we are making encouraging progress in a number of areas, notably health and wellbeing and employability and skills. We must not lose sight of that excellent work and the commissioner's recognition of the efforts that we continue to make in driving forward work on the outstanding recommendations.

However, a key function of the commissioner's role is to offer objective scrutiny, and we must therefore acknowledge her areas of concern. This year, Susie Hamilton highlighted two such areas—the pace of delivery of the veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan and the veterans homelessness prevention pathway. She noted recent encouraging progress on the former, and members will know that a board was established to take forward an implementation plan. We look forward to receiving a fully developed and costed plan from the board this month. We are grateful for the work of the board members and the implementation team to date, as we continue to prioritise the delivery of high-quality mental health services for veterans in Scotland.

It is also important to remind members that we continue to jointly fund the Veterans First Point network, which offers a one-stop shop for veterans, and that we have provided £1.4 million of funding for specialist and community outreach services through Combat Stress every year since 2018-19. I am also pleased to say that we have already progressed elements of the recommendations in the veterans homelessness prevention pathway.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** I compliment the minister on his arranging round tables across all parties in the Parliament to allow the notification of problems, and other communications, to pass more quickly than would perhaps happen otherwise. Will he join me in complimenting Forces Children Scotland and, in particular, the role of young people who are the children of veterans or of forces personnel? I wonder whether, later in his speech, he will be able to deal with some of the challenges that are faced by that group specifically.

**Graeme Dey:** All voices should be heard in the context of support for armed forces servicepeople and their families. If Martin Whitfield covers that in his speech, I will be happy to pick up on it in due

course. I will cover it to a degree as we move forward.

On homelessness, the Minister for Housing is actively considering where appropriate opportunities exist to raise the profile of veterans' housing and homelessness, as part of his regular discussions with organisations such as the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. He has also offered to meet the commissioner to discuss the matter further. That demonstrates our cross-Government commitment to veterans' issues. We will, of course, continue to prioritise the delivery of the outstanding recommendations.

Ensuring that veterans and their families move into meaningful, fulfilling employment after service continues to be a top priority. This year saw the launch of the military skills discovery tool. In addition, we remain committed to employing more veterans in the Scottish Government. I am delighted that veterans are now guaranteed an interview if they apply for a job in the organisation and meet the role's minimum criteria. This year, we also launched a campaign of working with the business community to help employers to further understand the benefits that veterans bring to the workforce.

When it comes to veterans' healthcare, a pilot general practice armed forces and veterans' recognition scheme was trialled for three months this year across nine health board areas. We are using feedback from the trial to further shape the scheme ahead of its national roll-out, later this year.

Obtaining greater data on the veterans' community is also a key priority, and I will talk about that more in my closing speech. We expect veterans-related data from the census next year and findings from three Scottish Government major household surveys and the UK-wide veterans' survey this year.

It is vitally important not to lose sight of the challenges that can be faced by the families of veterans and serving members of the armed forces. We are removing the barriers that some service families face in accessing funding for further education, and we continue to fund the national education officer to provide advice and data on the needs of service families in education in Scotland.

Despite the important work that we are doing to support veterans and their families, it is crucial to remember that they are ordinary citizens like you and me, and that, when they leave the armed forces, the overwhelming majority integrate into society perfectly well and go on to lead positive and fulfilling lives. They get a good job, find a suitable house and access appropriate healthcare.

We must all continue to challenge the outdated perception that veterans are somehow damaged by their experiences or are incapable of living a normal life like everyone else. That is simply not the case, and it is important to remember that. There should be a much greater focus on the huge contribution that veterans and their families make to the fabric of Scottish society and to communities across the nation. I hope that, in their speeches, members are able to balance the support that the minority of veterans may need with the positive impact that the overwhelming majority of veterans make.

I will highlight some of the many veterans who have transitioned from the military into civilian life in Scotland with immense success. Scott Simon, a Royal Air Force veteran of 20 years, has gone on to provide elite Olympic and Paralympic coaching, to chair Scotland Rugby League and, latterly, to be chief executive officer of Snowsport Scotland. Lesley Speedie, a former Army corporal, volunteered as a community first responder with the Scottish Ambulance Service, developed a community response hub during the pandemic and now chairs the Blackwood and Kirkmuirhill Resilience Group while studying community response and recovery from crisis at university.

Those are just two examples. I could give many more, and I am sure that members from all parties could do the same. Our veterans and their families, and our service families, continue to contribute a huge amount to our society, and I remain committed to providing the very best support for them.

I offer the Government's personal thanks to all the individuals and organisations that have contributed to the efforts during the past year, including those who continue to work hard every day to support our veterans and armed forces community.

I look forward to members' contributions and to responding in due course.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community, and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to society; further recognises that the contribution of veterans continues and grows as they move back into the communities that they served, with their experiences enriching society and providing a valuable and positive base for employers; supports the Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the progress made in delivering the Plan, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that there is a bit of time in hand, should they wish to make or take interventions.

15:04

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I would like to say that I fall into that category, as a veteran. I always struggle with saying that, because it makes me feel old. [*Interruption.*] I am old—okay. I hear some members saying that. I perhaps prefer to be called an ex-soldier.

Those of us on the Conservative benches are happy to support the motion. We were also pleased to contribute to and feed into it as the minister was drafting it. We, too, share the view that veterans bring a huge amount to society in Scotland.

Before I say any more about veterans, I pay tribute to our armed forces. We should never forget that veterans have probably served in conflicts around the world and that they allow us to sleep safely in our beds at night. They have never, as far as I am aware, as soldiers, sailors, airmen or whatever, challenged the fact that they might have to make the ultimate sacrifice.

I also acknowledge those who will always remain on duty, having paid that price. I have to say that I am slightly disappointed that there are no Greens in the chamber to contribute to the debate. They are quick to accept the safety that our service personnel bring, and it would be better if they were here to participate.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Just to make it clear, I am a pacifist, but that does not make me anti-Army. I want to put that on the record. I support the Army. I am anti-war, which is a very different matter.

**Edward Mountain:** I note Christine Grahame's position. In the 12 years that I was a soldier, I did all sorts of things. A lot of them were about supplying food to refugees and looking after refugee camps, which was not all about active soldiering. I pay tribute to Mr Brown for the work that he did in the services, too. Some of us contributed in other ways, and I believe that is why the armed services are vitally important.

I thank the veterans commissioner for all that she has done since she was appointed, and all the veterans commissioners who preceded her. Their job is incredibly important. I support the 81 recommendations—as, I know, the Government did—and I am pleased to see that 35 have been achieved. I think that it is perhaps a wonderful euphemism to say that 21 have been “absorbed into other outcomes”. I am not sure that I

understand that, but it means that there are 25 still to be delivered, which we should work on.

I welcome the veterans fund that the Scottish Government created. However, as the minister would expect me to say, I had expected and hoped that it would be bigger. In return, the minister would turn around and say, as they always do, "And where should that money come from?" My answer would, of course, be that veterans are vitally important and that we ought to consider them before we consider overseas trips and doing things overseas.

Nonetheless, the Government has done a lot of good things. The recruiting website is a great idea. It talks about the skills that soldiers bring and that we can use. We can also talk about the leadership that they bring and the fact that they are used to making decisions and quietly getting on with the job. The recruiting website will allow that to come across. I also like the "Welcome to Scotland" guide and the approach to stopping social isolation. Truthfully, I also like the fact that an additional 40 military skills have been taken into account and recognised in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. It is really important to remember all those things.

In relation to where work is still required, however, I will say a little bit about resettlement. Be under no illusion that leaving the armed forces is unsettling. It can be very difficult. As the report says, there needs to be claimed ownership by the people who are leaving. They are, in many cases, leaving their family, the organisation that they have worked with day and night, and their friends, whom they not only work with but socialise with. There is a huge need for people to do a lot before they leave and during the time that they are leaving, and to be helped to settle into the communities they move to afterwards.

**Martin Whitfield:** Last night, there was a very powerful reception here that was organised by Forces Children Scotland and Alexander Stewart. One thing that the young people spoke about was the challenge that their parents and carers had in transitioning out of the armed forces, particularly with regard to housing and with the practicalities of how to go about renting. Prior to that, all accommodation had been provided.

**Edward Mountain:** Martin Whitfield must have read my speech; I hope that I did not leak it. I will come to that, if I may.

The point is that things have moved on from the days when I left the Army. I was given £500 for a resettlement course and four days to get out of my house. However, the situation is deeply unsettling and we need to do more. The Army and the services could do more. There should be a better

focus on resettlement, and we could do more in Scotland to help people to settle in.

**Graeme Dey rose—**

**Edward Mountain:** I am running short of time. How much time do I have, Deputy Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Plenty of time.

**Graeme Dey:** I have two points to make. I do not disagree with much of what Edward Mountain has said. I hope that he agrees that one thing that we could do is raise awareness among the serving military about the ability to earn housing points while still serving. Awareness of what is on offer is an issue.

Does Edward Mountain also agree that one of the issues that we have—this is a good thing—is that many people leave the Army in one part of the UK to move to another part of it and many of them come to Scotland. There is the issue of making them aware of what is available in the country that they are moving to.

**Edward Mountain:** I think that that is right. The Ministry of Defence has a role to play in housing and helping people into it. I have badgered my colleagues down south about getting the MOD to make houses available, to allow people to move to the area that they want to settle in. Those MOD houses should be made available for a period of time while people get the opportunity to find alternative housing. I know that work is done on that, but we could do more. I find it deeply disappointing that there is empty service accommodation across Scotland. However, there are problems with leases and sorting those out, which I am sure members are aware of. We all need to work together on that.

It is not just about homelessness; it is also about not providing substandard accommodation. This year, the minister helped me to rehouse somebody who was in totally unsuitable housing. Frankly, that was a disgrace. When pushed, the council reacted quite hard.

There is a lot more that we could do in relation to the medical support that we give to our soldiers. We need to be aware that some of their medical records might not be as complete as other people's medical records, for very good reason. I believe that there is the ability to claim back from the UK Government for medication that is required as a result of their service. I am not sure that that is done in Scotland. Should that be done? There is a fund to allow people to do that—so I am told.

How much more time do I have, Deputy Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you a couple of minutes, Mr Mountain.

**Edward Mountain:** Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Where are we now? The minister made the point that our soldiers do integrate. It was not that long ago that I was in Kingussie, delivering leaflets—bizarrely enough—and I did not notice the ambulance that had come up behind me and almost nudged me before its sirens were put on. I have never jumped so quickly in all my life. I found that that was done by an ex-trooper whom I had served with in the Army. Bizarrely, not long after that, I was stopped by a traffic policeman with all the lights going—of course, that made my heart rush—and I found that he was an ex-sergeant who had served with me. He was paying me back for something that I said to him many years ago. Those things happen. He did not charge me—I had my MOT and insurance.

I have also met soldiers whom I served with driving lorries for big stores. We do reintegrate, and we do so very well. The fact that there are two veterans in the Parliament proves that.

In summary, soldiers, sailors and all servicemen and servicewomen do fit in, but we need help when we are moving. We bring huge skills to Scotland when we come to live here or return home here. Those skills include leadership, the ability to solve problems, diligence in the workplace, hard work on nearly all occasions, and loyalty. Veterans make a huge contribution to the communities that they join, and that is why, as a country, Scotland should welcome them with open arms.

15:15

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am pleased to be opening for Labour in today's debate on the Government motion on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland. I thank the minister for advance sight of the annual report on support for veterans, and I congratulate him on his reappointment to the post of Minister for Veterans, which I know he performs with great care and diligence.

It is important that we work across parties in the interests of those who serve and have served our country, particularly as they transition back to civilian life. Sir Edward Mountain, a Conservative member for the Highlands and Islands region, spoke powerfully about the implications and complexities around that.

Of course, there is a wider definition of what a veteran is, as many of our veterans are reservists who live in our communities, and have done all along. Veterans also have complex experiences, not least in recent years, following operational deployment overseas and the complexities of

dealing with the trauma and grief associated with it.

As my party's spokesperson for veterans and the armed forces in Scotland, I am in regular contact with veterans and their families, the third sector organisations providing support for them and other stakeholders, and, through that invaluable engagement, I am constantly learning and developing an understanding of the issues facing veterans, armed forces personnel and their families, and of the realities of their day-to-day lives. Indeed, just this week, I had the privilege, along with parliamentary colleagues, of visiting Glencorse barracks in Midlothian, which is home to the Army's initial assessment centre for Scotland and Northern England, as well as the Royal Highland Fusiliers, second battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, led by commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Dunn. We were afforded a fantastic immersive insight into the full journey of the young soldier, beginning with initial assessment training through to deployment on operations—indeed, a force protection company from 2 Scots is due to deploy to Erbil in Iraq in December for a three-month period.

In speaking to personnel and their families there, it was clear that they share a great pride in being part of the Army and the Scots regimental family, but they also shared with us some practical concerns regarding the costs of pursuing a career in the Army. I think that that is a critical consideration: how do we ensure that people are able to maintain their service for as long as they wish to do so and are not placed in the invidious position of having to terminate their service and perhaps prematurely become veterans?

A good example of that issue, which came up in discussion with soldiers and their families at the barracks, was the fact that accessing the 30 hours a week of free childcare entitlement can be onerous and expensive, given where the bases are situated. I encourage the minister to engage with the Army in Scotland on that issue and identify a suitable way to address that concern, because my concern about the longer term is that if that feedback continues to be sent to the MOD, it might adversely affect future base-planning strategies and potentially further reduce the Army's footprint in Scotland.

Labour welcomes the progress that is outlined in the annual report, such as the development of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership's military skills discovery tool and the awareness-raising work that is being done on the financial support that is available to veterans. However, the implementation must be faster in some areas, as the minister has highlighted. The annual report noted concern about the delay in implementing the veterans mental health and

wellbeing action plan, and noted that it takes, on average, more than 10 years for a veteran to ask for support for their mental health. Implementing that plan is an absolute priority that we all need to take seriously to prevent people reaching a crisis point.

Further, the report also highlighted concern about the delay in delivering the veterans homelessness prevention pathway. The commissioner said that

“little has been achieved to date and progress in implementing this much needed pathway is slow, with no clear milestones or timelines provided”,

and that is despite the fact that 690 former members of the armed forces have been assessed as homeless or have been threatened with homelessness in 2023-23, which is an increase of 40 on the previous year.

The introduction of guidance such as the wellbeing plan and the homelessness prevention path is welcome, but those strategies need to be resourced and implemented in a timely and practical manner if they are to have the desired effects.

Third sector organisations are certainly valuable in supporting veterans, armed forces personnel and their families within their local communities, and, indeed, I often cite SSAFA Forces Help’s helping heroes model, in my own city of Glasgow, which I believe is a stand-out example of a one-stop shop support service for veterans.

SSAFA’s model provides advice and practical casework benefits for housing, homelessness and a number of other areas such as employability and training, financial advice and healthcare. Research from the University of Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian University found that the social return on investment for Glasgow’s helping heroes service is £6.63 for every £1 invested. I believe that it is a one-way bet for us to look more closely at that model and its scalability across Scotland. Further outline analysis of the pre-pandemic years placed the return figure even higher, at £11.68 for every £1 that was invested.

I believe that that gateway model is a great example of how to access support and how it should look, and I hope that there will be many other positive examples across Scotland. I look forward to members highlighting them as the debate progresses. In the minister’s closing remarks, I would be grateful if he could outline what the Scottish Government is doing to support pockets of positive practice and learn from them and, ultimately, capture them and scale them so that all veterans in Scotland have the right localised and effective support.

The veterans and armed forces community is an asset to Scottish society. As I said at the

beginning of my speech, we must work on a cross-party basis to harness their potential and ensure that they have the necessary support. That means being honest about where things are working well, as well as where things could be better. I have set out some examples of where progress is being made. Labour is happy to work constructively with the Government on areas that need further development. I welcome the opportunity to debate this important topic and confirm that members on the Labour benches support the Government’s motion as well as the Conservatives’ contribution to it.

15:21

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The minister was right when he talked about the need to celebrate and recognise the contribution that members and ex-members of the military make to society. I have met some very talented people who have made great contributions to society and the places and people that they work for now. The minister also knows that it is important for the Parliament to focus on the many areas where we need to do better. I have met many people who have seen horrific things in the field of combat, such as murders, deaths and traumatic events involving people of all ages, as I am sure the minister has. That lives with them forever. We should focus on what we can do better to help those people who may be struggling to fit back into society, while also recognising, as the minister says, that there are many talented people who do great things for their employers as well as for society.

I am sorry that I am not in the chamber, but I tested positive for Covid this morning. I know that the minister will miss me, but I thought that it would be best to speak from home.

The Government was keen to have consensus on its motion, but I hope that the minister will forgive me for trying to lodge an amendment that was not accepted. We wanted to press the point about pupil equity funding for young people and children of armed forces personnel and veterans. I will return to that later, but I think that it is important to try to press the Government so that we can make more progress with helping young people in that area.

First, I want to cover a couple of things that other members have already touched on. However, it is important to emphasise what needs to be improved. I will touch on the veterans commissioner’s report. The minister was right to recognise the criticism, and it is to his credit that he did so. The commissioner pointed to some successes as well as particular areas on which progress has been slow, including health and employment, as well as mental health and

homelessness prevention, which require further progress. The progress on the delivery of the veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan was described as slow, which is not good enough. If our words are to mean anything, we need to move so much faster. The commissioner said that recent updates have been more encouraging, but the Government must maintain that if it is going to deliver a mental health and wellbeing pathway for veterans that is timely and effective.

The commissioner was also critical of progress on the veterans homelessness prevention pathway. We are more than a year on from the proposals being published, but she said that little has been achieved to date, and again, progress is slow, with no clear milestones or timelines.

That is really important, for a simple reason. Scottish Veterans Residences has said that about 800 households that include veterans make homelessness applications every year. It has also highlighted that homelessness can occur many years after discharge because of delayed transition, which can be the result of a reluctance to seek help or the deferred impact of previous trauma.

As much as we publicly value the service of those who are in the armed forces, we should also recognise the burden that falls on their families and in particular their children. The armed forces covenant says that members of the armed forces community

“should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public ... services.”

We should have the same commitment in relation to their children’s education. Many young people whose parents are in the services are forced to chop and change schools as they move for their parents’ work. That can disrupt their studies and their friendships.

For many young people, the worry of having a parent away in a dangerous place for a long time means that they need extra support. One measure that I was especially supportive of my Liberal Democrat colleagues introducing when they were in government was the service pupil premium in England, which provides £335 of funding per child from the beginning of school until the age of 16. That funding goes direct to schools to provide support as teachers think best to give young people the extra help that they need with their mental health and their schoolwork.

It is clear that such funding has made a real difference for many young people. In some schools, it has been used to employ dedicated members of staff to support and mentor service children. Pupils at one secondary school have said that having an interested adult mentor who understands the demands that are placed on

service families has helped them to feel less isolated, especially when one of their parents is on deployment, and it has helped them to build strong friendship groups to support them with their attendance during difficult times. The funding allows primary schools to provide outside learning support to work with pupils on building their social skills and self-esteem and developing positive attitudes to learning, which raises academic achievement.

Despite the success of that policy in England, I have not yet persuaded the Scottish Government to support it, more than a decade after its introduction. The numbers are significant, as 2,500 children of service personnel who live in Scotland are missing out on support. I hope that the minister will reconsider the Government’s position, especially given his new role in education, as well as his role in relation to the armed forces community.

We want to do right by veterans, the armed forces community and their children. The progress that the commissioner has identified deserves to be acknowledged, as does her criticism, but we should always ask what more we can do. The service pupil premium is something positive that the Government could do.

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

15:28

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** It is a privilege to speak in this debate, as I have in previous similar debates.

I have direct experience of members of the armed forces and their families through my engagement with Glencorse barracks, which is in my constituency. Just this week, I was back there for a visit with other MSPs, including Mr Sweeney. At one point, the barracks was threatened with closure by the MOD, but it has now been reprieved. Penicuikians very much support the barracks, which is integral to the community. The children of its personnel all attend local schools. The purpose of this week’s visit was generally to be briefed about the Army’s diverse and challenging role these days and its recruitment processes, but it also involved discussing—as it should—the pressures on personnel after returning home from a tour, the pressures on partners and families and the pressures after discharge.

I will give some context about the specific pressures on the armed forces. I spoke to one serving officer who began his service as a teenager in Northern Ireland and then had tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When personnel return to a home where their partner has been running the household single-handedly for months, that brings challenges for both of them, which are compounded if there are young children who are unfamiliar with their returning parent, who perhaps bears the imprint of terrible sights and sounds, which have to be sanitised in our news bulletins. Indeed, I learned that there is a two-week decompression process, so that people who return from conflict, despite their desperation to go straight home, spend time adjusting before going back to domesticity.

That is even more relevant when people leave the structure of life in the forces for good. Yes—they are coming out with skills, and they have been part of a team and might have been a team leader. Some people might have skills, such as information technology and trades, that are immediately transferable to civvy life, but other people might need retraining. In addition, they have to organise basic aspects of everyday life, such as a GP and a home, that the armed forces have done for them over the years. As I have referenced, if they are in a relationship, they have to rebalance responsibilities with their partner. They are coming home every day or might be working from home. That must put pressures on relationships. They have to get acclimatised to general everyday civvy life. They must organise themselves when, as I have said previously, days and years were organised for them. They are also separated from formerly close-knit colleagues.

It is estimated there are more than 200,000 veterans in Scotland, and it is understood that a high percentage of them live in rural areas where, historically, families over generations joined various long-gone regiments, such as the King's Own Scottish Borderers in the Borders.

Over the decades, the MOD has come a long way in recognising and acting on not just its duties as an employer but its fiduciary duty that extends—in my book—beyond those service years. This Parliament, too, has stepped in. We are aware that, although veterans are assets to our society, many require support, and a small proportion of them find the transition to civilian life more challenging. They are due the right support to ensure that they, too, are able to adapt, realise their potential and live full and successful lives in the community after service.

A small proportion of veterans find the transition too tough. According to Scottish Prison Service figures, in July this year, in Scottish jails, there were around 243 prisoners who had served in the armed forces. However, similar figures have never been collated for those who have been given sentences such as a community payback order, supervision or tagging. People with non-custodial sentences do not get the support that should be—

and often is—offered to those in prison. Those veterans fall between metaphorical cracks.

I ask the minister to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to pursue the recording of that information on veterans who receive a criminal but not custodial sentence—not for its own sake, although that is useful, but to provide support there, too. The armed forces charity, SSAFA, has caseworkers who work with people who are serving community sentences, and Police Scotland has veterans champions at divisional level, but they need to know who and where those veterans are.

Finally, Lothians Veterans Centre in Dalkeith is a small independent charity that supports military veterans and their families. It offers a safe, relaxed and supportive environment, where like-minded people can share experiences and gain professional and peer support in a home-from-home setting, in order to break down barriers of social exclusion and promote comradeship. I have visited its drop-in centre in the centre of Dalkeith, which has a welcoming environment and can provide instant assistance, support and advice in relation to a wide range of services, including health and wellbeing, housing, employment, benefits, pensions, further education and training, access to health services, welfare, comradeship and activities. Veterans can also just drop in for a cup of tea and a chat. Most members of the centre's professional team have served in—or are, in some way, connected with—the armed forces, so they possess a wealth of experience and offer an empathetic approach to supporting veterans and their family members, in order to make their transition from military to civilian life easier. I commend Lothians Veterans Centre and direct veterans to its website and that of SSAFA.

15:34

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I begin by apologising to you, Presiding Officer, and to members in the chamber, as I will need to leave shortly after my speech.

Edward Mountain was spot on, as usual. It is right that we highlight the challenges that our veterans face, the report by the veterans commissioner and the work that is on-going to better support our veterans. However, as a Parliament, we do not really focus on the contributions that our servicemen and women make to our country, which do not stop when they leave the forces. That is where I will start my contribution today.

I know a wonderful group of ex-servicemen and women in Lanarkshire called Veterans Community Lanarkshire, or VClan, which is a charity that supports veterans and their families in the

Lanarkshire area. It is based in Craigneuk, but it also holds a drop-in cafe every Friday in the Kings church in Motherwell—I must say that the soup is delicious.

I have had the pleasure of the group's company on many occasions, and it is one of the many reasons why I am proud to live in Lanarkshire. Like many veterans, VClan wants this Government to focus on issues that matter to it and its community. Our veterans fought for our rights and freedoms, and I believe that giving them the right support and tools is the least that we can do when they retire from service.

VClan is the custodian of war memorials in Lanarkshire. It cares for, cleans and tidies those important landmarks, and I know of many other groups across Scotland that also take on that important role. Members might be aware of the stark increase in the number of war memorials that have been desecrated in recent years. War memorials were commissioned throughout towns and villages in Scotland to commemorate the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could live in a world free of tyranny and oppression.

For many of the families and relatives, those memorials provide the only focal point for remembering. It is the names of their loved ones that have been etched into the hundreds of war memorials across the country. The memorials are emotive and at the very heart of communities. It is important that we continue to meet at those important landmarks and that younger generations are educated on what the people who are named on the structures fought and died for.

Since 1996, there have been 66 attacks on war memorials in Scotland. Although that number appears low, almost 70 per cent of those attacks have occurred since 2014. That is a worrying trend. Data shows that most attacks have taken place across the central belt, particularly in the area that I represent. During my time as a councillor and now as an MSP, I have been made aware of several incidents in which war memorials have been damaged and vandalised.

The first incident, in 2019, involved the war memorial situated in the Duchess of Hamilton park in Motherwell. I was horrified by the wording of the graffiti that had been drawn all over the names of soldiers who fought and died for our country. Words such as "fascists" and "rats" alongside the phrase "scum of the earth" were written in red wax that had been stained into the stone. Although some community members and veterans attempted to clean it off, it required a specialised stonemason to carry out the repair work.

Following the attack, I have had involvement following incidents, including at the memorial in

Coatbridge, Larkhall war memorial grounds, the Spanish civil war memorial in Motherwell and the Holytown war memorial. It should not be left to veterans and specialist stonemasons to carry out those repairs, because the attacks should not be happening in the first place.

Due to the number of attacks on war memorials across Scotland, groups such as the friends of Dennistoun war memorial have been at the forefront of a campaign to bring in better protections. It has organised a successful social media campaign to highlight the number of incidents and it has brought together groups of people who care about our heritage, our history and our war dead. The group has petitioned Parliament on numerous occasions, asking that more be done to protect those sites from the mindless and abhorrent attacks on the memories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. However, sadly, those petitions did not go any further. That is why I have launched a consultation on a proposed member's bill entitled the desecration of war memorials (prevention) (Scotland) bill. The bill has been asked for by veterans to support veterans and their families, the armed forces community and anyone who has a loved one's name placed on a war memorial.

As the law stands, the desecration of a war memorial is treated as vandalism. However, that fails to recognise both the distress that it causes to communities and the significance of such landmarks. It treats the desecration of a war memorial in the same way that it would that of a lamp post or a telephone box.

My bill would create the offence of desecration of war memorials and increase the range of sanctions available for prosecuting damage caused to them. I hope that the bill would create a stronger deterrent and ensure that war memorials are given the protection that they deserve. As I have said, the bill is for armed forces in the veterans community, for those who have lost a loved one during conflict or for those who are related to, or know, someone whose name is etched into the stone. The consultation will run until 19 December, and I urge everyone to join in. I also ask whether the minister will consider my proposal for this important bill and give it his backing. That would show that the Parliament is truly on the side of veterans and of the fallen soldiers to whom we owe so much.

15:40

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in the debate. At the outset of my contribution, I pay tribute to all our military personnel who have committed to making the ultimate sacrifice to defend our freedom, to our veterans

commissioner, and to all the organisations that support our armed forces and the veteran community. I pay particular tribute to the charity Support Our Paras.

I will focus on two areas: education and employment. Earlier this summer I had the pleasure of meeting Associate Research Professor Gerri Matthews-Smith of the centre for military research, education and public engagement at Edinburgh Napier University to discuss the findings of her report entitled "You're In Your Own Time Now: Understanding Current Experiences of Transition to Civilian Life in Scotland". Among the issues that are explored in the report is access to education. It notes that, despite the advantages that result from academic qualifications, veterans do not often pursue such a pathway. I am therefore pleased that an articulation mechanism has been developed with the University of Strathclyde to allow those with a higher national diploma qualification to enter initial teacher education. I am also pleased that the Scottish Government continues to develop the Service Children's Progression Alliance to support service children to access higher and further education.

Separately, though, I am aware that access to education for spouses and partners is challenging where service personnel have enlisted in England but are now based in Scotland. In those circumstances, a partner who wishes to study in Scotland is not entitled to have their fees paid. Although I understand the circumstances of the restriction, bearing in mind that families play a vital role in facilitating successful transitions, I am interested in any update that the minister might be able to provide on options for considering the issue further.

I turn to the role of veterans in the energy sector. Energy companies increasingly recognise the benefits of recruiting men and women from the armed forces, and they can offer them a range of employment opportunities. Qualities such as team leadership, organisational skills and technological knowledge are all highly prized by the sector. Career opportunities exist in the fields of engineering, project management, health and safety, and the skilled trades. To meet its future commitments, the sector is already working to match industry job profiles with military roles, and to identify transferable positions and, importantly, training and conversion opportunities. I am pleased that—

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** On that note, will the member join me in welcoming the repair work that reservists from the seventh battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland carried out on the Gordon Highlanders Museum's first world war trench this July? The

good work that they have done is supportive of what the museum is trying to do on reservists' education.

**Audrey Nicoll:** I thank my friend and colleague Jackie Dunbar for her intervention. The Gordon Highlanders Museum is in my constituency and I know the value of the work that it does, not just in supporting vocational and practical work but in offering a space for veterans and others to come together. It is a highly valued resource in the north-east of Scotland.

I am pleased that Offshore Energies UK has signed up to the armed forces covenant and received the employer recognition scheme bronze award; Port of Aberdeen has signed up to the armed forces covenant, too. Those are only two of the many examples of how the sector values veterans and service leavers.

I am pleased to note the veterans commissioner's progress update on the alignment of military and civilian skills and qualifications, which I know is not necessarily always a straightforward process; I am also pleased to note the military skills and qualifications discovery tool. I look forward to reading the commissioner's annual report, which has just been published. Having had a quick look at it today, I note the update on how Skills Development Scotland's work with the Career Transition Partnership to refer new employers to it is continuing to develop, and I note the close relationship between Skills Development Scotland and veterans organisations.

I was pleased to note that the new recruitveterans.scot website has been launched, which contains extremely helpful information for businesses about the benefits that veterans can bring to the workforce. I urge all members to highlight that website in their constituencies and regions.

The Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan and the Scottish veterans fund continue to underpin much of the work that is being progressed in Scotland. I know that the minister is utterly committed to this work, particularly because, as he has flagged, we are still all grappling with the cost of living crisis and the lag of Covid.

Young serving personnel with whom I engaged in preparation for today told me:

"The army is very accommodating to welfare issues, however it varies from unit to unit, some regiments have well-oiled welfare support in place through charities like Combat Stress and Support our Paras – they are so vital for welfare help. But to be honest, just simply chatting to each other and having each other there for support is the most important".

I know that we will lend our weight to that support.

15:47

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and to recognise the importance of our veterans and armed forces community. The Government's motion is right to highlight the valuable contribution that they make to our communities and society, and we all want to see our veterans and armed forces community supported in the best way possible to secure the best outcomes for them and their families.

The publication of the annual update on Scottish Government support for the community ahead of the debate is welcome. It highlights areas where progress has been made and the vital role of those people who are working to deliver quality support across the public, private and third sectors.

Historically, Fife has had a long and proud association with the military, with the Royal Navy base in Rosyth and the RAF base—and, more recently, the Army base—at Leuchars. Close to 20,000 veterans are estimated to live in Fife with their families, and many organisations are involved in providing support and advice to that community, including the Fife community covenant partnership, the Armed Services Advice Project, SSAFA Fife and Veterans First Point.

I want to raise a matter that I know that the minister is aware of: blue badge entitlement and, specifically, the differences in eligibility criteria for a blue badge between Scotland and England and how those relate to post-traumatic stress disorder. I appreciate that correspondence has taken place directly with my constituent about that issue, outlining the approach that is taken across Scotland, but I suggest that consideration should be given to looking at how the scheme could be improved for veterans, taking better account of their particular circumstances. It seems unfair that veterans are disadvantaged in Scotland compared with those in England and that their needs are not always being met through the scheme because a higher threshold has been set here.

I will now focus on some of the work that has been done in Fife, particularly on some of the challenges of social isolation and mental wellbeing, which are, sadly, relevant to our veterans community.

The report from the Scottish veterans commissioner has highlighted mental health as one of the areas in which we need to see further progress. I hear the minister's concern that we should recognise the huge contribution that veterans make every day to their communities, and I pay tribute to the community, but our responsibility is also to look at where we can improve people's lives and opportunities.

The publication earlier this year of "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026" is an important step in work to address social isolation and loneliness, and its commitment to engaging with veterans organisations is welcome. We must take steps to better identify how to support the armed forces community and strengthen social connections, including by building on successful work that is already being done.

Across my region, we have a number of breakfast clubs, which can be an important part of daily life. They provide social contact and camaraderie as well as a place to talk about accessing relevant services. In recent years, we have also seen the development of the Rosewell Centre in Lochore as a dedicated mental health and wellbeing centre for veterans. It provides a psychosocial support programme delivered by veteran peer support workers that aims to address key aspects of veteran wellbeing such as employment, financial stability and social connection.

Organisations such as the Veterans Foundation support charities across the UK in a range of projects. Fife Employment Access Trust used funding from the Veterans Foundation to deliver the grow your mind programme, which is an outdoor-based personal development and employability course for former armed forces personnel with mental health conditions. The six-month programme provides veterans with experience of horticulture and conservation, while teaching techniques for them to manage their mental health. It is just one of many programmes that are funded by grants from the foundation.

Families of those leaving the armed forces also go through huge adjustments in their lives. I have previously met people from the ruby boots project, which is run by Forces Children Scotland, which helps young people to prepare for their parents leaving the armed forces. As part of its work, it provides a peer buddy system, where a young person who has already made the change to civilian life mentors other young people and supports them through the process. Ruby boots was set up after young people told Forces Children Scotland that there was no specific help for them when their parents decided to leave the forces, and I welcome the fact that the project is now able to provide that support.

The work of such organisations in my region and across Scotland is so important to improving the lives of our veterans and armed forces community and their families. We all recognise the hard work and commitment that goes into delivering such work across so many third sector organisations, as well as those in the public and private sector.

The new data on veterans gathered in the census is one of the more positive outcomes of the recent census process, and I hope that it can be used to effectively inform other work. Data collection is an important part of ensuring that policy is directed in the right places and allowing us to assess the effectiveness of any interventions.

Improvements need to be made with the collection of figures on the impact of alcohol and drug use on veterans and the armed forces community so that we can ensure that support gets to those who need it. Although figures show that approximately 3 per cent of those who engage with drug and alcohol treatment services are veterans, it is vital that we deliver outreach work to target those who are not in treatment but who might be in need of help. Recent publications on drug deaths have not included specific information on veterans, and that area might require greater focus.

In the criminal justice system, although those who are serving custodial sentences are asked whether they are ex-service personnel—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry for coughing, Presiding Officer—I do not think that I have spent any time with Willie Rennie.

Although those serving custodial sentences are asked whether they are ex-service personnel and are offered support from Sacro and SSAFA, similar information is not collected for those who receive community payback orders, supervision or tagging and they do not get the same support as that offered to those who are in prison. As Christine Grahame has already said, we need to address the gaps in the data so that we can better serve the needs of veterans across our society. I support calls for improvements in that area.

15:54

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on Scotland's veterans and armed forces community. I want to let the minister know that I have had a read through of the annual update, which contains some very important and useful information.

I echo the comments that the minister and other members—Edward Mountain and Willie Rennie—made about the veterans community in Scotland. In the vast majority of cases, veterans manage their transition from military life and are very constructive and valuable members of society in all walks of life.

Notwithstanding that, it is important, as has been pointed out by the minister and others, that we recognise the fact that there are challenges in certain areas, and that we should, for many reasons, do all that we can, as a Parliament, to

support their transition. It is important for veterans and their families, but it is also important for our society and our broader economy, which I will come on to talk about.

The areas that I will focus on in my remarks are veterans' experience of accessing housing and other support services, their interactions with justice services, employment opportunities and, importantly, the contribution that veterans can make to Scotland's society and economy.

The Scottish Veterans Commissioner has called for improvements in housing support, and has identified that more than half of service leavers leave without housing arrangements in place at the level that they need. I welcome the Scottish Government's focus on that matter with the Veterans Scotland housing group and the work that it is taking forward.

I highlight the work of Scottish Veterans Residences, which is Scotland's oldest ex-services charity, dating to 1910. It operates three premises across Scotland. Members will be aware of Whitefoord house, across the Royal Mile from the Parliament, as well as premises in Dundee and the Bellrock Close premises in my Glasgow Provan constituency. I am delighted to have an opportunity to wear the SVR tie on the occasion of this debate in the Parliament. SVR residences provide not just housing support but counselling, support with benefits claims and war pensions, support with education and training, access to volunteer work and opportunities, and activities, sports and hobbies for veterans.

On several occasions, I have had the pleasure of visiting the Bellrock Close premises, which were purpose built for veterans. The premises contain 30 fully furnished one-bedroom flats that veterans can stay in for up to 18 months, while their transition is supported with wraparound support across a range of services, including education, training, employability, future housing needs, health and wellbeing, access to therapeutic counselling, a very well used and well kitted out gym, an information technology suite, a cafe and a range of extracurricular activities that veterans can engage in in an effective setting. The residence also contains 21 self-contained flats that residents can move into and stay in permanently at affordable rent. I really recommend and commend the work that SVR does.

The second area that I want to cover is the interaction of veterans with the justice system, not least because Barlinnie prison is in my Glasgow Provan constituency. As has been identified in the report and by the minister and other members, there are significant gaps in data. I welcome the work that has been undertaken by the Government with the Office for National Statistics, through the census and other routes, to flesh out

the data so that understanding of veterans' experiences and circumstances is better than it has been.

The data that I have managed to find indicates that around 220,000 former UK armed forces personnel reside in Scotland, which is slightly less than 5 per cent of the adult population. Data from the 2019 Scottish Prison Service survey indicates that 11 per cent of prisoners have an armed forces background. They are clearly disproportionately represented in that cohort, which indicates the need for further work to be done to address challenges, to understand the reasons for the disproportionate representation and to provide support services to mitigate that, where possible.

It is therefore welcome that, under the armed forces covenant, Police Scotland pledges to support the veterans community and introduce veterans champions in the custody and criminal justice environment to help to address some of those issues.

The next area that I want to touch on is the very welcome narrative in the report, and from the minister, about viewing veterans as assets to our community and our economy—in particular, in the current environment in which labour and skills shortages are the biggest challenges facing businesses. It was great to see the launching of the campaign with businesses to help employers to understand the benefits that veterans can bring to their workforces. The skills and experience that veterans have gained, often in very challenging circumstances, can equip them well for working for a business.

**Graeme Dey:** I totally agree with the points that Ivan McKee is making. Does he agree that there is a challenge for employers, which is to evangelise to a much greater extent about why they recruit from the veterans cohort? As Ivan McKee has indicated, they do not do it out of altruism; they do it because it gives them a fantastic and reliable workforce.

**Ivan McKee:** I completely agree with the minister about that. Perhaps we could have a conversation later about how I can use my ongoing interaction with the business community in many sectors to raise that topic and the opportunity that veterans represent, as the minister rightly identified, for businesses across a range of sectors, given the skills and experience that they possess. I welcome the work that is being done with Skills Development Scotland, among others, to provide support for veterans in accessing skills.

The final point that I want to make is about the Government's welcome ambition for Scotland to be viewed as the destination of choice for service leavers and their families. That is hugely

important—not just in relation to our aspiration to raise the bar as regards the support and the landing zones that are available for ex-service personnel and their families in Scotland, but from the point of view of the opportunity that it offers us to attract talent from the rest of the UK if people with an armed forces background recognise that Scotland is a great place for them to base themselves and their families, and to start their careers after they leave service.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Maggie Chapman, who joins us remotely.

16:02

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** Before I begin my speech, I note that I hope that Edward Mountain will apologise for stating that Scottish Greens would not contribute to today's debate. In the age of hybrid working, just because Scottish Greens—or, indeed, Liberal Democrats—are not in the chamber, that does not mean that we are not contributing, as Willie Rennie's earlier speech and now my speech indicate.

As Christine Grahame is, I am a pacifist, but that does not mean that I do not care about how we treat our veterans and what support we provide to them and their families, so I welcome the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the Scottish Government's annual update to Parliament.

I welcome, too, the opportunity to recognise the positive contributions that veterans make to many of our communities. Of course, it is important that we continue to strive to do more to support veterans. The minister highlighted some of the areas where good progress is being made, but there is always more that we can—and, indeed, must—do, as we have heard from others.

I want to thank the minister particularly for his comments today and previously about Lord Etherton's "LGBT Veterans Independent Review". That important report, which was published this year, examines the service and experience of LGBTQI veterans who served in the UK armed forces between 1967 and 2000. It describes the terrible consequences for individuals and families of that period's shameful official policy of homophobia and transphobia. I add my personal solidarity and sorrow, join the review's calls for recognition, apology and restitution, and look forward to discussing with the minister its recommendations to the Scottish Government.

The minister has also spoken about the opportunities that he has had in his role to remember and memorialise those who have been sent to war. Remembering matters: after all, we are approaching a time of year when things that are very different often have a habit of being

elided, conflated and conveniently confused. It centres, of course, on remembrance day, when we pause to remember those who have died in conflict—perhaps especially in the brutal horrors of the first world war.

However, as the last of that war's veterans passed away, their testimonies silent, something new began to emerge. The core of the remembrance message—"Never again"—was plastered over with new and shiny messages about the thrill of battle, the success of the so-called defence industry and the trailing remnants of British imperial power. We owe it to those who died in war and those who still live with its legacy—veterans and civilians—to remember accurately and well.

Care for veterans and their families is much too important to be tied up in unquestioning support for all that the armed forces do or are called to do, or in support for the deadly industry whose products they deploy, just as solidarity with the people of Ukraine and resistance to the Putin regime must not be a cover for normalisation of war and impunity for the arms trade.

Putin's power was enabled by many forces and factors, including national leaders who were mesmerised by his macho image and greedy for his oligarchs' billions. Their last-minute swerves to hostility are about as convincing as their other stories. Meanwhile, the invasion of Ukraine leaves thousands more wounded veterans in Europe, along with thousands more bereaved families, lost lives and homeless refugees. It leaves devastating environmental loss throughout the region and food shortages far beyond it. The victims of war are never only those in uniform; the deadly tentacles of that war are spreading far, in both place and time, to blight the lives of future, as well as present, generations.

As today's motion and review reflect, we owe respect and care to veterans after they have served in our armed forces, but we also owe it to them, and to present and potential forces members, to pay proper attention to the causes of the violent conflicts that they might be called upon to join. In an era in which UK personnel take part in United Nations peacekeeping missions, often in some of the poorest and most environmentally vulnerable parts of the world, global decisions impact more and more on the lives of Scottish veterans.

We know some of those causes very well—political power games, arms-trade profiteering and struggles for resources. Those resources of course include fossil fuels and minerals that are so often a curse for those who live alongside them.

Increasingly however, conflicts arise over access to fresh water or fertile land. Those

shortages and struggles and their tragic consequences are all heightened, deepened and broadened by growing climate change and inequality.

Last month, there was a crucial UN summit on the sustainable development goals, representing the halfway point before the aspirational achievement date of 2030. Those goals, as we know, are absolutely fundamental core obligations that are shared internationally. They are recognised as being essential to any hope of a liveable, just and peaceful world for the children of today.

Because those goals are so vital, many Governments' delegations to that summit were headed by their leaders. But not all, for some Governments had decided to do other work—the work of dismantling their plans for decarbonisation, the work of approving new fossil fuel extraction, the work of sacrificing essential climate action and of demonising refugees.

Those actions and inactions shamelessly light the fuel of future conflicts throughout the globe, causing future veterans. They are conflicts in which many will be killed and wounded—many wearing military uniforms, but many, too, in school uniform and many in baby clothes.

If, as the motion reminds us, we want to pay honest respect to veterans now and in the weeks to come, we must listen to what they tell us about their needs here and now. They need employment support, healthcare, education for their children and support in prison and beyond, as was highlighted by Christine Grahame—indeed, all the important supports that are covered by today's review. I especially thank Willie Rennie for his contribution to the debate and wish him a speedy recovery.

We must also listen to the distant voices of those who wore the very first remembrance poppies: veterans, families, and strangers alike. We owe it to them to work, at the same time as we support current veterans and their families, to build and make a more peaceful world.

16:09

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I am pleased to speak in this debate. I have spoken in a few such debates over the years and one issue that comes up again and again is the lack of data and information to ensure an evidence-based approach to making policy regarding veterans. I am pleased that good progress is being made. As the minister said, we are on the cusp of having a lot of rich and useful information that we can use to better develop policy and understand how and where we can improve services to support veterans and their families. That is positive. I hope

that that good progress leads to better informed policy and, ultimately, clearer and better outcomes for veterans and their families.

I welcome the collaboration and co-ordination between the UK and devolved Governments and, indeed, the many organisations that work daily to support and improve services for veterans and their families. There are excellent examples in our communities of organisations supporting veterans, and we must continue to support those groups across Scotland to ensure that no veteran is left behind.

I also highlight the work of veterans and armed forces champions in local authorities. When I was a councillor in Fife, I saw at first hand the role that those champions played in ensuring joined-up approaches, being a strong voice in the local authorities and raising issues that come in directly from local veterans groups and individuals. The councillor who had the role in Fife back then, Charles Haffey, was a veteran and was passionate about the job. I am aware that others have done a great job in the role since then, and some have been in touch with me when they have needed support. I am pleased that the Government continues to recognise the importance of the role and continues to work with local authorities to enhance and develop it.

However, I want to be candid when it comes to local government services. We should acknowledge that there are not enough houses for people to live in and that council housing lists continue to grow. Veterans, like hundreds of thousands of people on waiting lists, will find it difficult to get housing if the housing does not exist. The same can be said for many local services. In the same vein, if people are in their homes going cold and cannot afford to switch on the heating, they will suffer the same plight, whether they are veterans or not.

To be clear, veterans, particularly older veterans, face a difficult time, as do millions of their fellow citizens up and down the UK this winter. The main point that I want to make is that, if our economy is tanking, energy costs are out of control and incomes cannot keep up with costs, veterans will suffer and pay the price like everyone else who is on low incomes. I welcome the work of the veterans organisations that focus on doing their best to support people and maximise the assistance that they can access, but the best support would be to build a fairer and more just economy that works in the interests of the many.

To people who are transitioning from the armed forces, we must first say that they are an asset to Scotland, its workplaces and its communities. We must ensure that we harness their potential and fully support them to transition smoothly into civilian life. The actions that are being taken on

employment, education and skills are very welcome, but I say to the minister, who also has the brief for higher and further education, that if our colleges are struggling, cancelling courses and paying off tutors, that will also impact on those who are transitioning to civvy street, just as it will impact on anyone who wants to improve their life chances and opportunities through education. We need to address the urgent issues in further education.

The point that I am again making is that veterans are not immune from wider policy issues of grave concern, including our colleges and the lack of housing. The same applies to our NHS. Those who have sacrificed the most for our country deserve the best care possible. Although priority has been given to the healthcare of veterans, we cannot become complacent about the quality of health services, particularly mental health services, because there is massive pressure on them.

A report card would state that very good progress is being made but more needs to be done.

16:15

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** I am honoured to contribute to today's important debate in support of veterans and the armed forces community. Along with my colleagues, I will support the Government motion.

I consider myself lucky to have met a number of veterans who have served our country and to have met dedicated third sector organisations that support them day in and day out. As an Indian woman, I was honoured to be invited to the ceremonial bricklaying for Scotland's first British Indian Army memorial, which will mark the contribution of the more than 4 million south Asian soldiers who fought in both world wars. I congratulate the organisation Colourful Heritage, which is behind the memorial. For years, Colourful Heritage has been committed to achieving recognition for those soldiers, as well as to educating people on the role of the British Indian Army.

I pay tribute to that army, including to Naik Gian Singh, a member of the 15th Punjab regiment, who was awarded the Victoria cross for his bravery in the face of the enemy in Burma in 1945, and to many others like him, as well as to the band of war heroes who served with the Indian army, perished in the Scottish Highlands and were buried in a Kingussie cemetery. The Scottish Government has been very supportive of the Colourful Heritage project, but I would welcome more information on how the Government will help to support that initiative and others like it.

In my region, charities, including the Homeless Veterans Project and many more, have stepped in to provide support for members of our armed forces community as they transition to civilian life. However, funding and resources are scarce, which makes it challenging for charities to deliver those services. The drive to help the veterans community must be matched in the Scottish Government, and I hope that the Government will deliver on its responsibilities in that area, including when it comes to housing.

I recently submitted a written question on what assessment the Scottish Government had undertaken on the impact of the reported housing shortage on housing policies that are aimed at military service leavers and veterans, but the minister was unable to provide a detailed answer. I hope that, when he sums up, he will provide some clarity and detail on that.

We must remember that 821 veterans were forced to make homelessness applications in Scotland last year, and that more than 100 veterans had to sleep rough. That is why the Scottish Conservatives want to introduce a distinct veterans help-to-buy scheme, which would give veterans more support to buy a home in Scotland. I hope that the Scottish Government will support that.

I am pleased to note that some progress has been made in other areas—in particular, in the development of the general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme. In a recent response to me, the minister outlined that a full national roll-out of the scheme will go ahead towards the end of the year. Ahead of that, I hope to see further details on how the Government will promote the scheme to general practitioners and service users ahead of that full launch. Although I hope that the scheme will be helpful for signposting to sources of support, we need a more joined-up approach across devolved public bodies, including the NHS and local government, to enhance the support that is available to veterans who transition to civilian life.

Mental health service provision, skills and learning are not progressing fast enough. That is why we proposed an armed forces and veterans bill to create a new focus on supporting veterans to get access to education, a new home, a new career, healthcare, financial assistance and much more.

I am honoured to have contributed to this important debate on supporting our veterans and armed forces community. As has been made clear throughout the debate, the contribution that our servicemen and women bring to the country does not stop when they leave the armed forces but continues and grows as they transition back into our communities. Our veterans and armed forces

community is an asset to our society. For our tomorrow, they gave their today. We must do everything in our power to ensure that they have access to the support that they need.

16:20

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** I will start by agreeing with the first part of Pam Gosal's speech in which she mentioned Colourful Heritage and the contribution, which is often unacknowledged, of the then British Indian Army, especially during the second world war. I visited each one of the graves at Kingussie. There are two others at, I think, Dornoch. There is also the makeshift mosque in Lairg, where more than 300 soldiers were accommodated in that tiny village in the Highlands during the second world war.

I am delighted to take part in the debate. I have spoken at one or two of these debates previously, but, because of the role that I had at the time, I have not really had the opportunity to say more about my personal history, as many members have done in the past. I mention that because the last veterans debate that I spoke in as minister was one when I could not easily get a deputy or somebody to stand in my place, and I could not therefore go to the funeral of my uncle Robert in Brora. At the time, it struck me that he had served nine years in the Royal Navy and many years after that in the British listening stations up the north-east coast in Scotland, and that each of his brothers and his sister had also served in the armed forces. That was usually in the navy or, in the case of two brothers, during national service in the army. Their father—my grandfather—is listed on a war memorial in Pitlochry. He served with the Black Watch in the first world war.

I also reflected that the same is true for my mother's side of the family. She had a number of brothers, one of whom retired as a major from the army. He was then murdered in Penicuik when he was overseeing the transition of wages to pay the soldiers after he had retired. He was helping out in that regard. Two other brothers went to Queen Victoria's school in Dunblane, in my constituency, which was at that time, as it is now, for the offspring of members of the armed forces. I mention that to point out that members of the armed forces and veterans are of us; they are part of our families and the wider society that we all inhabit.

I will make a couple of other quick points. I am glad that the minister mentioned the medal replacement scheme. It would be useful if he could get as much publicity for that as possible. The Scottish Government cannot replace medals, but, when the MOD agrees to replace a medal, it can stand the cost of replacing the medal if it is

required to do so. I know that that has been a very welcome measure.

In relation to the physical and mental needs of veterans, which have been mentioned, I mention Rock2Recovery, which is a small charity. Although many people, including Alex Rowley and others, have called for additional support from the NHS, I would not want the support that is provided to other veterans by people who are themselves veterans to be undervalued. Rock2Recovery is a peer-to-peer service and is very valuable for that reason. I encourage the Scottish Government to continue to engage with Rock2Recovery to consider how it can help in relation to veterans who need that service. I also mention Wee County Veterans in my constituency, which does a fantastic job for veterans in Clackmannanshire.

I will make a point in relation to housing, which was mentioned by Edward Mountain. I think that the member said that, when he left the forces, he got £500 and a resettlement course. Things have got much better since then. Well, I can tell him that I got neither £500 nor a resettlement course nor a pension when I left the armed forces, so things have improved a little bit in the meantime.

In relation to Willie Rennie's points, I disagree with how he would try to address the issue of education. Much of what the Scottish Government has to do must respond to what the MOD does. He mentioned that people can be shifted between different billets. More recently, five or six years ago, there was a situation in Scotland of a family who had been moved from Germany to Edinburgh to Belfast: three different postings, with their family, in the space of 18 months. It is the public authorities that must address that challenge. I think that we do that very well in Scotland. In fact, a great deal has been done in Scotland that is worthy of more comment.

The Scottish veterans fund has been mentioned, as well as the development in relation to the census. We also have a dedicated Minister for Veterans—I think that that post was established under the former First Minister in 2008. It reached a golden period when we had a minister in the Cabinet. Graeme Dey should use that as his gambit to try to get into the Cabinet. He should say that we should have a ministerial-level appointment in the Cabinet. That shows the attention that has been paid to the matter. That is a real success.

I have been aware of how things have changed. I remember saying in 2011 and 2012 that we had to try to address disadvantage rather than provide advantage. That was quite a contentious thing to say at that time, but that seems to be the language that everyone uses now, and things are none the worse for that.

Scotland does a great deal that is worthy of commendation, but there will, of course, always be more to do.

I say to Christine Grahame and Maggie Chapman that I am not a pacifist. I think that it is essential that we have armed forces and that they are well trained and well looked after.

In this debate and too many like it, people have, by and large, veered away from any contention—any kind of political back and forth. I think that that patronises rather than promotes the interests of veterans. They are not people who have to be mollycoddled; they can understand political differences. We should not shy away from that.

On some of the differences, Edward Mountain mentioned that he thinks that the budget for the veterans fund is too small and that we should take money away from overseas trips. I do not know whether that would have included the two trips that I made to the Falklands on the Government's ticket. If we are going to be contentious, my comment would be that we should not have illegal wars and instead pay the money that is required for proper boots, proper helicopter support and proper tanks for our forces. We could also avoid things such as handing out P45s to service personnel on active service in Afghanistan. We should think about what is really important to veterans in those circumstances.

I do not support Meghan Gallacher's proposal. We should not marginalise defacing a war memorial, which is an abominable thing to do. We should not take that away from the general remit of the law.

On a note of consensus, Edward Mountain's point about housing is really important. He identified, as I have in the past, that the MOD has estates in Scotland that it no longer uses. There are hundreds of houses at Craigiehall, and there are other sites as well. If the Parliament comes together, we could spearhead—Edward Mountain will know the significance of that word—a campaign to get the MOD to convert that stock to housing that is made available for veterans. That might require selling off some houses and bringing others up to standard, but it is perfectly possible that we could make a big difference to the housing situation for veterans.

In conclusion, I am very grateful that the Parliament has once again recorded its support and admiration for veterans because of their service and the contribution that they continue to make to society.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** We will move on to winding-up speeches. I call Sarah Boyack.

16:27

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. How tight is the time for speakers? Is there a generous six minutes?

**The Presiding Officer:** There is a very generous six minutes, Ms Boyack.

**Sarah Boyack:** Excellent. Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and my former work with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations.

This has been an important and respectful debate. On the points that Keith Brown made about being overconsensual, members have not agreed entirely on quite a few issues. Part of the nature of the consensus is respect for those who serve in our armed forces and veterans. I join colleagues in thanking those in our armed services for all that they do.

As several members have said, it is not just about people's time in service; it is about what they do afterwards, too. Many move on and use their skills in significant ways in our communities and our economy. We should celebrate that as well.

Like others, I went to the excellent briefing last night with young people whose parents are or were in the armed services. That gave a really interesting perspective on their lives and what it is like to be in an armed services family—on the potential journeys that they have to make, the number of times that they move, their families having to respond to change, living in different places, going to different schools, and the challenges of retaining and developing connections with friends and families. That came across very well. As Claire Baker mentioned, the ruby boots project was quite inspiring.

**Martin Whitfield:** On that point, something that is being called for is for the data that surrounds those young people, particularly their school and educational position, to be universal, so that their new schools understand what they have and have not done and they do not have to revisit things. Does the member agree that that is something that we should urge everyone to get behind?

**Sarah Boyack:** That is an excellent point, and it came across at the event last night. Young people are actually very well organised and one thing that struck me is their ability to access data through digital connectivity. That is something that they are increasingly using, so it would be good if schools could match that approach.

One of the things that has been discussed a lot today is that the transition from being in the armed services to returning to civilian life is not always

easy or straightforward, and a lot more needs to be done to support our veterans and, as Mr Whitfield has just commented, their families, too, because those years in service can come at a personal cost to people's health and wellbeing. It is more important than ever that the collaborative partnerships that are referenced in the Scottish Government's motion today are actually put into place between the public sector, the private sector and the third sector to ensure that the veterans and armed forces community get the best possible support and access to services.

Supporting health and wellbeing is essential, and the transition to new lives needs housing to be in the right place and employment opportunities to be made available. Those were key issues on which there was agreement across the chamber today, which I think is important.

There were also many comments about the excellent work that is done by local organisations. I thought that Paul Sweeney's points about the helping heroes project in Glasgow, which does fantastic work, were particularly important, but other organisations across the country are doing similar work. As Ivan McKee noted, Whitefoord house, which is across the road from the Parliament, is run by the Scottish Veterans Housing Association and has supported and provided homes for veterans for decades.

Sight Scotland, in my region, also does important work. Its new lawn bowling team competed in the vision impairment bowling Scotland league, with matches taking place all over Scotland, and its newly created charity team took part in its first league match recently at the Jessfield bowling club in Portobello in Edinburgh. Members might not think that that is important, but when we read some of the briefings by groups such as Sight Scotland, we understand the critical importance of the associated social and cultural connections for veterans, with visits and opportunities for people to take up new life experiences and inclusive activities. That also applies to the work that is done to enable digital connectivity in order to access new skills or relearn vital life skills, particularly for those who have lost their sight through their service.

Another issue that came up several times today was the important work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, and her contribution on health and wellbeing, employment and skills is welcome. I want to repeat the comments that have been made by others about the two areas where she felt that more progress is urgently needed. As Paul Sweeney commented, there is slow progress on delivering mental health and wellbeing support, and I hope that the Scottish Government will pick up on that, because veterans might have experienced what for us would be unimaginable

pressures, and they need to be supported. Willie Rennie also made some insightful comments about the importance of support.

Before I close, I want to comment on the homelessness prevention pathway for veterans. It was produced last year, but, as the commissioner said, little has been achieved to date, and progress in implementing that much-needed pathway is slow, with no clear milestones or timelines provided. That has been raised by several colleagues across the chamber. I say to the minister that dedicated housing needs investment, and the issue is important.

**Graeme Dey:** The member will have noted from my opening comments that the Minister for Housing, Paul McLennan, has committed to meeting the commissioner to hear her views and to take them forward.

**Sarah Boyack:** I very much welcome that, but, as three of our colleagues representing Edinburgh said when they raised the issue of the need for affordable housing, the issue must be addressed now, with actual investment.

There needs to be effective underpinning of the armed forces covenant. In our 2021 manifesto, Scottish Labour called for statutory targets to implement the covenant and to support the recommendations of Poppy Scotland in its manifesto and of the other veterans charities that have lobbied on that important issue. If Labour is elected next year, we would fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law, because we think that it is important in terms of respect.

I asked one of my constituents what his recommendations would be. First, he mentioned the covenant and said how important it was, but he then talked about recognising the importance of veterans. He said:

“Raising better awareness among business of the skills that ex forces can bring is therefore important (and likely good for the economy!). Service personnel are measured and trained for their courage, commitment, discipline, respect, integrity, loyalty and leadership. Not to mention communication, positivity and flexibility. Who wouldn't want more of that in their organisation?”

Those words are very well chosen, and I hope that businesses that are listening today will pick up on those fantastic veterans who can offer us their skills and talent.

16:35

**Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful for the opportunity to thank all 250,000 veterans across Scotland who have bravely and selflessly served our country. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for all that they have done to protect us, defend our United Kingdom and serve the entire country whenever called

upon. We also owe huge thanks to their families, who can see their own lives upturned through the service of their loved ones, which we have heard a lot about in the debate.

Since becoming an MSP, in 2021, I have had the great privilege of meeting current members of the armed forces, veterans and their families on several occasions. I was delighted to have the opportunity to visit the Royal Navy's Rosyth dockyards to tour the HMS Prince of Wales and speak to sailors and marines about Scottish shipbuilding and the incredible work that they do to keep us safe. Earlier this year, I was blown away by the RAF's operations at Lossiemouth, when I was given the chance to see its operations up close and hear about how they protect our skies and seas 24/7, 365 days a year. I have also been immensely proud to support Poppyscotland's appeals both here and in Ayrshire. I encourage anyone who can do so to continue giving their time and money to help that organisation to give veterans the help that they deserve.

I know that many MSPs across the chamber have felt similarly when visiting armed forces bases and veterans charities, which Graeme Dey mentioned in his contribution. He also had the privilege of paying his respects in northern France to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. Paul Sweeney mentioned a number of bases that he has had the privilege of visiting, while Pam Gosal spoke about being invited to the ceremonial bricklaying for Scotland's first British Indian Army memorial.

However, as we all recognise, it is not enough for MSPs to merely thank veterans and hear their words. We must translate our words into action and give them every support that we can as they transition to civilian life. I am pleased that, across every party, we can all recognise the huge importance and contributions of veterans to our society, which were noted by Sarah Boyack in her closing remarks. In their service, and in their everyday lives afterwards, they are integral parts of communities across Scotland. The Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan is positive, as is the UK Government's. It is fantastic to see both of Scotland's Governments working together on the delivery of those plans for the benefit of veterans across Scotland and the UK.

Of course, we can all recognise that more needs to be done for veterans. Life is far from perfect for many of them in Scotland. Last year alone, more than 800 veterans made a homelessness application, and around 100 of those ended up sleeping rough. We can all, as one Parliament, say that that is unacceptable and commit to preventing that from happening again. Willie Rennie said that we need pathways that are timely

and effective and that we cannot be slow to take action.

So, what more must be done for veterans? I thank the Scottish veterans commissioner, Susie Hamilton, for her detailed and diligent work in producing a very welcome and in-depth assessment of the Scottish Government's progress. I had the pleasure of meeting her at a recent Combat Stress event, and her knowledge, experience and passion are clear to see. I also thank the previous commissioners, whom Edward Mountain mentioned, for their work.

The commissioner said:

"This year's report has shown some really encouraging progress, particularly in the area of health and wellbeing."

As others have noted, she looked at the Government's 81 recommendations and found that 35 have already been achieved and that a further 21 have been absorbed into subsequent recommendations. That is good news, especially the improvements in general practice surgeries that have helped veterans to access the treatment that they need more quickly.

As the commissioner noted, tackling the issues that those with polytrauma face

"has the potential to transform the lives of the most seriously injured veterans."

However, as I mentioned, there are still serious problems to overcome in relation to homelessness prevention and mental health. The commissioner found that

"progress in delivery has been slow"

on the 2021 veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan. The commissioner expressed concern that veterans' needs are not being met and said that that must become more of a priority. Christine Grahame mentioned the two-week period in which servicemen have to readjust after a tour before they go back home, because of the experiences that they have when they are away on tour.

Similarly, delivery of the veterans homelessness prevention pathway has not been successful to date. The commissioner noted that

"little has been achieved to date and progress in implementing this much needed pathway is slow, with no clear milestones or timelines provided."

I will move on quickly to other members' contributions. Meghan Gallacher said that war memorials are a focal point for our remembrance. She also spoke about the 66 occasions on which they have been damaged. She is right that that should not be happening. Memorials are a focal point not only for us but for family members, so we need to take action on that.

Audrey Nicoll spoke about education, employment and facilities in the north-east to help

veterans in her area. We need to be more vocal, to ensure that everybody knows about the help that is out there for veterans.

Claire Baker mentioned the ruby boots project, which helps children when their parents leave the forces. Quite a few of us had the privilege of meeting children who are involved in that project at last night's event in Parliament.

Ivan McKee mentioned Scottish Veterans Residences, which has three locations—one is in his constituency and the others are in Dundee and Edinburgh. The organisation provides not just housing but other forms of support. That is more support that we need to ensure that everybody is aware of.

Alex Rowley said that we have made progress on the previous lack of data. We need to use the data that we get to achieve better outcomes for veterans.

Keith Brown mentioned the medal replacement scheme and getting as much publicity as we can for it. I am sure that, as MSPs, we can all publicise that scheme on our social media, so that it gets the publicity that it deserves.

On mental health and homelessness, the Government needs to make urgent progress for veterans. It must do so because the people who are affected by such issues are the most vulnerable and often need help the most. As it stands, they are, sadly, not receiving the help that they deserve. If the Government's actions are measured by what the Government does for those who are most in need, it has a long way to go in those areas.

I welcome the nature of this debate, and we are happy to support the Government's motion, but I press the Government to deliver its veterans strategy in full by meeting the expectations of the veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan and the veterans homelessness prevention pathway.

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Graeme Dey to wind up the debate. You have a very generous 10 minutes, minister.

16:43

**Graeme Dey:** Thank you, Presiding Officer—I, too, can read the clock.

I thank members for their contributions, which raised valuable points. In the time that I have available for closing, I will prioritise responding to key points.

Christine Grahame and Claire Baker talked about provision of support for veterans who are engaged in the justice system but are not in prison. I am not entirely sure of the scale of that

issue, but it is on the radar of the justice secretary and me. As we have heard, there is no explicit preset question to ask people who are being considered by the court for community sentences or who are serving sentences whether they served in the armed forces. As we know from those who are in prison, veterans are often too ashamed to reveal their history after falling foul of the law so, even if such a question were asked, they might not answer it.

On what could be done if we had such information, I hope that the new veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway might provide a route for assisting that cohort. I will feed the concerns that Claire Baker and Christine Grahame raised into the associated workstream, so that those who are taking forward delivery are alive to capturing such individuals.

**Claire Baker:** I appreciate the minister's comments on the data issues that I raised, but I also raised an issue to do with blue badges. I appreciate that the minister is not the sole minister involved in that, because it comes under social security and transport, but could he give a commitment to go away and look at it? I know that he has corresponded with my constituent and that he recognises that there is a difference between the threshold in England and in Scotland.

**Graeme Dey:** I will commit to looking at that issue.

Edward Mountain made a number of excellent points, although Maggie Chapman subsequently took him to task for his misplaced comment regarding what he anticipated the Green Party's participation in the debate would be. I hope that he feels suitably chastised. Among other things, he focused on resettlement, which Ivan McKee picked up on, too. One aspect that Edward Mountain missed out was early service leavers. Understandably, in this space, we tend to focus on families. However, the most challenged and challenging cohort in resettlement is often those who are single, with only a limited period of service behind them. They are often recruited from difficult backgrounds and from areas that they do not want to return to. I do not pretend to have the answer on that point, but it requires a degree of focus.

I wish Willie Rennie well in his recovery from Covid. I know that he has a strong constituency interest in the service pupil premium, but I am still not persuaded of the need for that. Willie Rennie noted that 2,500 young people in Scotland are in service families. However, although I recognise the potential impact of deployment or upheaval from rebasing, I want to see evidence of how many of those young people are impacted in a way for which they would not be able to secure appropriate support from the generally available

services in school, particularly where the school has a strong understanding of the needs of that cohort. If, through the national education officer, evidence emerged of a proven detriment being experienced, we would look with partners at how that might be addressed.

We have a track record of responding to evidenced issues in the education space. On the back of responses that we received from armed forces families and representative groups, we made changes to ensure that FE funding is available for all service children who are based in Scotland. That applies to spouses and partners, too.

Paul Sweeney noted, among other things, the issue of accessible childcare that is close to bases. As he knows, Scotland is the only part of the UK to offer 1,140 hours a year of funded early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. As we announced in the programme for government, we will expand access to funded childcare for 13,000 more children and families by the end of this session of Parliament. We are alive to the issues that face serving families following the introduction of the wraparound 20 hours a week childcare, which is funded by the MOD for four to 11-year-olds. In fact, I discussed that quite recently with Richard Knighton, the head of the air service. I have agreed to visit Lossiemouth with him in due course to hear more about the challenges that are being encountered.

Keith Brown made a valid point about how MOD policy, which is often developed with no consultation with devolved Governments, can create a need locally, with no regard for how that need is met.

Finally, the Gordon Highlanders Museum got an honourable mention from Jackie Dunbar and Audrey Nicoll, and rightly so. Having said that, I had better declare an interest, as my grandfather's medals are on display there.

As we move towards the conclusion of the debate, I will focus on giving a little more flavour of some of our priorities over the next year. As I said in my opening remarks, examining and acting on veterans data will be a major priority for us throughout the next 12 months and beyond. I hope that, next year, I will be able to return to the chamber and share some insights from the census and various other surveys that contained veterans-related questions. We have made progress up until now in ensuring that we can get access to diverse sets of data from a number of different sources, but it is now even more important to do something with it.

As Alex Rowley highlighted, access to rich and varied data sets will allow us to determine the

issues that matter most to veterans and their families and where improvements to support or service delivery need to be made. That, in turn, will better inform where we should focus our efforts. I am hopeful that good-quality evidence will help us to continue to change the narrative on veterans and further improve perceptions around some of the issues that can sometimes be exaggerated, sensationalised or misunderstood.

I highlight again that the vast majority of veterans and their families reintegrate into civilian society perfectly well and go on to lead their lives without significant issue. We should collectively focus more of our attention on the positive contributions that they make to society rather than on the often inaccurate and negative perceptions. For example, in the UK Government's recent study of perceptions of UK armed forces veterans, there was a feeling that ex-service personnel might struggle to reintegrate into civilian society. Respondents particularly associated veterans with issues such as homelessness. I do not shy away from the fact that there is an issue, but we know from existing data that veterans are no more likely to be homeless than the general population is.

Noting the positive contributions of the armed forces leavers does not represent any attempt to deflect from our responsibility—our collective responsibility—to those who have been left with legacy challenges from their service; rather, it seeks to address the frustration that many in the cohort feel about how they are characterised, particularly in the media.

I spoke earlier about the Scottish veterans commissioner's annual progress report. This year, we also welcomed the Scottish veterans commissioner's new three-year strategic plan. In the plan, Susie Hamilton describes what she intends to focus on during her tenure as commissioner. She highlights three specific areas: community and relationships, with a particular focus on women and LGBT veterans; veterans and the law—looking at, among other things, whether the right support is in place for veterans in the criminal justice system, which perhaps goes back to Claire Baker's and Christine Grahame's points; and finance and debt, which involves looking at the advice, guidance and support that are provided to veterans as they return to civilian life.

I was pleased that Susie Hamilton aligned her activity to the themes of the veterans strategy, and that elements of her work will complement Lord Etherton's independent review. I look forward to engaging in and supporting fully her work, and we stand ready to respond as necessary. Finally on the subject of the veterans strategy, we continue to be guided by our strategy action plan and the commitments that are contained in it, some of

which I have been pleased to provide an update on. I reiterate the recognition that I set out in my opening comments that we have received criticism about a couple of aspects of progress—we are working towards delivering on that.

Alex Rowley was right when he said that, although the report card would acknowledge that very good progress is being made, it is also true that more needs to be done. I fully accept that. As ever, there is more to do, and we are still working on the elements of our plan, which will continue to evolve, mature and respond to the needs of our veterans and their families, particularly in the light of the raft of data that is coming our way. It might be that we have to change direction in certain respects, depending on what the evidence tells us. I will not shy away from that and stick unnecessarily to a particular approach if it is no longer fit for purpose. I know that my ministerial colleagues across Government will share that view.

We have to be ready to adapt flexibly to the needs of our veterans and the entire armed forces community. Of course, any such decision on changing direction or approach would be taken in conjunction with the relevant ministerial colleagues across Government, because it is a cross-Government responsibility.

It is vitally important that the Parliament continues to have the opportunity to scrutinise our performance and how we are delivering as a Government for our veterans, their families and the entire armed forces community in Scotland. However, I recognise that there are limits to the time that the Parliamentary Bureau can or will afford us for such purposes. That is why, as Martin Whitfield alluded to earlier, I have committed to holding regular veterans drop-in sessions for members with me and officials, so that, between debates or statements in the chamber, members can raise any issues with us and offer thoughts on how we might improve our offering to veterans, serving personnel and their families.

Today has once again served to remind us that this is a subject that we can make common cause on across the chamber.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes the debate on support for veterans and armed forces community.

## Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:53

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-10767, on substitution on committees. I ask Gillian Mackay, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that Ross Greer be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.—[*Gillian Mackay*]

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

## Motion without Notice

16:54

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite Martin Whitfield to move the motion.

*Motion moved,*

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 16.54 pm.—[*Martin Whitfield*]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Decision Time

16:54

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

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-10743, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community, and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to society; further recognises that the contribution of veterans continues and grows as they move back into the communities that they served, with their experiences enriching society and providing a valuable and positive base for employers; supports the Scottish Government's veterans strategy action plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the progress made in delivering the Plan, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services.

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-10767, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on substitution on committees, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that Ross Greer be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

*Meeting closed at 16:55.*



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

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