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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 28 November 2023

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# Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 28 November 2023*

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our leader today is Martin Mansell of the Glasgow Quaker Meeting.

**Martin Mansell (Glasgow Quaker Meeting):** What is peace? Mahatma Gandhi was once asked what he thought of western civilisation. He is said to have replied:

“I think it would be a good idea.”

Looking at the Ukraine war and the middle-east conflict, many people think of peace in the same way—as a good idea, but not just now.

Quakers have long been associated with pacifism and we acknowledge the dilemmas that it presents. Some Quakers believe that violence can be justified in extreme situations such as the second world war, when some even join the armed forces. Others see pacifism as absolute non-violence. Pacifism is more than just refusing to fight; it is about what happens before and after a war.

Quakers try to understand the underlying causes of violence and work towards reducing them. Behind the young man with a knife, for example, there is often fear, poverty and a childhood of everyday violence, so we work with groups such as the Alternatives to Violence Project Britain that help people to understand where violence comes from in their lives and what they can do about it.

We also work on an international level, through our United Nations offices in Geneva and New York, to try to defuse conflict—for example, by arranging informal off-the-record meetings between diplomats.

Although we accept the reality of evil and conflict, our pacifism is rooted in our belief that there is something of God in every human being. We are reluctant to divide people into good and bad in the way that our criminal justice system often does. I remember a social worker in Glasgow saying that if two young men go out for an evening with knives, one is likely to end up in hospital and the other in a police cell, and it is a 50:50 chance who ends up where.

Pacifists are often challenged to show how non-violence can deal with an aggressive dictator or an armed gunman. We are not naive enough to believe that appealing to something of God in a ruthless individual will be “successful”—I say that in quotes. Gandhi himself was assassinated, and Jesus—perhaps the ultimate pacifist—was also killed. However, we maintain that they did not fail. Their legacy of non-violence has been an inspiration to millions, in contrast to the hatred and devastation that always follow violence and war.

Ultimately, peace starts with each of us. We should all examine our lives for the seeds of conflict and try to heal them.

Thank you. [*Applause.*]

## Topical Question Time

14:04

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is topical question time. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question or enter RTS in the chat function, if they are online. Succinct questions and answers are always looked for, in order to get in as many members as possible.

### Public Sector Workforce (Update)

1. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the public sector workforce reductions predicted by the finance secretary on Sunday. (S6T-01660)

**The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur):** The United Kingdom Government's autumn statement is one of austerity for public services. In his budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer chose to ignore provision of much-needed funding for such services, other than the £10.8 million of consequential for health.

We have had two years of high inflation, because of which public sector pay deals have exceeded our planned expenditure. We welcome the recent report from Audit Scotland on the Scottish Government's workforce challenges and we recognise the issues that it has set out. Growth in the public sector workforce is due to a range of factors, and we are committed to providing high-quality public services. However, our financial position necessitates our considering reform of the way in which public bodies deliver such services.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance will set out a further update in the draft Scottish budget for 2024-25.

**Daniel Johnson:** The Deputy First Minister's comments in the media over the weekend will have caused anxiety and nervousness among public servants across Scotland, just as winter costs start to bite. They deserve clarity and candour from the Government.

What level of detail is contained in the Scottish Government's plans to reduce head count? Will those plans be laid before Parliament in detail? What areas of focus will there be for such reductions, given that the national health service's head count will be protected? Will the minister guarantee that there will be no compulsory redundancies? Will he agree to meet trade union

representatives, as the GMB union has called on him to do?

**Tom Arthur:** We are in this situation because of a range of factors. Clearly, the impact of inflation has been significant, but we are also here because of decisions that have been taken by the UK Government. As the Deputy First Minister has already stated, we are committed to protecting the health service and we want to avoid compulsory redundancies. Of course, we are committed to engaging constructively with all our partners across the public sector in order to achieve those aims and ambitions.

With regard to a further update, as I said in my original answer, the Deputy First Minister will provide more information as part of the Scottish budget process.

**Daniel Johnson:** The ministers' answers were phrased to represent a range of factors doing a huge amount of work. The reality is that the announcement brings into question the Government's competence and shows its lack of workforce planning. As the minister knows, since 2019, civil service head count in devolved areas has increased by almost 40 per cent, which represents more than 7,000 posts. That is at a time when the NHS's head count grew by just 11 per cent and the Scottish Government's core head count increased by 2,000—by a third.

Throughout the Covid pandemic, the Government was adamant that Covid money was being used only for non-recurring items, but was that the case? Given the coincidence, was that money being used to grow head-count numbers? More importantly, is it not grossly incompetent, if not outright cruel, to create positions only to have to remove them just months later?

**Tom Arthur:** What is "incompetent" is the UK Government's handling of the UK economy, and what are "cruel" are its budget decisions. The reality is that, as was the case with every aspect of public finances, decisions on spending of public money during the Covid pandemic were set out in a transparent process through the annual budget process and, of course, in the published audited accounts.

I recognise that we are in an exceptionally challenging set of circumstances, but they are not unique to Scotland. Indeed, our colleagues in Wales are wrestling with similar challenges, which is a reflection of the broader macroeconomic factors and the decisions of the UK Government.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The minister is well aware that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has spent a great deal of its time on public sector reform and how that might happen. What principles does he believe should underpin such reform?

**Tom Arthur:** That is an important question. We have committed to a 10-year programme of public service reform, but underpinning that is a desire to ensure that we deliver more efficient person-centred services, and that we put prevention at the heart of them. We recognise that that is a shared ambition, and we are committed to working constructively with partners across the public sector to deliver it.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** That was a woeful set of explanations from the minister.

For years, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and Audit Scotland have warned the Scottish Government about the black hole in our public finances, but it has kept on recruiting people into the public services. It should be apologising to the people whose jobs are now under threat—not looking to blame Westminster. We need a proper explanation from the minister. When will we get it?

**Tom Arthur:** As I set out in my original answer, further information will be provided as part of the budget process. However, we cannot escape the circumstances that we have found ourselves in over the past two years, which include exceptionally high inflation that has necessitated public sector pay deals that have put unanticipated additional pressure on the public finances.

We are now having to contend with the return of the UK Government austerity agenda—one that has an excess of the austerity that was pursued by George Osborne and by Mr Rennie's party when it was in the Government.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Can the minister say anything about last week's Office for Budget Responsibility forecast? Could the autumn statement have done more to help Scotland's finances and protect jobs?

**Tom Arthur:** John Mason is right to highlight the OBR's grim set of forecasts, which underline the significant external factors that I mentioned, as well as the mismanagement of the UK economy by the UK Government. We want a public spending settlement that recognises the importance of investment, of protecting jobs and of supporting public service reform, which the UK Government has failed to recognise in its spending plans.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can squeeze in another brief supplementary question.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** The minister is giving us a very bad impression of himself as someone who has sloping shoulder syndrome, blaming everybody but himself for the situation that we are in.

Does he understand and accept that if the Government does not fully fund the council tax freeze that the First Minister announced—without

any consultation of anybody—there will be dire consequences for local government jobs and services?

**Tom Arthur:** We have committed to funding the council tax freeze fully. That is why we are engaging constructively with our partners in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. What is creating particular challenges in the current context, ahead of setting our own budget next month, is the fact that we have had such a paltry and pathetic settlement from the UK Government—a settlement that is not commensurate with the challenges that we face.

### Vessels and Piers Project (Update)

2. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, further to the finance secretary's letter to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 21 November, whether it will provide an update on the delivery of vessels and piers projects, including the small vessels replacement programme and the port works at Ardrossan and Gourock harbours. (S6T-01658)

**The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** The Government remains committed to the funding of new vessels and of port infrastructure to support our lifeline ferry services. The small vessels replacement programme is progressing well and, as Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd has confirmed, it remains on track, with the outline business case for phase 1 nearing completion, before it moves into the procurement phase. That is a crucial part of the process that will help to ensure that we deliver value for money and that vessels and shoreside works align.

Recent confirmation of in-year budgets does not impact on the overall delivery of key investments in the new ferries for our island communities, as first payments will not be due until contracts are awarded.

The business case for Ardrossan and the scope of the Gourock port projects are under review to help to inform robust investment decisions. The various partners in the Ardrossan project have further work to do in the process, following the pause in procurement in the summer, as the scope of the necessary work has been extended. I recently wrote to the Ardrossan task force members on that work.

We continue to make significant investments across our networks, working with CMAL and the operators to improve reliability and resilience of services as we progress. There has been extensive work from CMAL in the design and business case development of the small vessels replacement programme over the summer and autumn, including consultation of island

communities. Through work with Transport Scotland, it is progressing well towards the next planned stage of procurement.

**Jamie Greene:** I thank the minister for the update.

Let me probe a little bit about what “on track” means in the real world. The Scottish Government investment plan update from two years ago made categorical commitments that seven vessels of the small vessel replacement scheme would be serving island communities within the next five years—that is, by 2026. The CMAL chief executive responded by saying that

“we are not prepared to wait and wait and wait and see small vessels getting older and older”.

However, as we heard in the chamber today, it was also confirmed this weekend that payments will be made only once the shipbuilding contract is signed. It seems that the process has been pushed back a year, because if the payment follows the contract, surely the work will start only once the contract has been signed.

The obvious question is this: in the light of the “reprofiling”—as it is being called—will our island communities see all those vessels in service by 2026, as was originally planned, and, for the sake of Scotland’s shipbuilding yards, including Ferguson Marine in Inverclyde, who on earth will build the ships?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members of the need to comply with the time that has been allocated for both questions and answers.

**Fiona Hyslop:** CMAL’s published corporate plan for 2020-23 indicated an earlier start date, but we all understand why those plans would not have been delivered. CMAL wants progress, and so do I. We work with CMAL very closely. One of the first things that I did when I came into office was visit CMAL to understand what its plans were for the programme.

On delivery of the vessels, we are clearly at the stage that CMAL thought we would be at, which is completion of the outline business case and design, and the move into procurement. We are delivering the funding for the overall vessel programme that we said we would between 2021 and 2026. The small vessel replacement programme will commence building in 2026, with delivery in the following two years, which is the current plan as set out by CMAL.

**Jamie Greene:** The funding is promised, but delivery of the vessels is what people are interested in. When will the vessels be sailing around their communities? It sounds as though we are talking about at least 2028, which I am sure

will come as a huge disappointment to our island communities.

The harbour improvements, which are also much needed, include the Ardrossan and Gourock upgrades. We were told that the Ardrossan harbour redevelopment construction would be finished by spring or summer 2026. Will the minister update me on whether that is still on track and on plan? That would contradict comments that were made in the letter to the Finance and Public Administration Committee from Shona Robison. She said that the reprofiling will

“push out timescales of future improvements”.

What future improvements will be pushed out or, in other parlance, delayed? Will the harbour redevelopment plans also be delayed, or are they on track?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Vessels will be delivered from 2026, as planned. There will be important alignment between the overall vessel procurement and shoreside investments, which include harbourside investments. That includes the fact that we want to move to electric ferries, because of our desire to improve the system.

On Ardrossan—bear with me, Presiding Officer, because there was a lot of detail in those questions—the member will know that, as I have outlined in the chamber, the improvement works will need to be extended from the original investment proposal. The replacement or strengthening of the Winton pier and the Irish berth at Ardrossan, which ferries use in certain wind conditions to manoeuvre out of the harbour, has expanded that piece of work. North Ayrshire Council and Peel Ports, as the partners in that process, are delivering on-going work to make sure that we have a robust investment decision.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, I need to go to the supplementary question from Stuart McMillan.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** The minister will be aware of my support for Ferguson Marine’s workforce and for the yard. The small vessel replacement programme is vital to Ferguson’s, particularly because of its history with the three hybrid ferries. In addition to what has been said so far, can the minister provide an assurance that the announcement of the programme will happen early in the next financial year? The minister will be aware of the correspondence that was sent from local MP Ronnie Cowan, Councillor Elizabeth Robertson and me to the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy. Will the minister agree to meet the three of us to discuss the small vessel replacement programme?

**Fiona Hyslop:** It is clear that Stuart McMillan wants to advocate for his constituents and the Ferguson Marine yard, which he continues to do. The yard has to focus on winning future work and getting itself into a state where it can win future work.

In relation to Ferguson Marine, the lead minister is Neil Gray, who I understand has been in correspondence with Stuart McMillan. Our focus has to be for Ferguson Marine to secure the two new ferries, to ensure that the yard has a future and to serve the island communities.

It is clear that there are opportunities in relation to the procurement of the new small vessel replacements. On the needs of islanders and the local economy that Stuart McMillan represents, I understand that relationship. We are considering future vessel contracts from public agencies on a case-by-case basis.

I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy had an invitation to meet Stuart McMillan, and I hear that that invitation has been extended to me. However, I would need to reflect on what stage we are at in procurement and whether that might be appropriate.

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** Ardrossan waited six years for the Scottish Government to agree terms with Peel Ports while ministers refused to agree to calls to bring the port back into public ownership to make progress. There is now real concern that Ardrossan will lose out to Troon permanently. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure urgent consideration of a business case for the essential works at Ardrossan harbour? Why has that work been left so late?

**Fiona Hyslop:** It is clear that the issue of public ownership is different from the progress of the different partners in delivering the works that are required for Ardrossan. On my responsibilities since I have been in post, I have wanted to ensure that we have the most robust business case that we can have. For example, North Ayrshire Council has been liaising with the Isle of Arran ferry committee, and has appointed consultants to provide a report. That will not be available until late November, so we could not deliver on that business case as of now. However, that is what partnership working is about. More than one partner is involved. We have been working with them and Peel Ports and looking at the extension of the need for the Winton pier and the Irish berth, which would not have not been in the original proposals that Katy Clark reflected on.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We will move on to the next item of business after a short pause to allow the front-bench teams to change positions should they wish to do so.

## Heat in Buildings

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a statement by Patrick Harvie on heat in buildings consultation. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:22

**The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie):** The climate crisis is, of course, the greatest challenge of our age. Scotland has halved its emissions since 1990, but the most challenging part of the journey lies ahead. The First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition will be at the 28th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP28—this week to share our experience and learn from others about how we can secure a future for people and planet.

We have a legal obligation to make that journey to which all parties in Parliament signed up. However, we are making that journey not just because the law says that we must and floods and fires show us that we have to act. It is not even just because of the huge economic opportunity for Scotland, which we have set out as one of the Government's three defining missions. Fundamentally, doing so is in the interests of the people whom the Parliament represents. That is true of the way that we heat our homes and buildings. There is the opportunity to free people from dependence on fossil fuels and the volatile prices that drive fuel poverty, and to free the world from reliance on the brutal and authoritarian regimes that control so much of the global fossil fuel market.

That is why today I am publishing consultations on proposals that, if Parliament approves them, will give the leadership and clarity that Scotland needs to make the transition to clean heat by 2045.

I have had the great fortune in this job to see at first hand the countless examples of the heat transition that is already under way. A retired man told me about how clean heating had transformed the comfort of the suburban bungalow that he and his late wife had shared for decades. A family in Lochaber were amazed by the reduction in their bills after moving from liquefied petroleum gas heating to a heat pump. New homes from Shetland to the centre of Edinburgh are being built to a zero emissions standard by developers who are choosing to act well ahead of our new build heat standard, which will come into force next April. I visited a heat pump manufacturer in

Glasgow that is investing in the new jobs and skills that Scotland needs, and I have listened to how Argyll Community Housing Association already has more than a quarter of its 5,000 homes using heat pumps. It is one of many social landlords that are leading the way in some of Scotland's most rural settings. Just yesterday, I visited the new heat network at Edinburgh's waterfront, which is one of a rapidly growing number of heat networks in Scotland.

The move to clean heating is not just for tomorrow; it is already here today. Our role, for which all parties in Parliament share a responsibility, is to provide the certainty and long-term time horizon that will accelerate that growing trend, which will give households the information that they need to plan and give businesses the confidence to invest. We will do that by providing the most generous package of financial support in any of the UK nations. Just last week, I welcomed "Green Heat Finance Taskforce Report: Part 1", which outlined the enormous appetite from private funders to support such work.

We do this in stark contrast to the UK Government, which seems more interested in exploiting climate as a political dividing line than in rising to the challenge. The Prime Minister's climate U-turns in September may have a bigger direct impact in England, but his signals have a profound impact on what consumers hear and what businesses need throughout the UK.

Today, we take our approach forward by setting out a clear framework of regulation that takes us from now to 2045 and works with the gradient of consumer demand and industry capacity. First, to tackle fuel poverty, reduce energy bills and increase home comfort, we intend to regulate to ensure that Scotland's homes meet minimum energy standards. Privately rented homes are to meet a minimum energy efficiency standard by no later than 2028, and owner-occupied homes are to meet the same minimum energy efficiency standard by 2033. A new net zero standard will apply to homes in the social rented sector, which will mean meeting a new and higher energy efficiency standard between 2033 and 2040 and all homes moving to clean heat by 2045.

Secondly, I want to help heat networks to grow to meet their full potential of supplying up to a third of heat demand. There are more than 1,000 heat networks in Scotland, but many are small. That is why we are consulting on new powers to safeguard locations and circumstances where heat networks are most attractive and to ensure that heat networks are viable in those places.

Thirdly, we are consulting on all homes and non-domestic buildings ending their use of polluting heating by 2045, with staging posts along the way to avoid a bottleneck as we approach that

deadline. If that approach is agreed to, in the first instance, people who buy a home or non-domestic property before 2045 will end their use of polluting heating systems within a specific and reasonable period following that purchase, with a set of exemptions and abeyances to reflect different circumstances.

Fourthly, to demonstrate public leadership, we intend to set an earlier target of 2038 for all public buildings to have clean heat.

I will now address issues of timing, scale and pace. I have confirmed that the key dates in our 2021 "Heat in Buildings Strategy—Achieving Net Zero Emissions in Scotland's Buildings" remain in place—they are 2028 for minimum energy standards for privately rented homes, 2033 for minimum energy standards for other private homes, 2038 for public buildings to be zero carbon and 2045 for all buildings to be zero carbon.

Our intention is to have in place by 2025 the main legislative foundation for the heat transition. I have worked through stakeholder feedback, detailed evidence and the very significant changes in the cost pressures that households and businesses have faced in the past two years, and I can now set out a more detailed timescale for the current decade.

If Parliament has, by 2025, passed the bill that I intend to introduce, detailed secondary legislation will be required, and it will be the next parliamentary session before those regulations have an impact. To ensure that we are fair, just and proportionate, it might be 2028 at the earliest before the first home or building owners are required to act under those regulations.

In turn, that timeline has two implications. First, the position that we set out in our 2021 strategy of starting the heat transition at different times in off-gas and on-gas areas—in 2025 and 2030 respectively—is no longer our intended approach. A single timeline that takes effect from 2028 will be fairer and clearer. We will still take account of the different contexts in urban and rural areas, but we will do so through our delivery programmes, our funding and our use of exemptions rather than through primary legislation.

Secondly, our intention for clean heat to play the maximum possible role in our 2030 climate plans would have meant more than 1 million homes decarbonising by 2030, but the single timeline that I have now set out from 2028 means that that scale of change is not achievable by that date, and more of the transition to clean heat shifts into the early 2030s instead. That approach allows us to gain the full benefits of the technological innovation that is already taking place to build the workforce capacity, consumer demand and economies of scale that we will need.

The timeline that I am outlining today will place Scotland on by far the most ambitious path within the UK, with the deployment of clean heating systems at scale and at a pace that is very much faster than the prevailing take-up rate. Coupled with our pioneering work on the new build heat standard, on standards for social housing and on energy efficiency, it is clear that, by driving the development of heat networks into the next decade and beyond, and—to repeat—by providing the most generous package of funding support in the UK, Scotland can have the most ambitious zero carbon programme for buildings that has ever been seen in the UK.

I know that some people in this chamber and beyond regard clean heating merely as the latest front in a climate culture war. They can expect to be disappointed. The days of heating our homes and buildings with fossil fuel and polluting systems are numbered. However, during the consultation, I intend to take an open and constructive approach with any MSP or party that chooses to take the issue seriously. That approach extends beyond political parties to a wide range of stakeholders, from businesses investing in clean heat to fuel poverty campaigners, and from private landlords to funders. Bring forward positive ideas and I will listen. The consultation and our final proposal will be shaped by those views.

However, those who wish to pretend that the heat transition is not necessary, who want to treat it as a shallow political game or who trade in vague promises with nothing to back them up will not only be abandoning the commitments that they made when they voted for the climate targets and betraying the clear majority of the public who want ambitious climate action; they will be undermining Scotland as we seek the maximum social, environmental and economic opportunity from this ambitious transition. That would serve no one.

Today is the next big step in meeting our climate ambitions and embracing a warmer and cleaner future. Let us all rise to that challenge.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which time we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if those members who wish to ask a question would press their request-to-speak button.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** I thank the minister for the advance sight of his statement.

Today will mark the start of a 10-year time bomb for more than half of Scotland's home owners. SNP and Green ministers have come to the chamber today with a timescale but not a plan for how they will achieve what they have set out.

There is nothing in the statement today to provide reassurances that SNP and Green

ministers understand the true costs that will face home owners the length and breadth of Scotland. Estimates have suggested that it may cost more than £30,000 to achieve the minimum energy efficiency standards in a rural property for example. What estimation of the costs of compliance for the average home has been undertaken?

**Patrick Harvie:** To be honest, I am not entirely sure whether Miles Briggs thinks that giving 10 years' notice of the measures coming in is in some way bad for home owners. It is important that we give people clarity to plan and that we give businesses clarity and the timescale in which they can invest. That long-term time horizon will drive up investment in skills, capacity and innovation.

The member should also be aware that the green heat finance task force's first report, which was published last week, begins to set out some of the innovation that is happening in, for example, financial products, green mortgages and other forms of driving more investment.

The assessment of the overall costs will vary significantly throughout the country and in different building types. Part of the consultation is considering the issues of abeyances and exemptions, to look at different circumstances.

I hope that Miles Briggs and his party colleagues will come to recognise not only that heat transition is necessary, but that investing in it and giving people a long-term time horizon to plan for it will maximise the economic benefits to Scotland and the cost-saving benefits to households in the long run.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement, and I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Timescales for action are already slipping since the first heat in buildings strategy was published. Why will the legislation take two years to introduce, given that people need to have homes now that are affordable to heat and power?

We have been told that £33 billion is needed to implement the strategy, so where will the money come from? People do not need warm words; they need warm homes, and they need Scottish Government leadership.

Given the failure to spend £133 million on retrofitting last year, what lessons have been learned to ensure that people are not ripped off when they try to do the right thing?

**Patrick Harvie:** It is important that we not only take account of the cost of living pressures that many people have faced in the past couple of years—that is one reason why we have to adapt our plans to cope with what people can realistically

afford—but look through the implications of the UK Government climbdown on climate a couple of months ago.

Some of the direct impacts from Rishi Sunak's bizarre speech announcing the scrapping of climate action will be felt more significantly in England. However, we already see the UK slipping down the league table of green investment, and that will have an impact if we do not counter that narrative here. As investors look across Europe and the wider world in considering where they want to put their money in investing in net zero, it is important that we send a crystal-clear signal that Scotland is serious about getting the job done and about making this an attractive place for the investment to come to make that possible.

On the commitments that we have already made, Sarah Boyack is aware that we have committed £1.8 billion over the course of this session of Parliament. More than £1 billion of that has already been committed through the budget process, at the halfway point in this session. We will continue to build on that strong track record.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Queens Quay in my constituency, where my office is located, has the first 100 per cent carbon-free district heating system in the UK. The system, which heats council buildings, West College Scotland, Clydebank leisure centre and a new care home, is a great example of innovative delivery of carbon-free energy. What emphasis will be put on the expansion of that scheme and other major heat network projects to help to deliver more green energy to homes and businesses?

**Patrick Harvie:** Marie McNair is absolutely right to draw attention to that scheme, which is an excellent example, not just at the technical level of how heat networks can provide affordable and reliable decarbonised heat, but at an economic level, where leadership by the local authority is making sure that we get the maximum social benefit in developing it.

We have worked with our colleagues in Denmark and, in the previous session of Parliament, we passed heat network legislation. Just last week, I brought to Parliament a target for the amount of heat that we expect to be delivered through heat networks by 2035. Almost all political parties managed to bring themselves to support that target. That is the kind of signal that we need to give to ensure that local authorities, social landlords and other organisations see the delivery of new heat networks and the decarbonising and expansion of existing ones as a huge opportunity for them to achieve the heat transition in a way that works for their local communities.

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** What punishment will there be for home

owners who fail to carry out the required work after the purchase of a property from 2033? The consultation seems to suggest civil penalties or building societies and banks getting involved. Can the minister guarantee that home owners will never be punished or even evicted by their building society for non-compliance?

**Patrick Harvie:** I encourage Mr Lumsden to read the detail of the consultation documents that we have published today—

**Douglas Lumsden:** You only published them two minutes ago.

**Patrick Harvie:** I am not sure whether the member wants to hear the response.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, please resume your seat. We need to hear the person who has the floor. In this instance, it is the minister. Please resume, minister.

**Patrick Harvie:** I encourage Mr Lumsden and all members to read the detail of what we have published today, as well as the "Green Heat Finance Taskforce Report: Part 1". Some in the media have picked up on individual lines in that report relating to things such as council tax. The vast bulk of what the task force has written in its report and of what we have written in the documents that we are consulting on is about support and incentives and making the system work for people.

We have looked at the option of civil penalties in relation to landlords who fail their tenants by not investing in bringing properties up to standard. We have not suggested that there would be, at least in the foreseeable future, a role for civil penalties in relation to home owners. I repeat that the balance of the benefit of the heat transition will be achieved if we place far more emphasis on support and incentives than on amplifying people's fears by using words such as "punishment".

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** Although domestic heat pumps and other technologies that are powered by electricity are very welcome, significant upgrades to the electricity grid will be required, particularly alongside the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points. What detailed analysis has the Scottish Government done to ensure that there is the grid capacity to support the delivery of its heat in buildings strategy in the targeted timeframes? Is that analysis in the public domain?

**Patrick Harvie:** We engage with network operators and the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets on that. Ivan McKee is quite right that the application of electrification for heat and transport has implications for grid upgrades, but it also offers opportunities. As we create more storage, in relation to either vehicles or domestic energy

through heat or electricity, there will be the opportunity for energy providers to use smart tariffs to ensure that we get the maximum benefit from low-cost renewables when they come on to the grid in large volumes. People will then be able to use that energy when they need it. There are therefore advantages to the issue, not just challenges in relation to grid upgrades.

As I said, we engage actively with network operators and Ofgem. We believe that there is capacity in the system to continue to develop in line with the trajectory that we are taking on heat decarbonisation. I am sure that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee will continue to take an active interest in the matter in the months and years ahead.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** In his statement, the minister said nothing at all about how we reduce the amount of heat that we need. My constituents suffer the highest levels of fuel poverty in Scotland due to living in old, draughty and poorly insulated homes. There was nothing at all in the statement about insulation and how we tackle the fabric of our buildings. When will the minister address that fundamental question?

**Patrick Harvie:** I am sorry that Rhoda Grant got that impression. In my statement, I addressed the issue of energy efficiency standards in the private rented and owner-occupied sectors. There is also detail on that in the consultation documents.

The work that we have done prior to the current consultation on reform of energy performance certificates addresses how we give people the information that they need to invest in their homes in order to reduce energy demand. The work that we have done to extend the fabric-first measures—the energy efficiency-only measures—in the social rented sector is also important. The social rented sector asked us to extend the funding for that type of investment, and we have responded positively to that.

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** Hydrogen will play a vital role in Scotland's future net zero economy, and it could and should play a part in heating our homes as we move forward. Will the minister outline what engagement he has had with the UK Government, academics, energy companies and industry leaders to ensure that Scotland fulfils its hydrogen potential?

**Patrick Harvie:** Scotland has immense potential in the production of green hydrogen, and its application could decarbonise many aspects of our economy. There is an emerging consensus that hydrogen will play a significant role in some parts of our transport system, in industry and in a number of other sectors, but there is an

expectation that it will not play a central role in home heating.

The process of generating renewable electricity, converting it into hydrogen, transporting it and converting it back into power that can be applied in heating will always involve efficiency losses at every stage. There will be far greater benefit from using renewable electricity directly, especially through devices such as heat pumps that achieve more than 100 per cent efficiency by drawing energy from the ambient environment. The UK Government is moving to the position, which we took some time ago, of recognising that, although hydrogen might have some role to play in heating, it is not expected to be a central one.

We, of course, continue to engage with all stakeholders that are interested in the green hydrogen economy in a wider sense. We in no way play down or seek to ignore the immense opportunities that hydrogen will present for our economy, the rest of our energy system and industrial uses.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I declare an interest as someone in receipt of feed-in tariffs and the renewable heat incentive.

As the First Minister jets off to Dubai for COP28, his Government is downgrading its plans to decarbonise buildings. A clear mission to get 1 million homes on to climate-friendly heating by 2030 has now gone. What will the minister do differently in relation to the first hurdle of getting private rented homes up to minimum standards by 2028, given that the only Government support scheme for the sector has upgraded only 215 properties in three years?

**Patrick Harvie:** The reality is that, as a result of the decisions that I have announced, Scotland will have far and away the most ambitious programme of heat decarbonisation of any part of the UK. That is a very sharp contrast with the UK Government's announcements on scrapping important measures on energy efficiency. In a pantomime bit of rhetoric, it announced that it was scrapping some non-existent policies, but it scrapped significant policies on heat decarbonisation as well. The Scottish Government is taking the opposite approach—an approach that is achievable and affordable but also ambitious—and is ensuring that we offer the most generous package of grants and loans to householders in Scotland to ensure that it is achievable.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** Denmark is a European leader in district heating, as the Scottish Government recognised when it signed a memorandum of understanding on the green energy transition with the Danish Government in 2021. How is Scotland sharing best practice with our neighbours as we expand

our heat network ambitions, which are a key part of the heat in buildings strategy?

**Patrick Harvie:** We have engaged actively with colleagues from Denmark, who advised the Government on the shaping and framing of the heat networks legislation in the previous session of Parliament. I have also had the opportunity to visit Denmark to see the continued expansion of heat networks.

It is important to recognise that Denmark has had 50 years of experience in building modern heat networks, which now cover something like two thirds of households there. We do not have 50 years to wait to decarbonise our homes—we need to act more quickly. Heat networks will play an important role, as will individual systems such as heat pumps.

We will continue to be informed by our European partners, including those who are already installing clean heating systems at a significantly faster rate than they did in previous years. We need to learn those lessons and show that Scotland will gain the greatest possible economic benefit from joining that rapid heat transition.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** If we force people who live in tenements to pay potentially ruinous amounts of money, it could be a breach of their human rights. That is why we set up the tenement maintenance working group in the previous session of the Parliament and why that area of law reform now sits with the Scottish Law Commission. Does the minister agree that the sweeping changes that he wants to make should be made in conjunction with the work that the Scottish Law Commission is undertaking?

**Patrick Harvie:** Absolutely. We have also been working with the tenements short-life working group. I had a meeting with the chair only last week to talk about its recommendations.

I have said before and I say again that, as we frame some of the exemptions and abeyances as a result of some of the views that we will hear in the consultation, no one will be at all surprised that traditional tenements might take significantly longer than the rest of the housing stock to adapt. Many of those properties will need to benefit from heat networks rather than individual flat-by-flat heating systems. We will work with the grain of the technology development that is taking place and the recommendations of the short-life working group. As a tenement dweller myself, I understand the challenges, but I know that people—including my constituents and, I imagine, Mr Simpson's—want the solutions, and that is what the Government is determined to give them.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I welcome the clarity with which the

minister set out the pathway to 2045. I also welcome the stark contrast between our trajectory and the UK Government's, because the Prime Minister's decision to scrap minimum energy efficiency standards for private landlords will cost tenants in England £8 billion over the next decade in higher bills.

Will the minister confirm that private landlords in Scotland will be required to meet minimum energy efficiency standards? Will he outline what the resulting benefit will be to Scotland's 300,000 private tenants?

**Patrick Harvie:** Absolutely. I have been clear in my statement about the 2028 target that we intend to bring forward on minimum energy efficiency standards for the private rented sector. Mark Ruskell rightly highlights the cumulative impact across the whole UK of the UK Government's decision to scrap that policy. On the household-by-household impact, some £300 a year has been added to the bills of PRS households because of that decision by the UK Government to scrap its policy. We will not impose those additional costs on people. If the UK Government was remotely serious about making the transition to net zero affordable, it would have broken the link between electricity and gas prices, rather than adding even more to the energy bills of people in the PRS. That is not the approach that Scotland will take.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** Much of the discussion about heating in the future has been about heat pumps. In a lot of situations, however, it seems that district heat networks or communal heating systems are better suited. Does the minister agree that heat networks should be a bigger part of the picture? If so, what action is the Scottish Government taking on that?

**Patrick Harvie:** Absolutely: there will be places where individual household-by-household or building-by-building solutions will be right, but there will be many parts of Scotland where district heat networks and communal systems across large multiple-occupancy buildings will be the right way to go.

As I said earlier, we have learned a great deal from the experience of our colleagues in Denmark. Last week, we brought the secondary legislation to set the 2035 heat target of 7 terawatt hours of heat through heat networks to Parliament, and it was agreed. We have a range of support from the Heat Network Support Unit, which shares skills and expertise to bring projects forward. The heat network fund is there to invest in pre-capital and capital support, which is needed to bring networks to fruition. We are also working with a wide range of institutional investors, who view this sector as a great place to put their money. I would far rather that all of our collective pension funds were

invested in the kind of technology that we need in Scotland, such as heat networks, than in some of the industries that are making the problem worse.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** What does the minister have to say to people whose homes cannot physically be retrofitted? Last year, 1,464 photovoltaic devices were installed, with loans of £7.25 million from the Scottish Government. That scheme has now been scrapped—unless it is combined with a renewable heating system, which not everyone can afford. Surely half a loaf is better than no bread, and people should not be discouraged from installing solar panels, given their positive impact on climate change.

**Patrick Harvie:** We certainly do not discourage people from installing solar—far from it. In fact, no funding for solar was scrapped; the same funding is available. We need to maximise the heat decarbonisation potential of that funding, which is why we changed some of the rules on how people access it.

Just recently, the Scottish Government published a tenfold ambition for expanding the deployment of solar in Scotland. It has huge potential, not just to add renewable energy on to our grid but to ensure that householders, businesses and communities generate some income for themselves to reinvest in the built environment.

I have just seen the first response from the chief executive of the Climate Change Committee. He has responded to our proposals, saying:

“These are bold proposals to decarbonise Scotland’s buildings ... They recognise the importance of a long-term plan ... with a very welcome focus on upgrading properties at the point of sale.”

I very much hope that that spirit of co-operation and constructive engagement will characterise our political debate on the issue over the coming months.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the statement.

## Female Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11455, in the name of Clare Haughey, on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, on female participation in sport and physical exercise. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

I call on Clare Haughey to speak to and move the motion. You have approximately 10 minutes, Ms Haughey.

14:54

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** As convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I am pleased to open this afternoon’s debate on female participation in sport and physical activity. On behalf of the committee, I thank everyone who engaged positively with our inquiry for their input and place on record the committee’s thanks to the clerks for their work.

I joined the committee as convener at a late stage in the inquiry, but I know that it was originally prompted by a key finding from the committee’s previous inquiry into the health and wellbeing of children and young people, which found a significant decline in the number of girls participating in sport and physical activity as they reached puberty. The current inquiry subsequently found evidence of a gender gap in the rates of participation that persists up to women in their early 40s.

We wanted to find out more about the reasons behind that worrying trend. The purpose was to identify key barriers to participation in sport and physical activity for females of all ages and to make recommendations for breaking down those barriers.

Teenage girls face particular barriers when taking part in sport and physical activity, both in and outside of school. A lack of understanding and awareness of menstrual health and negative attitudes among boys are important factors that contribute to the decline in girls’ participation from the age of adolescence. We need to improve learning and normalise discussions in school about the impact that menstruation can have on girls’ participation and to remove the stigma around managing periods. We must also do more to tackle misogynistic attitudes and foster mutual respect between boys and girls when they take part in sport and physical activity.

The committee heard about the positive impact that the active schools programme has had in

broadening girls' access to a wider range of sports and physical activities. However, the most recent full evaluation of active sports took place almost 10 years ago in 2014, and an updated evaluation of the programme is needed, with a particular focus on how it is helping girls to access the same range and quality of opportunities for sport and physical activity as boys.

Beyond school settings and teenage years, a lack of understanding, education and appropriate support creates barriers to the participation in sport and physical activity of women of all ages. It means that they lose out on the benefits of remaining physically active, with knock-on impacts on their long-term health.

Leadership is equally important in giving more women the confidence to be physically active. We need to do more to break down the barriers that prevent women from putting themselves forward for coaching, leadership and volunteering roles. That will create a virtuous circle in which the existence of more positive role models will encourage more women to participate at all levels. We also need to find solutions that will help to make it easier for women with childcare and other caring responsibilities to be able to participate regularly in sport and physical activity, including in leadership roles.

Sadly, the inquiry heard extensive evidence of girls and women being subjected to harassment and abuse while exercising. That is completely unacceptable. In sport and physical activity settings, we need to improve processes for receiving, handling and dealing with complaints to ensure that they are clear, transparent and easy to navigate. Too often, sport and active travel infrastructures and facilities are designed, constructed and maintained in a way that fails to take account of basic safety requirements for female users. Our report recommends encouraging the systematic use of feminist town planning to improve the safety of basic infrastructure, so that it is better suited to the needs of female participants.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** Clare Haughey said that she thinks that some active travel infrastructure is not suitable for women. Can she explain that a bit more?

**Clare Haughey:** That is based on written evidence and evidence that the committee heard in its sessions. Simple things such as lighting in parks or on cycle paths would make them much safer places for women, and they would certainly feel safer there.

The Scottish Government's commitment to doubling investment in sport and active living to £100 million per year over the current session of Parliament is welcome. However, a significant

proportion of that funding needs to be targeted at increasing rates of female participation in sport and physical activity, particularly among those who face intersecting barriers to participation such as disability; ethnic, religious or socioeconomic background; or being from the LGBTQ+ community. On that subject, the committee heard evidence in support of greater use of equality impact assessments to ensure that sports infrastructure and facilities are designed to facilitate access for all.

Imagery and messaging aimed at encouraging greater participation in sport and physical activity should actively promote inclusion and diversity. We should be improving equalities education in schools to help overcome stigma and discrimination that might otherwise discourage girls who face intersecting barriers to their participation in sport and physical activity. Moreover, decision makers need to work together to identify and promote positive role models who properly reflect diversity and inclusion, and to pursue strategies aimed at recruiting a greater diversity of female applicants into coaching and leadership roles.

Although we have come a long way in recent years, there is still much further to go if elite female athletes are to achieve anything approaching parity with their male counterparts. The Scottish Government should consider setting up an independent women's sport trust for Scotland, which could help grow revenue from women's sports and reduce reliance on men's sports for funding.

Women in elite sport need sustainable career pathways that enable them to pursue their sport while earning a sustainable income. The industry also needs to do more to produce clothing and equipment that meet the needs of women in elite sport.

In addition, there is a chronic lack of research into female physiology and the impact of menstruation and women's health conditions on training and performance. Women in elite sport still lack appropriate support when it comes to decisions around pregnancy. It cannot be right that so many elite female athletes continue to be forced to make a choice between continuing their career and starting a family.

Sexism and abuse are on-going concerns. To address them, our report calls on the Scottish Government to consider setting up an independent body to tackle cases of misconduct and abuse in elite female sport. The media, too, has a crucial role to play in its promotion of women's elite sport. There has been progress in that respect, but much remains to be done. Shockingly, the Scottish women and girls in sport advisory board's 2019 report "Levelling the Playing Field" found that more

than a fifth of online news articles relating to women's sport included sexualised reporting and images. That has a hugely damaging impact on self-confidence and self-esteem, and undermines female participation at all levels.

Television sports coverage remains significantly skewed towards male sports. While the quality and quantity of the coverage of major women's sporting events has improved, levels of coverage outside the window of those events drop to a small fraction of the overall sports coverage in the media. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that the public has a real appetite for following more women's sport in the media. The number of people watching TV coverage of women's sport in the first half of 2022 doubled to more than 36 million compared with the same period a year before.

To further stimulate and encourage growth in coverage of, and public interest in, women's sport, our report recommends that the Scottish Government consider whether additional public investment might be needed and, if so, where to target it for maximum effect. It would also be helpful to receive an update from the minister on the planned Scottish sport media summit and on what bearing the outcomes from the summit might have on further improving the quality and quantity of future media coverage of elite women's sport.

For good or ill, social media have an undeniably huge impact on female attitudes to, and engagement with, sport and physical activity. Sports organisations and governing bodies can play an important role in disseminating and amplifying positive messaging around the health benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity by girls and women, and in challenging misogynistic attitudes and behaviours.

The Scottish Government can also play a role by providing support and guidance around social media strategy development. The United Kingdom Online Safety Act 2023 could also provide a framework for stronger action, including sanctions, to address the harmful impact of the negative body image content that exists on social media.

In order to effectively benchmark progress towards closing the gender-based participation gap, we recommend commissioning a new population-level survey to give us an accurate and comprehensive picture of current rates of participation in sport across all segments of the population. We should also explore incentives to encourage research organisations to direct additional resources towards research in sports science, with a specific focus on women.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing both the minister's initial response to the findings of our inquiry and the other contributions in this debate.

As our inquiry found, breaking down the many persistent barriers to female participation in sport will require on-going determination and focus.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the recommendations contained in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's 7th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Female participation in sport and physical activity (SP Paper 445).

15:05

**The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd):** It is my pleasure to take part in today's debate. Members will be aware that I am incredibly passionate about this area and am committed to creating the change that we need in order to see more women and girls getting active across Scotland.

I thank the committee for its report and I also thank those individuals who came forward to share their experience and knowledge. On Friday 24 November, the Scottish Government published an interim response to the committee's report, which responds to a number of the committee's recommendations. We will provide a full and in-depth response to all the recommendations in due course.

It is important to highlight that we recognise that there are barriers to women and girls being physically active and that it remains our priority to support participation by all groups and to tackle inequalities in participation. I was recently told that I am one of only three ministers in the whole world whose portfolio includes both health and sport. That that combination exists in a ministerial post in this Government is no accident: we understand that increasing participation by women and girls is absolutely crucial if we are to ensure improved long-term health outcomes and life opportunities. We must ensure that women and girls are given every opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity at all stages of their lives.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** The committee has produced a very positive report. Paragraph 132, which I found particularly interesting, deals with boys' domination of playground spaces. Will the Government undertake the additional work to reach out to local authorities about the design, availability and openness of playgrounds and—which may be more important—the messaging about who those playgrounds are for?

**Maree Todd:** I am more than happy to do that. The member will be aware that I engage regularly with local authorities and with a diverse group of leaders in sport and physical activity across Scotland. That is exactly the sort of territory that we like to get into. As I said, my response to the report is an interim one. In some areas, you have

asked for answers that lie outside my portfolio, but I am absolutely determined to get in about that and to ensure that we deliver real and lasting change for women and girls, which, I am persuaded, starts in the playground.

Although there are many pressures in our society that can lead towards less active lifestyles and a decline in activity levels, the good news is that Scotland is bucking the trend. The most recent Scottish health survey showed a significant increase in the number of women meeting the UK chief medical officer's recommended level of activity—a 4 per cent rise, from 61 to 65 per cent. The survey also showed that the gap between men and women in levels of participation is closing.

Although that is positive news, I am not complacent. We must continue working to ensure that more women meet the CMO's guidelines, given the consequent impacts on long-term health and wellbeing. We await the results of the 2022 Scottish health survey, which will be published on 5 December, and I hope that we will continue to see a positive trend. We know that a higher proportion of boys than of girls meets the physical activity guidelines. That difference is significant among those aged 13 to 15, where there is a 20 per cent difference, with 73 per cent and 53 per cent respectively meeting the guidelines.

That particular drop-off in female physical activity is one that we have all been aware of for some time and I am grateful that the committee has focused on that. The reasons for that are multifaceted and require different interventions, but a lot of fantastic work is going on across the sector to address the issues. Our active schools programme is successfully engaging girls in sport and physical activity in every local authority across the country, and we have committed to ensuring that that programme will be free for all children and young people by the end of this session of parliamentary session.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

Does the minister recognise the evidence that was given to the cross-party group on sport on the premises that are used by schools and local authorities that sometimes lie empty for a long part of the day? One way to engage with local authorities would be to try to improve the usage of those facilities, which could encourage more women to take part in sport at a time when, at the moment, they are prohibited from doing so.

**Maree Todd:** I recognise the point that the member is raising. It is a vexing issue that has been around for a long time, and we see it many parts of the country. I am determined that we will work together to try to unlock and free up the school estate and make sure that those assets become part of the community, in order to

encourage the participation of the whole community. We need to be doing that, particularly in these financially constrained times.

The work that we are doing with active Scotland will provide more children with more opportunities to take part in sport before, during and after school. It takes an inclusive approach, with a particular focus on poverty, additional support needs and care-experienced young people. During the 2022-23 academic year, more than 124,000 girls made more than 2 million visits to active schools sessions, making up 46 per cent of the participants.

The "Fit for Girls" programme, which was delivered in partnership between sportscotland and the Youth Sport Trust, provides support to local authorities, governing bodies and other national partners that have identified a need to improve the provision for girls and young women and are committed to empowering girls as part of that process. There is also the incredible partnership between Scottish Sport Futures and the Sweaty Betty Foundation, which aims to reduce as many barriers to participation as possible, as well as encouraging important conversations about breast health, periods, hormonal changes and other issues that affect girls and young women.

However, we know that, before adolescence, many girls have already decided that they do not belong in sport. Earlier this year, Women in Sport published research that highlighted that the message that girls as young as five hear and see daily undermines self-confidence and makes them feel that sport is not for them.

Providing positive experiences that develop physical confidence and competence from the earliest age is key. Our active play development programme targets areas of disadvantage and will support more children from more deprived backgrounds to develop the skills and confidence required to enjoy being more physically active.

Progress in relation to other inequalities remains a concern, and it is therefore vital that we understand and address the intersectionality of additional barriers to participation. Disabled people, those from ethnic minority communities and those living in more deprived communities all have lower levels of participation.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to provision, and those who deliver locally are best placed to identify the needs of their communities. This week is Scottish disability sport week 2023, which is led by Scottish Disability Sport, and today's theme focuses on overcoming barriers to participation. It is the first year of the campaign, which is a nationwide celebration of disability sport

and a chance to inspire and support disabled people throughout Scotland to get active.

We are working closely with sportscotland and partners to ensure that we embed a culture of inclusion across sport. In October this year, we celebrated Scottish women and girls in sport week, our annual campaign that is hugely important in increasing the visibility and participation of women and girls in sport and physical activity, as well as highlighting the many health benefits that it can bring to their lives. The theme for the week was celebrating inclusion, and it was encouraging to see the positive stories shared during the week and the buzz right across the sector.

I was pleased to see that there was support from the leadership and relevant spokespeople of all five parties in Holyrood. Many MSPs supported the motion lodged by the convener of the cross-party group on sport, Liz Smith, in recognition of the week, and all five parties were represented in its signatories. There is genuine consensus on the importance of access to sport and physical activity for women and girls, in recognition of the benefits that it brings, and there is significant desire to collaboratively reduce barriers to access.

Early data from the evaluation of that week showed that there were more than 38 million campaign impressions on Twitter alone, demonstrating the campaign's powerful reach to engage partners across the sector.

Sport and physical activity bring a great deal to our communities. I feel strongly that they have the power to lead the way on the many challenges that wider society faces. Leadership and visibility are vital. We are working with the Scottish Sports Association to support its on board for sport programme, which focuses on improving the diversity and skills bases of the boards of Scottish governing bodies of sport. The young ambassador programme created by sportscotland has been successful in attracting large numbers of young women into leadership roles in sport and physical activity. They are role models for and leaders of other young people. The young ambassadors can have an absolutely pivotal role in their schools and wider communities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, you must conclude.

**Maree Todd:** There is more that we can do, and I expect that to be our focus for the coming year. To reiterate, I want to see a change to support women and girls of all ages and backgrounds in being physically active. I know that there is a real appetite for change among us all, and consensus is welcome and necessary.

15:15

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a general practitioner in the national health service.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the committee's evidence-gathering process. Participation in sport, or simply making physical exercise part of our daily or weekly routines, is crucial for health and wellbeing. That applies to each and every one of us. Exercise reduces the risk of chronic diseases and fosters a much healthier population. As the statistics show, Scotland is not healthy. As parliamentarians, through our communications and policies we must be able to create the conditions in which more and more people adopt healthier lifestyles. With regard to women and girls, however, we need to go much further.

Our Health, Social Care and Sport Committee has discussed in depth how female participation in sport and physical exercise empowers women, and builds confidence, resilience and a sense of accomplishment that extends beyond the playing field. Moreover, increased female participation contributes to breaking gender stereotypes, advances inclusivity and cultivates a more equitable society in which everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Of course, participation comes in many forms, from groups of walkers to the local boxercise class, and even to competing at high level.

Participation is not just for school pupils or for the under-30s, though. Last Friday, the 2023 Scottish women in sport awards ceremony was held in Glasgow. The awards recognise and celebrate the hard work, dedication and commitment that enable young girls and women to participate in every aspect of sporting life. Guess who won the award for team Scotland team of the year? It was Scotland's over-60s masters hockey team. Our over-60s women players were crowned European champions, after beating England in a nail-biting final.

The Scottish Sports Association has been following our committee's work very closely. It is reassuring to know that the SSA feels that our recommendations provide a strong foundation from which to advance female participation in sports and exercise. However, the SSA goes further and highlights a number of areas that will be of particular importance if we are to optimise the sporting environment for our women and girls. I would like to cover some of those in my remaining speaking time.

To create the conditions for greater participation we need to change our culture around spending on sport and physical activity, which should be

seen not as a cost but as an investment. I will give an example of why we need to change our thinking about funding for sport. I will stick with the example of hockey.

On the edge of Glasgow Green is a fantastic facility—the national hockey centre, which was built in 2013 at a cost of £5 million. It is one of the city's 2014 Commonwealth games legacy venues, but it is not fully open. Since last September, Glasgow Life, which is owned by the city of Glasgow and runs its culture and sports facilities, has continued to rent pitches for training and competitive matches. However, it has not yet opened the changing facilities, the first aid room or the cafe, despite the fact that Scottish hockey's governing body is a legal tenant of the facility and will be so until 2032. That seems to be strange, does it not?

With their having no use of the changing or other facilities, hockey players are expected to walk to a neighbouring football ground to change before and after matches. Let us all close our eyes and picture the scene. A hundred yards away, football players have changing facilities, but the people who enjoy another key sport, hockey, are provided with a second-rate service in a relatively new facility.

Glasgow Life currently seems to be happy to take payments for pitch bookings, but it is not so keen on providing the full facilities. I am told that Glasgow Life does not have the funds to operate the national hockey centre normally. Too many of Scotland's cultural and sporting assets that are based in Glasgow do not receive the national funding that they need in order to operate—they are often squeezed by Scottish Government funding cuts to our local authorities.

We need to look at solving such problems not through the prism of cost, but through that of investment. The social return on such spend comes in improved physical and mental health. Investment in sports and exercise remains one of the best buys in population health and wellbeing—it is miles better than any black Friday deal.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** Sandesh Gulhane made an excellent point about the national hockey facility, which, of course, is less than a decade old and was meant to be part of the legacy of the 2014 Commonwealth games. Does he agree that allowing that facility to languish in the state that it is in destroys the legacy of the Commonwealth games to Scotland?

**Sandesh Gulhane:** Yes, I agree. Allowing that to happen does not show the equitable approach that we need to have to all sports—especially one that is as important and key as hockey.

The investment that I was talking about cannot be a one-off. Just as the best laid plans have

multiyear targets, sports and exercise need multiyear funding so that we can improve certainty in delivery. Local authorities, which are responsible for much of the targeted spend, must be more accountable for meeting sports and physical activity targets.

Of course, ideally, a love of sports or simply of experiencing the benefits of physical exercise should be instilled in us when we are young. Physical education and games in schools should not be an afterthought. As our children grow older there should, when they reach 15, 16 and 17, be a concerted effort to encourage girls in particular to keep fit and healthy. That can extend beyond playing a sport: there could be opportunities for coaching.

We need to change the narrative around sport: it is not just for those who are good at it. Although there is a place for competitive sport—that should always be encouraged—for most people, sports and exercise should be about having fun, clearing the head and keeping healthy.

However, we cannot ignore what young women experience when participating in sports at school. According to the Young Women's Movement, 74 per cent of young women who were surveyed say that their body image had stopped them from engaging in sports or exercise activities. They describe feeling vulnerable, exposed and scrutinised by boys in mixed sports classes. There is a case that teenage girls in particular would benefit from women-only spaces.

Finally, I would like to focus on an area that is of particular importance to me as a GP. SAMH—Scottish Action for Mental Health—is calling for an expansion of the GP links worker programme to help to improve knowledge and access to exercise referral schemes. Community links workers provide general practices and patients with invaluable support. I fully agree that they do much to encourage physical activity, in particular within marginalised communities and among women who are in the menopause life stage and would benefit from a personalised approach to mental wellbeing and physical activity.

Investing in participation by girls and women of all ages in sports and exercise will contribute to a healthier Scotland in terms of physical wellbeing and fostering confidence. The benefits far surpass any costs. By providing a diverse range of opportunities, we can ensure inclusivity and recognise the needs of individuals, be they teenage girls or much older women. I fully support efforts and initiatives that champion the cause of female investment and involvement in sports, so let us reap the rewards of stronger, more vibrant communities.

15:24

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the committee's report on the vital issue of female participation in sport and physical activity. I am not a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, but as Scottish Labour's sports spokesperson, I welcome the important publication, which highlights the significant gender gap between male and female participation.

I commend committee members and the clerks for their work on this extensive and thorough report. It highlights the many and varied barriers that women and girls face and the challenges that we need to overcome.

I have spoken in the chamber about the importance of sport to our society. If we seriously want to tackle gender inequality across society, we must tackle it in sport. I have also spoken about the power of sport and its ability to change lives. Not only does sporting activity promote physical and mental wellbeing, it has the power to tackle antisocial behaviour and many other societal problems.

The power of sport should therefore be harnessed to change the lives of women and girls as much as men and boys. That is, in part, why the committee's findings are so concerning.

I am a man who loves sport, but I believe that it is vital that the voices of women are heard and elevated. I am pleased that the committee has done so much to listen to and take evidence from women in producing its report. It is clear that we need to address not only the barriers to participation but the challenges and attitudes that many women in sport face every day, on every level, from the grass roots to the elite.

Tennis champion Serena Williams was once asked about being considered one of the greatest female athletes of all time. She responded:

"I prefer the words 'one of the greatest athletes of all time.'"

She highlights an inequality that women in sport face every day—their gender rather than their sporting ability is seen first and foremost. If that is the attitude towards a sports star at the top of her game, it is clear that all women and girls face a culture that must change. We must change that culture from an early age, which the minister and the convener spoke about earlier.

The report highlights that the current gender participation gap begins at puberty, with just 11 per cent of girls aged 13 to 15 meeting Scotland's physical activity guidelines. Barriers faced by teenage girls include restricted offerings of sport as well as negative attitudes from boys, which has been mentioned.

It is deeply concerning that girls are given limited opportunities to participate in male-dominated sports such as football, rugby and cricket. It is even more concerning that when girls participate, their male classmates often make comments on their bodies and sporting abilities. We must tackle that body shaming and inequality of opportunity. That is why I fully support the committee's recommendations to carry out an updated active schools programme evaluation, with a focus on supporting female participation.

The committee also heard, as has been mentioned, extensive and alarming evidence on harassment and abuse towards women while exercising. That is totally unacceptable. Safety is paramount, and I agree with the committee that there has to be a zero-tolerance approach when it comes to the perpetrators of such harassment and abuse.

Active travel infrastructure should also be improved in order to allow physical activity. That should include adequate street lighting, as the convener mentioned, which would allow more women to safely access the outdoors and sporting activity. We know that budgets are limited at present, but active travel is one of the budget lines that is increasing significantly. It is therefore vital that communities and the voices of women are heard on what investment in active travel they want. That is particularly the case when so few women are in senior positions administering that funding, as the report highlights.

Facilities and funding issues were also identified as key barriers, and I have spoken about those with many stakeholders. It is not that long ago that women's football clubs such as Glasgow City Football Club were forced to use car headlights as floodlights to train at night.

I consistently hear concerns that access to facilities is more restricted for women—for example, men's teams often get priority bookings on football pitches, and I am glad that that has been acknowledged by the committee. I echo the committee in welcoming the Scottish Government's commitment to doubling investment in sport and active living to £100 million a year. That is badly needed.

However, that is taking place against a background of savage cuts to local council budgets, which provide so many sporting facilities. Continued cuts to local council sports provisions will hit everyone, but will undoubtedly have a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Does the member agree that those savage cuts are a false economy and that taking money out of that page of the ledger means that a much bigger number will appear on another page of the ledger?

**Neil Bibby:** I absolutely agree with Mr Whittle. I was just about to come on to that point. He is absolutely right. Investing in sport and physical activity is preventative spend. It is the preventative spend that we talk about in the Parliament. That is why we need to protect those budgets.

It is equally important that we acknowledge some of the barriers for women at the elite level. As has been mentioned, women's funding, pay and media coverage in comparison with those of men are not only a barrier; they are an injustice. The committee reported that 84 per cent of elite female athletes in the UK felt that sportswomen were not paid enough and that, between September 2022 and 2023, there was 28 times as much coverage of men's football as there was of women's football and 26 times as much coverage of men's rugby as there was of women's rugby.

In tackling those barriers, I support the committee's call on the Government to explore the creation of an independent women's sports trust for Scotland to support growth in women's sport, including funding and media exposure.

It is important to note, as has been mentioned, that the report highlighted that many disabled, LGBT and ethnic minority women face intersecting barriers to participation. We know that role models are important in showing young women that anyone can get involved in sports and compete at the highest level. That is perfectly illustrated by the gymnast Simone Biles, who said:

"Growing up, I didn't see very many black gymnasts, so whenever I did, I felt ... inspired".

She said:

"I remember watching Gabby Douglas win the 2012 Olympics and I was like, 'if she can do it, I can do it.'"

It is therefore welcome to hear about the success of the Welsh Labour Government's "Anti-racist Wales Action Plan" in encouraging participation in sport by women and girls from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Scottish Government should explore the possibility of a similar initiative.

I want to touch on the power of social media. Unfortunately, the committee heard evidence that there has been an increase in misogynistic behaviour towards women. That needs to be tackled. We need to look at regulations following the UK Online Safety Act 2023, while recognising that it can amplify women's voices.

It is vital that we understand the barriers to participation in sport for women and girls. The report highlights many of them. We now need action from the Scottish Government and others to break them down.

15:32

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I like running in the mud when it is wet and cold in the middle of winter. I love going up and down hills for hours on end—but I am weird. Most people do not enjoy that. It is not for everyone, particularly women and girls, and neither should it be. Everybody should be encouraged to do their own sport in their own way. However, we also need to ensure that it is attractive and enticing, and that there is a wide and varied offer for people.

Sport and exercise improve my mental health, my memory and my sleep. I think that I come up with my best ideas when I am at the top of hills—I know that there are many of them. I enjoy sport and exercise, and I want everyone to enjoy them in their own way.

It is worth recognising the improvements that have been made in sport for women and girls. In particular, I pay tribute to the minister. I know from the sporting community that it appreciates her contribution to sport. It knows that she is passionate about sport, and it recognises that she is a woman who is passionate about sport and who ties her work to health. That is critically important. We have heard from her today how much she cares about it.

Sport and exercise are a microcosm of wider society, and the problems that we experience elsewhere in the attitudes, stigma and harassment that women experience are also reflected in sport. That is no excuse for sport in any way whatsoever, but it indicates that we have a much wider problem in society that we need to tackle.

**Clare Haughey:** Can Willie Rennie expand on what he, as a man, thinks the male population can do to tackle the misogyny that women experience in sport and physical activity?

**Willie Rennie:** A bit more encouragement and a lot less mocking are at the centre of this. I have seen that mocking for myself, and I am embarrassed when I do not challenge it. Men have a particular responsibility. When they see harassment and stigma before them, they need to say something. We need to stop that. We know that that laddish male culture exists as much in sport as it does elsewhere, and we all have a responsibility to challenge it. It is all about culture, attitude, responses and language—all of that is incredibly important.

We have seen improvements recently, such as those in sports kit to meet women's desire to wear kit that makes them feel comfortable, addresses differences and recognises changes that they go through in their lives.

The active schools programme is a great advancement. We need the evaluation of how

effective it has been, but bringing experts into schools to improve the range and quality of the sport offer—and the exercise offer, because this is not just all about sport; it is about having alternatives in school—is part of the answer to make sure that we have something that is suitable for everyone.

I heard mention of the Scottish Women in Sport awards, where a great picture was taken of two sportswomen—Eilidh Doyle and Isla Hedley, who is a young sportswoman. They first met when Isla was about 12 or 13. Isla won the young sportswoman of the year award, and her role model was Eilidh, who had previously won sportswoman of the year. That shows clearly the position of role models—people like us who we can look up to and who are performing exceptionally well. The more excellent sportspeople we have such as Eilidh, who is prepared to take time out to encourage the next generation, the more things will improve.

We have made progress on pay for women in elite sport. Now, 83 per cent of sports pay men and women the same, but the big differences are in golf, cricket and football—the old offenders. The gap is narrowing, but it needs to narrow much more. We need to recognise and praise sports that are closing the gap and send a clear signal to those that are not that they need to do much better.

I now notice a difference in the language that is used on television and in other broadcasts. When people refer to football, they are describing football for men and women; they do not say “women’s football” any more or say “football” when they mean men’s football. The term is neutral now. That is a subtle and small change, but it is important. There are many more female presenters on television for football and many other sports, which makes the approach less laddish. It is more open and the language is different, which is a big improvement. Many more sports are being covered. Smaller, more niche sports are being covered, and women are often taking part in them.

In closing, I will say a few things. When Madras college in St Andrews got a new building, it scrapped the hockey pitch and replaced it with rugby and football pitches. A group challenged that but did not succeed. That should never have happened. Men play hockey, too, but it is a predominantly female sport. That change should never have happened. The excuse was that more women are now playing football and rugby, but that is not good enough. A much wider range of facilities needs to be available to suit everyone.

Of leaders in sport, 80 per cent are men. We need to change that. If we have women leaders in

sport, we have a greater chance of changing the culture.

We need to stop the reduction in the hours of community sports centres, because women feel—rightly—much safer in those centres.

I am a big fan of jogscotland—

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

**Willie Rennie:** I will say a final thing. Jogscotland is one of the best innovations that we have. We get an awful lot more people involved through jogscotland, which offers easy entry at low cost, with brilliant leaders. We should be progressing that model.

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

15:39

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Sport is so important, and I welcome the report by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. We know instinctively how important sport is for our physical and mental health and for social and cultural connectivity, but there is also extensive evidence of the benefits of regular exercise for physical and mental health and for wellbeing.

We all need a tribe or a team to be part of. Sport, particularly in our younger years, can provide that shared purpose and belonging that is so important—a good gang to join, if you like. However, that does not just apply in our youth. It is important for us as adults to have opportunities for social connection, and sport provides that.

We should all be concerned about the persistent gap between boys’ and girls’ participation rates in sport and physical activity, which begins at the age of puberty and persists up to women in their 40s. That is a substantial part of a woman’s life, and we have to understand the barriers and dismantle them.

The committee’s report found that teenage girls face barriers around puberty. To date, there has been some welcome progress in implementing the Scottish Government’s “Women’s Health Plan: A plan for 2021-2024”, which has included learning about menstrual health as part of the Scottish curriculum. I share the committee’s hopes that that will be beneficial in normalising discussions about menstrual health, improving awareness and understanding about the impact that menstruation can have on girls’ participation in sport and physical activity, and removing stigma around managing periods, particularly as that relates to girls’ participation in physical education classes.

I support the committee’s calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it will evaluate the

impact of improved learning about menstrual health as part of the school curriculum in addressing the significant decline in the participation of girls in sport and physical activity that is connected with puberty.

We are debating the matter during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, so the minds of many of us will be on wider matters of inequality for women and girls. It is important to acknowledge how all those issues connect and overlap.

The committee highlighted negative body image and a lack of self-confidence as a barrier to participation, recognising that many may be deterred from participating in sport and physical activity because they lack self-confidence or experience negative body image.

From a very young age, our girls are bombarded with airbrushed sexualised images of unattainable aesthetics and content that can give the entirely wrong message about who and what their bodies are for. Participation in sport can be a healthy counter to that and help individuals to love their bodies for what they can do, not for how they look to others. Being surrounded by teammates of all different shapes and sizes reinforces that, as do many of the wonderful sportswomen and coaches that we have in this country.

I share the committee's concern, but I was not surprised to hear extensive evidence that negative attitudes of boys continue to create a major barrier to girls' participation in sport and physical activity, particularly during adolescence. The committee highlighted and commended the "Don't be that guy" campaign to tackle sexual harassment that Police Scotland runs and the positive impact that it has had in addressing negative attitudes by boys, which in turn has helped to foster an environment of mutual respect between boys and girls when participating in sport and physical activity. There are some messages in the campaign that might be helpful for male colleagues who wish to address behaviour that they witness.

The committee is right to call on the Scottish Government to consider what more it could do to learn lessons for future policy development from the implementation of the "Don't be that guy" campaign and to consider how a wider roll-out of it and other education programmes across schools could help to tackle misogynistic attitudes and behaviours.

I see that there was a mixed response to the topic of single-sex sports, and I agree with the committee that there should be no one-size-fits-all approach. That said, I absolutely recognise the benefit of female-only activities and competition, and there must be retention and protection of

female-only space and sport for girls and women who need it.

I will close on a success story. The active schools programme is one that we can look to as just that. It successfully engages girls in sport and physical activity, and it offers a range of fun activities in schools across the country. In my North Ayrshire area, I am always particularly impressed by the range of activities that are going on and the young leaders who are doing sterling work.

In 2022-23, girls and young women made more than 2 million visits to active schools sport and physical activity sessions, and females made up to 46 per cent of participants in the active schools programme, so there is definitely learning for us in that. I was interested to read that the highest participation activities among females were netball, football, multisport, dance and movement, and basketball. Active schools teams have worked hard to engage girls and young women, people with additional support needs and young people from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. In reviewing that, we can learn what is working well and where we need to make that investment.

I thank everybody who contributed to the report, particularly the legion of volunteers in this country who run the clubs and activities that support women's and girls' participation in sport.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that the limited time that we had in hand has now been exhausted, so I will have to urge members to stick to their time limits from here on in.

15:45

**Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** I am delighted to contribute. During the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry into female participation in sport, MSPs visited the Fighting Chance Project (Scotland) in Dunfermline. That project, which inspires young people to make positive changes in their lives through judo, is transformational. For me, the physical and mental benefits of doing martial arts have been massive. I have worked in industry all over the world, and karate has given me the confidence to travel alone and hold my own in what often felt like a man's world. As a contact sport, it taught me when to pull my punches and when to land them. Karate also taught me the importance of perseverance and how to push through failure. Sport is often so much more than physical activity.

In the committee, I fully supported doing an inquiry into female participation in sport, because we need to understand the barriers to participation and find ways to finally overcome them. Some of those barriers are systemic—they include

misogyny, sexism and stereotyping, as we have heard today. The media have a huge role to play in shifting the dial on that.

Some of the barriers are structural, with funding and resource allocation and access to facilities particularly coming to mind. The leisure sector in Scotland is under significant pressure, as I know all too well following the closure of Bucksburn swimming pool in my region earlier this year. The Scottish National Party Government must step up and do all that it can to protect such facilities, because the unintended consequences will be considerable.

Finding innovative new ways to access facilities is important, too. I was especially interested in the Scottish Sports Association's recommendation that we look at access to the school estate, and I hope that we can take that forward as we build on the inquiry. I was encouraged to hear Maree Todd say today that she is supportive of that.

There are other factors that deter women and girls from sport. In her evidence to the inquiry, Baz Moffat from The Well HQ persuasively made the point that,

"Until we educate the people who look after girls about female health ... and implement that into our coaching education ... we will still see a gender gap in female participation and performance."—[*Official Report, Health, Sport and Social Care Committee*, 23 May 2023; c 42.]

Given the issues of self-consciousness, managing periods, changing physiology, women's health conditions such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum recovery, pelvic floor dysfunction, urinary incontinence, lack of time owing to caring responsibilities, perimenopause and hormonal changes, it is little wonder that the gender gap in sport begins at the age of puberty and persists until women are in their early 40s.

We have different physiology, different patterns of mental and physical development and different milestones, from menstruation to menopause, that impact us profoundly. Fair Play for Women, in its submission to the inquiry, shared the point that some sporting injuries in women

"occur more at certain times of the month ... because ligaments are affected by variation of female hormones"

throughout the menstrual cycle. I echo that organisation's calls for greater funding and research in that area.

Earlier this year, triathlete Emma Pallant-Browne shared on Instagram a powerful photo of herself bleeding through her swimsuit during a race. That sparked an international conversation, some of it positive and, sadly, some of it not. Emma simply said that she felt that it is not healthy to feel ashamed of your period. Other female athletes and Olympians celebrated Emma's

pragmatic approach to periods. She managed to destigmatise menstruation by showing that she was comfortable with it.

In her evidence to the inquiry, former athlete Eilidh Doyle highlighted the importance of sportswear and of feeling comfortable when competing. It is not just about fit; it is about colour. I know from first-hand experience of karate the anxiety that wearing a white gi can cause. Sport associations and governing bodies must show sensitivity in that regard.

A further consideration relates to the safety of women in sport and the implications of trans inclusion for competitive fairness. Sport should be welcoming, but not at the expense of women's safety or fairness, and that extends to the changing room, too. One of my constituents told me that she no longer takes her granddaughter swimming because a local leisure centre has introduced mixed changing facilities and her granddaughter no longer feels safe or comfortable. Women and girls must have safe and protected spaces where they can get changed.

Our inquiry covered a huge amount of ground, and I wish that I had more time to do it justice. Following the shared passion that we all have, I hope that our inquiry will be built on by the sports leadership in Scotland to bring about the change that we need.

15:51

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I very much welcome the opportunity to participate in this committee debate on a subject that is very important to me. Sport has always played a significant role in my life, and it continues to do so to this very day, albeit through slightly less vigorous activities these days.

It has therefore been insightful and concerning to sit on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee while hearing at first hand evidence about barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity. Opportunities to take part in all forms of sport should be available to everyone, so the question that we faced was: how do we make that happen?

I very much welcome all the work that has gone into the committee's inquiry, and I have confidence that our report, which was published in October, can serve as a call to action and, more important, a blueprint for change.

There is undeniable evidence of the benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity for both physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, despite those benefits, we face a persistent gender gap, which begins at puberty, extends into early adulthood and persists until

women are in their early 40s. That gap is not just a number; it represents a loss of opportunities, untapped potential and a failure to provide equitable access to the benefits of sport for half of our population.

I thank the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport for her thoughtful and detailed interim response to the committee's report on behalf of the Scottish Government. It is encouraging to note that the Scottish Government has been working diligently to bridge the gap in funding support for women in sport through initiatives such as the active schools programme, Scottish women and girls in sport week and the women's health plan. It is clear that that work, along with positive media coverage of women's elite sport, has been instrumental in creating change.

A 2022 Women's Sport Trust report showed that 36.1 million people watched women's sport on television between January and July 2022. That was an increase of 18.6 million from the equivalent period in 2021. We know that the media plays a crucial role in promoting female participation in sport. Historically, women's sport has received far less attention and coverage compared with sport played by their male counterparts. Lack of representation and invisibility have contributed to stereotypes and barriers for women in sport.

However, with the rise of digital media and social platforms, there has been a clear and positive shift towards increasing the visibility and recognition of women's sport. Make no mistake—the power of the media cannot be overstated. They can reshape societal norms and challenge gender stereotypes by highlighting female athletes' achievements and telling their inspiring stories. Through comprehensive coverage, documentaries, interviews and features, the media can showcase women's sport as exciting, competitive and noteworthy. Such exposure not only legitimises women's athletic abilities but creates role models for young girls and encourages them to participate in sport at all levels.

That is why we continue to build on the progress so far and why the Scottish Government continues to take ambitious action, including its commitment to double the funding for sport and physical activity to £100 million a year, although it is important to recognise that there are competing demands for that funding. In that context, I look forward to the Scottish Government setting out its plans for funding to be suitably targeted to ensure that the goal of increased participation and visibility of women and girls in sport and physical activity is made a key priority.

Crucially, we must acknowledge the intersectional barriers that are faced by girls,

particularly those from minority backgrounds, and we must ensure that diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of the Scottish Government's strategies.

During the committee's inquiry, we heard evidence, supported by the findings of UK-wide research, that suggests that many girls and women are given limited opportunities to participate in sports and physical activities that are stereotypically viewed as being male-dominated and, therefore, unlikely to be of interest to them or suitable for female participation.

Some members might know that I am a passionate member of the Scout Association, have been a scout leader in Kirkcaldy for too many years to mention and spend most of my summer recess leading a mixed-gender scout group. Throughout my years, I have seen at first hand how important it is to encourage girls of all ages to participate in diverse sports opportunities and physical activity, particularly in co-educational settings and at community level.

A 2009 Observatory on Sport in Scotland report found that, although girls are more active than boys between the ages of five and seven, their participation drops significantly from the age of eight onwards. By the age of 13 to 15, approximately 11 per cent of girls in Scotland meet physical activity guidelines, compared with 24 per cent of boys. Those alarming statistics are echoed by what I have seen time and again on the ground. Negative body image, poor confidence and issues related to puberty are all major barriers to participation in sport. It is vital that we provide safe spaces for girls to overcome those issues and learn important life skills, such as teamwork and leadership.

The matter transcends the boundaries of athletics and is about empowerment, equality and the celebration of talent and teamwork. The benefits of our efforts go far beyond the sports arena. They extend into society when we support women and girls in participating in sport and physical activity. We are not just creating athletes; we are nurturing future leaders, role models and advocates for gender equality.

Empowering women in sport and physical activity is not just about access to sports facilities or creating equal opportunities. It is about building a society where every girl and woman can realise their potential, unhindered by societal norms, physical barriers or gender bias. Let us all commit to that cause, not just in words but in actions, to create a more inclusive, healthier and equitable Scotland.

15:56

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I add my thanks to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee for its report. I also thank the committee for bringing the debate to the chamber to give the subject the prominence that it deserves and provide an opportunity for all members to debate this important issue.

It was important that the committee decided to focus the inquiry on participation at not only elite level but community level. The interesting recommendations on how female participation in sport is supported, reported and promoted will help us all to move the dial forward with regard to preventing the drop-off and plugging the gender gap about which we have heard in the debate.

The committee aimed to identify actions that should be taken to help increase the numbers of women and girls who participate in sport and physical activity and, crucially, identify what can be done to ensure that they are able to remain active and engaged throughout their lives.

The reality is that we are talking about a long-standing issue that is a really tough nut to crack. Sadly, there is still a huge disparity between the participation levels of women and girls and those of men and boys. As I have mentioned in the chamber before, the figures are compounded by deprivation, with higher levels of non-participation in areas of high deprivation. We all wish for sport to be a great equaliser, but the figures suggest that, for too many people, opportunities are limited and that personal as well as national potential is not being realised.

During one of its evidence sessions, the committee heard from the Young Women's Movement about the scale of the challenge:

"we were shocked by how much someone's socioeconomic background impacts their ability to access sport. We assumed that there would be an impact, but 81 per cent of the people who responded to our survey indicated that that was a key barrier for them, which was disheartening. Although we thought that there would be an impact, we were surprised by how big it was."—[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 14 March 2023; c 26.]

In 2020, the Observatory for Sport in Scotland identified socioeconomic deprivation as the main barrier to participation in sport in Scotland. The reality is that, if we want to ensure that women and girls have the best chance to participate in sport and activity throughout life, we need to acknowledge the reality that affordable sports facilities are being closed as local government funding is squeezed. I hope that the minister will speak to that issue and bring it up again with those in power.

In the small amount of time that I have left for this speech, I want to focus on what young girls

have told me about participating in sport. Last night I had the great pleasure of joining a session of the 3rd Mauchline brownies. As well as having my debating skills challenged by a very vibrant and able group of young girls, I was able to take the time and opportunity to ask them about sport and physical activity. There was great enthusiasm for sport and activity, with a big bubbly round of discussion about football, rugby, gymnastics, running and swimming. All the girls agreed that they loved sport, they knew that it was really good for them and they knew that it was important to participate in it.

I went on to ask them if it was easy to participate in all those activities, and that is where the discussion changed. The girls talked about getting time at school for sport. That was sometimes difficult, because "important lessons mattered." They also talked about transport and facilities in their rural community. That is often more difficult there. Even at their very young age, they could identify that local community centres where they had participated in sport were closing, and that swimming pools were about to be closed in the local area.

By far the biggest challenge that they faced was boys. That is in line with some of the evidence that was collected by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. It struck me that the group of young girls in front of me were just approaching the drop-off range around the age of 14. The young girls speaking last night very much echoed the evidence gathered by the committee. They said to me that boys dominate the playground space, and that they often "exclude us girls" from the open areas.

The girls told me that boys sometimes say to them that girls are not very good at sport. They also told me that, although they loved to participate in certain sports such as football and rugby, sometimes the boys said to them that those were not girls' sports. It was striking to me that that was the experience of young girls here and now.

Given the research and the committee's report, we should be doing all we can to change attitudes and trends. Changing the participation of women and girls in sport is not just about speaking to women and girls; it is definitely also about having conversations with boys, men, teachers, sports coaches and the wider community. I do not believe that those attitudes are ingrained at an early stage; I believe that we can change them. However, it takes us all working together to change things for the good. It takes Government to acknowledge the barriers and to put the participation of women and girls in sport to the very top of the agenda, with funding sources to support it.

There is much more to say on this subject, but I do not have any time left. I thank members from across the chamber for raising other important issues that are addressed in the committee's report, and I thank the committee and its clerks for all their work in this important area. I hope that we all move on together to make the necessary changes.

16:02

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** There is a lot of chat these days about inspirational female hero sporting stars—in particular, female footballers—so I take the opportunity to acknowledge the success of the Scotland women's team, which has recently gained growing support. It qualified for the 2019 world cup, whereas the last time the men's team qualified for a world cup tournament was in 1998.

Women's football in Scotland is not a new thing. It grew in popularity during world war one. While the men were away fighting on the front line, women kept those at home entertained with well-mannered matches. Lily St Clare was reported in *The Glasgow Herald* as being Scotland's first-ever goal scorer, in a team wearing

"blue jerseys, white knickerbockers, red belts and high heeled boots"—

which no doubt looked fabulous without being entirely practical. Those who played in the 1918 team demolished their English opponents 3-0—a stunning victory. Of course, they were told to get back to looking after their homes and children upon the men's return from war.

We know the value of role models, not only in seeing their achievements but as they inspire us to relate to them and think that it is possible for us to get that job or play that sport, and to be valued equally with our male counterparts.

The accelerating popularity of female sports is contributing to that, but this year's report on female participation in sport by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee also highlighted that there is much more to be done. The fact that 25 per cent of elite female athletes earn less than £10,000 from sports tells us that there is a job to do in promoting female sport as an investment opportunity. Improved funding will open up greater earning potential for elite athletes, as well as improving training and equipment that is better suited to women's bodies as opposed to those of their male counterparts.

We are getting much better at talking about women's health. Having more women—and our male allies—in the Parliament has meant that we have been able to talk more openly about matters such as menopause, period health and endometriosis, but that has not yet filtered through

to all corners of society. A survey of elite sportswomen that was conducted by the BBC in 2020 found that almost 60 per cent of respondents felt that their period affected their performance, with nearly 40 per cent saying that they felt uncomfortable discussing that with their coach. I know that the committee took evidence on that, and I urge members who have not yet had a chance to do so to read the report, particularly the parts where Scotland goalkeeper and captain Gemma Fay and judo champion Connie Ramsay discuss their experiences. I also echo the words of the minister, Maree Todd, who is quoted in the report praising the female athletes who have begun to discuss openly issues around menstruation, contraception, pregnancy and menopause in sport.

Of course, wider issues such as sexism, misogyny, personal safety and abuse, which are heightened by social media, remain major contributing factors to why fewer women feel safe or comfortable enough to participate in sport. The problem begins early. Girls get more active than boys in early years, but that changes by the time they become teenagers, as we have heard from colleagues. According to the Observatory for Sport in Scotland, by the age of 13 to 15, only 11 per cent of girls are meeting physical activity guidelines, compared with 24 per cent of boys.

Intersectionality plays a big part in discouraging women from participating in competitive sports. For women from ethnic minorities, that can be particularly pronounced. Glasgow Life has pointed out that research consistently shows that Muslim women have among the lowest participation rates for sport. Earlier this year, sportscotland, along with the sport funding councils from across the UK, published a report on tackling racism and inequality in sport. As part of the work on the report, forums were set up that were exclusively for women, where participants came together to discuss the pervasive impact of stereotypes on the involvement of women in sports across Scotland. The report delved into the early effects on confidence and motivation, and how individuals are made to feel out of sync with the expectations that are imposed by their coaches and team leaders.

Participants expressed a sense of being nudged towards certain sports in school based on perceived suitability, which led to feelings of objectification and being typecast. Those encounters were compounded by cultural expectations within communities and families, which resulted in experiences of microaggressions, casual racism and sexism. Many voiced the feeling of being overlooked in team sports, and raised concerns about the media's portrayal of women of colour across

various sports, which they felt contributed to a perpetually negative culture.

My time is running out, but I want to highlight the work of Women on Wheels, which teaches women and children, especially those from ethnic minorities, to cycle in a supportive nurturing environment. I was inspired by the recent world cycling championships, and I am taking lessons with Women on Wheels as an ethnic minority woman who is now on wheels. I do not expect to be an elite cyclist any time soon, but I am enjoying the physical exercise and working towards more active travel.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** Ms Stewart, that is good to hear, but you need to conclude.

**Kaukab Stewart:** I commend the report.

16:09

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** I follow other members in thanking committee members, clerks and witnesses for their participation in what was a very interesting and engaging inquiry.

As many members have already covered, the barriers to engagement and to on-going participation in sport for women and girls are multifaceted. From previous committee work, it was noted that there is a significant drop-off in participation among girls during their teenage years. During the inquiry, we found that there was an additional inequity in participation in physical activity up to the age of 40, and that there were often significant barriers to coming back to organised activity in particular.

One contributing factor that was raised with regard to participation by young women and girls was the focus on competition rather than fun. In physical education in school, a shift towards building skill levels and competition, rather than movement for fun and feeling good, has put some off engaging fully. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health noted that what constitutes fun varies, and it emphasised the importance of giving children the opportunity to try different sports. That is easier said than done, both in a school setting, where teachers are trying to cater for everyone, and for parents after school, in particular where there are multiple children in the family and where participation costs are high.

Eilidh Paterson from Scottish Student Sport said:

“Nobody should be sending a child to a class, session or sport with the aim of them winning. The idea is that they are there to enjoy themselves, to have fun and to make friends with other people. I therefore encourage that to be the central point of all sport and activity, no matter the age or stage of the people involved, although that should certainly

be the case in the very early stages. After all, if people do not find sport fun, they will not come back ... they will ... see themselves as ... othered or will be inactive, possibly for life, because they will not see themselves as being welcome in that space.”—[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 28 March 2023; c 60.]

We heard in evidence sessions of many adult sports clubs that have regular social sessions in football, hockey or netball, but getting women to the stage of engaging in adult clubs requires overcoming the barriers that we heard about during the inquiry.

The committee also heard that addressing the practical issues of managing periods and puberty, for example by bringing in dark-coloured kit and providing the right facilities, is essential in allowing girls to get on to the pitch or the court in the first place. Changing societal attitudes to menstruation, and providing coaches who have been given an understanding of the impact of periods on players, can also lead many young women and girls to feel comfortable in their sport.

For those who drop out of sport at that time, we need to make it easier for them to come back to physical activity, and to find new activities that they enjoy. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity at university to discover a love of both hockey and rugby—two sports that were not offered at my school. I knew that I was not as good as those who had been playing throughout their school career, but the environment was supportive and encouraging, and it allowed others to share what they had learned to help those of us who were new to those sports.

We also need to be aware of the practical barriers that persist for adults. As I mentioned earlier, cost is undoubtedly a factor in the current climate. Moving from education to the work environment, and the accompanying change in how we live our lives, is a factor, too. I know from my own experience, and that of many others my age who commute, that trying to make it home from work for a 7 pm training session—as I found even before I was in this job—is not something to which we can commit every week.

The other option is playing in a team in the area that you work in, which means that you get home later. At this time of year, the earlier, darker nights—as we heard from Clare Haughey—are perceived as not safe by many. I use that example because we need to be aware that some of the issues in this area cannot be solved purely by sports clubs and sporting bodies.

We have created working environments that mean that it is difficult to fit in all the other things that keep us well and enable us to lead fulfilling lives. Looking at introducing flexible working, a four-day working week and a universal basic income would be a help to many. In addition,

adults can be frightened of taking up something new, going into a new social environment or potentially, at the outset, not being very good at something. We need to work on how we normalise trying new things throughout life.

There are many other contributing issues that I will not have time to cover fully, including maternity, sports facilities, caring roles, body image issues, a lack of positive role models and a lack of visibility of women's sport. However, as this is the start of Scottish disability sport week, I note that more needs to be done on both representation and support in order to enable many of those athletes to engage in lifelong sport.

Many issues were raised in the inquiry, and we need to remember that many of them are interrelated and cannot be tackled in silos. We need to address them across portfolios in order to ensure that as many people as possible have the access to physical activity that they need to keep them well.

16:14

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I know how much pressure the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee is under and thank its members for using some of their precious time to look into the issue of sport, which I know is often left on the shelf. I really appreciate their taking the time to do that.

I declare a significant interest in sport, given that it has defined my life. I am a level 4 senior coach and have been since 2000, having coached football and athletics at all ages as well as rugby, hockey and mixed basketball.

I was amused by Willie Rennie talking about running through the mud, the gore and the wet and going up and down hills. I thought he was a strange man to enjoy that, but he said that he does a lot of his best thinking while he is out running, which really resonated with me. When I require thinking time, I pull on my kit and go out for a run. I am much slower than I used to be, and a lot of old ladies go past me carrying heavy shopping, but thinking is nonetheless done.

I am going through my third cycle of coaching youngsters all the way up to senior level, and all three of my daughters have gone through that process. Much progress has been made, especially in football, rugby, tennis and cricket, but we have a long way to go to reach parity and equal opportunity. I also heard Willie Rennie say that sport mirrors life. If we look at participation, we see that there are 645,000 members of sports clubs in Scotland but that only 102,000 of them are women and 67,000 are girls. So, 26 per cent of members of sports clubs in Scotland are female and we are starting from a point where there are

three times as many male participants as there are female ones.

There is also a far greater drop-out rate for girls than for boys, and they drop out at an earlier stage. Puberty has been mentioned, and we have talked about how menstruation affects participation in sport. I see that as a problem in coaching and coach education. We must develop our coaches to understand the different physiological demands on female and male players, and not only in regard to matters such as puberty and menstruation. A male 800m runner and a female 800m runner experience different physiological demands, and the female will take longer to run 800m.

Coaches are also key to tackling misogyny. We must be strong enough to speak out, and I have done that myself when I evicted a couple of athletes from my own squad. I evicted one from an international squad and was actually challenged by other international coaches, who did not want me to do that, but I was not prepared to have that sort of attitude in my squad.

I also note that there is a central belt bias, because many opportunities for participation are in the central belt, with rural areas once again being the poor relation when it comes to access. Even when public transport is available—and as has been said before—many girls do not feel safe travelling on public transport after dark.

People continually raise the issue of poor body image. The irony of that is that participation in sport develops a healthier body and actually tackles poor body image.

I think that there has been a disparity in the bounce-back from Covid. I speak anecdotally from my own perspective, because I have seen fewer women than men coming back into sport. Incidentally, there was also a big drop-off in disability sport during Covid. One thing that greatly surprised me was that the women who have come back to sport are less competitive: they will come and take part in training, but they will not compete. I need to understand a little bit more about that.

We cannot overstate the importance of sport to society when seen against the backdrop of Scotland being the unhealthiest nation in Europe. I have spoken a lot about our need to tackle the £5 billion price of obesity and the £4.5 billion cost of mental illness, as well as the costs of diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease and musculoskeletal conditions. Poor health is the biggest drag on our economy.

Sport is such an inclusive activity, and it breaks down so many barriers. On the way through here this morning, I was listening to a radio programme and I heard that women are more prone to poor mental health and social exclusion because of

their lifestyle. Sport is one of the big answers to that. Sport gives us confidence, resilience and aspiration—those intangible things that help us in the rest of our lives.

On a wall in my office, I have a poster that says:

“Food is the most abused anxiety drug. Exercise is the most underutilised antidepressant.”

As I said, poor health is the biggest drag on the Scottish economy, and the place to tackle that is in school. School is our battleground. We need to start in nursery, then continue through primary, secondary and beyond, giving our children more time and opportunity to participate. At the moment, they have to go home to go somewhere else.

Sport has become the bastion of the middle classes. All that we need do is look at the Olympic team and see how many were privately educated.

I know that I am running out of time—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Yes, Mr Whittle. Please conclude.

**Brian Whittle:** I will leave it there and say thank you once again to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee for having this debate.

16:21

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** It is nice to follow Brian Whittle in the debate, because he has a lot to contribute from his direct experience in sport.

As a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I am quite happy to speak in this debate about our report. I add my thanks to everyone who provided input to the committee, including our clerks.

A lot of the points in the report have been well rehearsed by members this afternoon. The one thing that we all agree on is that more participation and visibility of girls and women in sport is essential. On the committee’s web page, there is a wee video submission by Daisy Drummond, which starts with this stark figure:

“By the age of 14 girls are dropping out of sport two times faster than boys of the same age!”

It is important to highlight that.

The inquiry has emphasised that being physically active is one of the best things that we can do for physical and mental health, and the minister and Willie Rennie have described how it benefits them individually. We know that sport and physical activity boost self-confidence and self-esteem, learning skills and socialising. More importantly, they are about having some fun. As a nurse, I think about health issues, and sport and physical activity help to prevent heart disease, stroke, diabetes and a number of cancers, as well

as playing an important part in helping people to maintain a healthy weight and reduce the risk of developing depression.

The number of women and girls in Scotland participating in sport and physical activity has increased in recent years, but the report shows that we must do more to address the barriers that stop women and girls taking part. Those who took part in the inquiry identified poor self-confidence and issues around body image as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity for many girls and women. One person who responded to the committee’s call for evidence suggested that the relationship between body image and physical activity is a vicious cycle: the more self-conscious someone feels about their body, the less likely they are to take part in physical activity. Many people may be deterred from participating in sport and physical activity because they lack self-confidence or because they have a negative body image, as members have mentioned.

To combat that, the committee recommended that sporting venues should do more to demonstrate that they are welcoming and inclusive of participants of all abilities, and to offer tailored advice and support to those who may be reluctant. I would like to ask the minister whether any support, such as from sportscotland, could be made available to meet that aim.

Leadership and role models are crucial to overcoming barriers related to self-esteem. The committee heard that negative attitudes and behaviours among teachers and coaches and a lack of positive role models among women in leadership roles discourage female participation in sport and physical activity.

It was clear, through the inquiry, that men play an important role in increasing female participation in sport. We heard how it is crucial that men demonstrate a real commitment to promoting and encouraging female participation. That includes educating male coaches and leaders in their sport about the important role and responsibilities that they have in that regard, and encouraging them to demonstrate positive and inclusive behaviours.

As part of the inquiry, I wrote to 162 local sporting and activity groups across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. I received a fair few responses: I got 68 back. I also visited Wallace Hall academy, in Thornhill, to discuss female participation in sport with six young women who were themselves participants. A number of key issues were raised in that engagement and in the responses received, including many that were specific to my rural area. They included a lack of local buses to enable people to travel to and from venues, and the prohibitive cost of equipment and membership fees. Some women and girls reported that male domination of clubs was also a barrier.

Those participants' experiences were replicated by those of the participants in the inquiry overall, so it is useful to see that what is experienced in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders is replicated elsewhere.

As the committee's report states, Ewelina Chin from HSTAR Scotland noted that

"women who reside in rural places, and places that are more deprived, experience barriers to participation not only related to cost but because of"

the infrequency of public transport or

"safety concerns related to the use of public transport"

such as night-time or lone travelling.

In addition, the committee recognised that male dominance of clubs was a deterrent, particularly for young school-age girls. That has been outlined by members who have spoken about participation on school grounds. To address that issue, and to provide improved opportunities for girls to take part, the committee called on the Scottish Government, local authorities and schools to work together to develop support and guidance for teachers and playground staff, to help to ensure equal opportunity.

While I was visiting Wallace Hall academy, I met Barry Graham, the headteacher, and Kiva, Michaela, Zena, Daisy and Matilda, all of whom were inspiring young women who were involved with sport. They reported that a lack of access to, and the unavailability of, funding can be significant barriers to participation. One of their concerns was that schools, their sporting teams and community clubs often do not know about the funding streams that are available and that those can be complex to access. Will the minister tell us whether more emphasis can be put on advertising the various funding streams that are available for sports?

I will close there, Presiding Officer, because I am conscious of the time.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the closing speeches.

16:27

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. As many members have done, I begin by thanking the committee, its clerks, its witnesses and those who sent in evidence to tackle this most important question.

Scottish Labour is committed to seeing more women and girls live active lives and participate in sport at all levels. It is important that the committee considered participation from the very start, all the way through to the elite level. As we have heard, it is through such participation that so much good can be done for people's physical

health, mental health and the emotional health that comes from working with friends.

We have heard a number of members speak about involvement in teams or, as Kaukab Stewart put it, the tribe that someone belongs to as they grow up, and the ability to have a group around them who will support them when things go wrong. As I saw at the weekend, that might involve just slipping a football over to someone, but it can be turning to them to get good advice about more substantial matters. It is about a sense of belonging that allows young people to develop and test out their characters as they grow into adulthood.

There is so much that is positive in the committee's report, from the initial summary in paragraphs 3 to 69 that identifies the importance of breaking down the barriers that women in sport face. Those range from women's health, which we have heard so much about, to the problems with negative body image to which many members have drawn our attention, and to harassment, safety concerns and access to facilities. Above all, the positive aspects include someone being made to feel welcome when they walk up to a door next to a playing field, a squash club or whatever the sports venue might be, and when someone opens it, smiles and says, "Hello. Come in." Receiving such a welcome is so important for everyone who participates in something new.

In a number of contributions we heard about the challenges that people face as they get older. It is hard to do something new at any time; it is even harder to do it when a young child does not even know that a sport exists, or when they do not see people who look or talk like them participating in it, or they do not see it on television or on social media or YouTube, which I find my young children watch frequently.

If people do not see those sports being played—like the recent women's XV rugby tournament in which the Scotland team did so well against the rest of the world—they cannot decide to participate themselves.

The report is huge, and this afternoon's debate cannot do it justice. It would be good to return to the topic to see where we are in a few months' time.

There are some areas that were mentioned by several speakers that I would like to pick up on. The first is the issue of negative body image that the convener, Neil Bibby, Ruth Maguire, Brian Whittle and Emma Harper referred to, which comes up in so many reports, and meetings and talks that we have with young women. We hear that it is a real challenge being a young woman and growing up in this world because of the expectation placed on them by mysterious others

on social media—or those who apparently earn vast amounts of money and live wonderful lives—about what they should or should not look like.

However, sport is one of those areas that, through just having fun in the playground, growing up and developing an understanding of the support—

**Emma Harper:** Martin Whitfield talks about body image, and I am thinking about evidence that we took during the inquiry about the Norwegian beach handball team that got fined €1,500 for wearing shorts instead of the regulation bikini bottoms. Does he agree that we need the leading bodies to champion comfort in uniforms rather than regulate something that might deter women from sport?

**Martin Whitfield:** Emma Harper makes a very powerful point. I recall a netball team that could only get sponsorship if they agreed to do a calendar in a certain way. That talks to sponsors and the finance that goes into sport. The fact remains that sport should be about the product of the sport—be that what it may.

We have heard about the data and research that are lacking, as well as the skills that are lacking, in order to produce comfortable, usable clothing for women to use in sport. That should take the priority. Sport should not be about what it is wrapped up in and what it looks like. Sport is the joy of watching someone do something brilliantly at elite level, participating at medium level and just having a go at the earlier levels.

I raised with the minister the point made in paragraph 132 of the report about the domination of playgrounds and physical spaces by boys. That speaks to the very heart of the change of culture that so many people have spoken about. If girls do not feel safe in a playground—be that a school playground, a local authority playground or just the field out the back of their house—they are not going to enjoy the physical experience of being there. It is interesting that the report goes on, in paragraph 179 and, in particular, paragraph 180 with regard to physical education in schools, to quote from the Children's Parliament report, "Gender Equality in Education and Learning", which calls for

"trained supervision in playgrounds and spaces where girls experience sexism and sexual violence"

so that they feel safe.

**Brian Whittle** *rose*—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am afraid that the member needs to conclude his speech.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very tight for time so I am going to conclude. I thought Mr Whittle's

speech was very powerful and I would love to have had time to discuss it.

If we look at the challenge in our playgrounds for young girls, we can see the challenge that exists in sport and participation for their rest of the life. It is an area where we understand the difficulties. It is an area where we can make a difference. It might be only a small start, but it is a significant one to making life easier.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Meghan Gallacher to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:33

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** Scotland is lucky to have so many talented women in sport. Eilidh Doyle, Isla Hedley, our Scottish women's football and rugby teams and many others were mentioned over the course of today's debate. However, I have always admired Laura Muir and Eilish McColgan—not just because I was a member of a running club, the Bellshill Harriers, but because they are excellent role models for women looking to enter elite sports.

Members of the Scottish Parliament, including the minister, have expressed their passion for promoting women in all sporting roles and their commitment to increasing participation in sport and physical activity. We only need to look at the number of sporting motions that MSPs submit a year—motions that congratulate and recognise the efforts of clubs, organisations and sporting talent—to know that the Scottish Parliament backs women in sporting roles. However, those motions do not show us the whole story, and we need to understand why women's participation in sport is so low. We have heard many arguments in the debate that highlight the barriers that women face when participating in sport and physical activity.

Clare Haughey mentioned the decline in the number of girls participating in sport, with the gender gap persisting up until the age of 40. She also mentioned the stigma around puberty that exists for many teenage girls wanting to participate in sport at school. That was a key takeaway from the committee's report.

Scotland has come a long way in breaking down the stigma of menstruation during teenage years, including the roll-out of free period products in schools and public buildings. However, much more needs to be done to smash the taboo around menstruation, and the sports industry is key to breaking those barriers down.

Tess White rightly said that, until those involved in women's sport fully understand women's health, barriers to sport and physical activity will remain. From Wimbledon allowing dark-coloured shorts to

national campaigns to spread awareness around menstruation, Parliaments and sporting bodies need to start telling women that they can and should participate in sport.

Culture is another key theme discussed during the debate. The pay gap for women in sport compared with their male equivalents remains far too wide. Women feel undervalued and unaccepted, and are less likely to pursue a career in sport. I am pleased that the committee highlighted that as a requirement for change. Golf, cricket and football remain the worst offenders, as members have pointed out.

Dr Sandesh Gulhane and Neil Bibby spoke about the current inequality of opportunity for women in sporting roles. We heard arguments that women are not seen for their talents but just for their gender, and it is concerning that cases of harassment and abuse prevent women from entering the world of sport.

Ruth Maguire mentioned the “Don’t be that guy” campaign. We need to break gender stereotypes and ensure that the zero-tolerance approach that we have frequently mentioned in the debate is put into practice. Many members raised the interesting point of community facilities being underused or not used to their full capacity. Dr Sandesh Gulhane raised the important local issue of the national hockey centre at Glasgow Green, because the asset is not being sufficiently funded.

I am sure that Willie Rennie was about to talk about the length of time that facilities are open so that we can maximise the hours and the types of sports that are available for women. As Brian Whittle said earlier, we need to ensure that women are not heading home in the dark, because most women would feel uncomfortable doing that.

Scottish Government cuts to councils are having a detrimental impact on sporting facilities, and many are under threat. That is particularly relevant for councils over the next three financial years. When only 26 per cent of clubs in Scotland have female membership, it shows that we need our local facilities to be open to encourage and support women into sport.

As this debate is about women’s sport, we need to speak about single-sex spaces, which Ruth Maguire rightly raised during her speech. We need to look at women’s sport and the safety of women while they participate in activities. I agree with Tess White that sport should be welcoming for everyone. We also need to ensure that women’s sport is fair and provides the correct safeguards; otherwise, we will further deter women from entering the world of competitive sport.

I want to finish on the most important point that has been mentioned. Sport is about having fun. Sport should be for everybody. That is why I back

the #KeepHerPlaying campaign. Taking part in sport is not just about the cheers, the wins or the bragging rights, although all that is fun, too. It is about developing confidence and important life skills, such as resilience and discipline. It is about improving self-esteem and mental health.

There are far too many points to run through, but if we can all agree on something, I hope that it is this: we need to improve female participation in sport and physical activity.

16:39

**Maree Todd:** I thank members from across the chamber who have contributed. The debate has covered a lot of ground, and from listening to those contributions, I am hugely encouraged by the progress that we have made, but I am under no illusion that a lot of work remains to be done. I very firmly believe that sport should be a safe and enjoyable space for women, whether they are participating, coaching or watching. It is our duty to ensure that every girl and woman, regardless of her age or background, has access to the array of physical and mental benefits that come from being active.

The committee’s report underlines the importance of breaking down the barriers that have hindered female participation at every level of physical activity. We know that data remains a challenge. We publish data on participation from the Scottish household survey and the numbers meeting the CMO guidelines from the Scottish health survey. Although they provide a range of information on age, gender and socioeconomic status, for example, we are working to identify ways in which we can also report on ethnicity, sexual orientation, pregnancy, maternity and religion.

It is not, of course, just about increasing the number of women who participate; it is about harnessing the transformational power of sport to enhance wellbeing, foster community and empower individuals. Sport is also a critical part of improving the health of the nation. Through targeted work, community engagement and a diverse offering, we can definitely improve our sporting system so that it enables women to thrive on and off the field.

We are fortunate in Scotland to have committed individuals throughout the sporting sector and that our national agency—sportscotland—fosters an environment in which every female athlete has the chance to succeed and feels welcomed.

During Scottish women and girls in sport week, I visited sportscotland institute of sport and had the opportunity to hear about the work that it is carrying out on female athlete health and performance training. I also got the chance to

speak to some Scottish athletes about their experiences and how they were being supported by the institute. However, that work does not support just elite athletes. The female athlete health group has developed a new e-learning resource that is aimed at anyone who works with female athletes at any level in sport.

True progress requires addressing challenges at every level, from local community clubs to the national stage, and the coverage of elite athletes in the media. It is clear that we still have some way to go, particularly in ensuring that women have the same sponsorship opportunities and investment, and that we are able to see women's sport televised and reported on. There have been some huge changes over the past few years alone, but there is definitely more to be done.

I recently visited Ross County Football Club's women's team. I met players who hope to enter the Highlands and Islands league next year. Scottish Power has announced that it is sponsoring that league, and it is keen to ensure that it leaves a lasting legacy. It is the first time that that league has secured sponsorship. That further underlines the upward trajectory of women's football in Scotland and highlights that women's sport is worth investing in.

Earlier this year, I heard the secretary general of the International Working Group on Women and Sport, Lisa O'Keefe, speaking at the Scottish women in sport conference. The secretariat is based in the UK for the next three years. That provides a fantastic opportunity to create a real sustainable impact on women's and girls' sport beyond 2026.

As I mentioned earlier, leadership is likely to be a focus for the Government. That is an important topic, both to highlight those women in leadership positions and to open up conversations about the barriers or drop-off in leadership as well as participation beyond the teenage years.

It has long been recognised that there is no single solution to reducing inactivity across the population. We are working through our national leadership group for physical activity and sport to agree recommendations and actions for a whole-systems approach that reflect particular conditions in Scotland, based on the International Society for Physical Activity and Health's "Eight Investments that Work for Physical Activity".

**Brian Whittle:** I know that the minister and I share a passion about trying to promote sport in general. Does she agree that it is the educational environment in the broadest sense where we will get our biggest return for investment?

**Maree Todd:** That is certainly one of the areas where we will get a big return for our investment. It is a vital area, because it sets the culture for life.

It is clear that the issue is very close to my heart and to the hearts of many members in the chamber, and I have found much to agree with in this debate. There are a number of things that I want to pick up on.

For the record, I note that the most recent evaluation of the active schools programme was in 2018, not 2014, as several members said.

It was great to hear from Kaukab Stewart the long view of women's football, although it was perhaps a little poignant, as many women today still face media reporting that focuses absolutely on their appearance more than their sport.

A number of members raised the Scottish sport media summit, which I will be happy to share information about with the committee when more information is available.

As I said, there is much to agree on. I agree that sport has the power to change lives, which is one of the reasons why I love it. I agree that sport is good for our physical health—that is obvious—but there is a solid body of evidence that it is also good for our mental health, and it is definitely good for our social health, from making friends to building cohesive communities.

I agree that spending on sport is an investment, not a cost. I definitely agree that sport and exercise should be fun—that is what drives me to participate—although I hear from many women that celebrating their competitiveness is important. It is not unfeminine to compete, and I acknowledge that I have more fun when I am winning.

I agree—dare I say it?—with Willie Rennie that he is weird, although I am clearly weird, too, because I like running my daily mile in the mud and, as a highlander, I have no chance of avoiding hills.

I agree that sport reflects society. We live in a man's world. Women are not equal in our society. We face misogyny, discrimination and violence, and sometimes we face that in sport, too. However, I profoundly believe that sport can lead the change in our society. Sport has the power to change our world. I look forward to the halcyon days when our male colleagues from across parties challenge the misogynistic abuse that their female colleagues face day in and day out in this place, as well as abuse in sport.

Martin Whitfield kindly mentioned the women's XV 2 tournament, which the Scottish women's rugby team did so brilliantly at. The entire nation has watched that team develop and charge towards success. That was great to see.

It is clear that our shared commitment to gender equality demands that we address the multifaceted challenges for women and girls. Each

challenge requires a collaborative response. The Government welcomes the committee's report and the recommendations in principle, and we will respond fully in due course. I thank everyone who contributed to the discussion and I absolutely thank all who work tirelessly in our clubs and communities to provide opportunities for women and girls to be active.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Paul Sweeney to close on the committee's behalf. If the member can take us as close as possible to decision time, that will be much appreciated.

16:48

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** As the deputy convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I am pleased to close this important debate on the committee's behalf. As we have heard, the inquiry pinpointed a range of persistent barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity that need to be broken down. The committee's report made important recommendations about how to achieve that. I am grateful for all the contributions to the debate and for the entire effort to build such a purposeful inquiry.

At the outset, the committee's convener—the member for Rutherglen—helpfully set out the background to the inquiry and its purpose. The inquiry confirmed—as has been reinforced by many of the speeches that we have heard—that the root cause of the significant gender gap in participation in sport and physical activity lies in girls' experiences during adolescence. As evidence that was submitted to the inquiry powerfully demonstrated, for too many teenage girls negative experiences of physical education in schools undermine their confidence and discourage them from participating in sport and physical activity for many years afterwards. The gender gap at that age continues for women and the rate is not surpassed by men until they are in their late 40s. It is really worrying that that extraordinary gap has emerged.

To tackle the issue at its root cause, our first priority must be to give teenage girls a more positive experience of physical education in schools, in order to make them feel welcome, included and positively supported. That extends to membership of sports clubs. We heard from one of the Conservative members for South Scotland—Mr Whittle—that male membership of sports clubs is three times greater than female membership of sports clubs. That is a significant difference. Indeed, that difference extends to participation in sport in youth clubs, as the member for Kirkcaldy mentioned in relation to his role as a scout leader. The issue transcends not just school

environments; it applies to adjacent sports clubs and youth societies, as well.

As many members have said this afternoon—including the member for Cunninghame South, whom I welcome as a new member to the committee and commend for her valuable contribution to the debate—that means improving education around menstruation and managing periods and how they can affect teenage girls' participation in sport and physical activity.

It also means tackling negative and misogynistic attitudes, and fostering a culture of inclusion and respect, as was mentioned by the Labour spokesman, Mr Bibby, who is one of the members for West Scotland, and by the member for North East Fife, who spoke about his experiences in his constituency.

Ms Mochan, who is one of the South Scotland members, spoke very powerfully about her experience of how young constituents are dealing with terrible attitudes in their school environment and how that has affected them. We have heard of no more powerful experiences than those of the young people who are witnessing that today. It was pretty shocking to hear about those persistent attitudes.

If the experience of teenage girls is a root cause of lower rates of female participation, the gender gap—as we have heard today—is sustained into adulthood by many other factors. Those include lack of knowledge and support in respect of a range of women's health conditions, from pregnancy to menopause and from urinary incontinence to endometriosis; lack of positive role models and of women in leadership roles; the additional barriers that are created by childcare and other caring responsibilities; and a failure to design facilities and infrastructure in ways that make female users feel safe.

This afternoon, we heard powerful examples from the member for North East Fife about school facilities at Madras college being casually closed down in a way that impacted on one gender. We also heard from Dr Gulhane, who is one of the Conservative members for Glasgow, about the scandalous situation at the Glasgow national hockey centre at Glasgow Green. The situation will squander the legacy of the 2014 Commonwealth games, if we are not careful.

As part of any effective strategy to boost rates of female participation in sport and physical activity, funding is a crucial lever. The Scottish Government's commitment to increasing investment in sport and active living is welcome, but we will miss an important opportunity if we do not seek to carefully target a significant amount of that money at encouraging girls and women to

take part in sport at a younger age, and to live active lives throughout their growth.

We have also heard that many girls and women face intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. That might be due to disability, or they might come from a minority ethnic or deprived socioeconomic background, or might be part of the LGBTQ+ community.

As is set out in our committee's report, wider use of equality impact assessments, inclusive imagery and messaging, the promotion of positive role models and targeted investment all have roles to play in increasing rates of participation in sport and physical activity among girls and women who face those intersecting barriers to their participation. We simply cannot tolerate panicked end-of-year budgetary decisions that discard those important considerations, as was powerfully mentioned by one of the members for South Scotland, Ms Harper.

As we have also heard this afternoon, although there has been real progress in relation to the status and profile of elite women's sport in recent years, much more has still to be done. The committee's report has made some practical suggestions as to how that might be achieved, including in relation to funding of and pay for professional athletes. We heard some examples of positive progress in some sport disciplines, including golf, cricket and football, but many other sports have to make progress.

We have also heard about clothing and equipment. The member for Glasgow Kelvin made an interesting observation about the experience of a century ago and the interesting sporting attire that women were expected to wear in the 19th century. It is important to note that the origin of organised sport began in the late industrial age.

To the present day, we still carry the cultural norms and baggage from the expectations of gender-based roles in Victorian society. It is important to reflect that the significant progress that we have made is clearly not good enough, so we must redouble our efforts.

The member for North East Fife made an interesting point about the changes in the coverage of sport. That is important when we consider health conditions, women who are considering pregnancy or who might be pregnant, and the general zero-tolerance approach to tackling the sexism and abuse that are directed at women in elite sport.

**Martin Whitfield:** On that point, what are the member's views with regard to sponsorship in sport? There seems to be an attitude from certain sponsors that they require a product that is perhaps historical in nature, rather than funding something else. Does he feel that there is a role

for sponsors to better understand their responsibility and the opportunity that they could provide in changing the balance with regard to women's performance in sport?

**Paul Sweeney:** That is an important point that was noted in evidence from broadcasters and sponsors, who talked about the need to ensure that there is balance, particularly with regard to the income insecurity that is faced by women who want to progress to elite sport. There is a significant gap there that still needs to be tackled.

Despite the positive improvement in coverage, particularly in areas such as football, which has been mentioned, elite female athletes and female sports journalists continue to be on the receiving end of absolutely appalling and unacceptable sexist and abusive behaviour. We heard some pretty devastating accounts of that in evidence to the committee. We need to redouble our efforts to bring that to an end.

**Ruth Maguire:** Forgive me for going back a little to sportswear and uniforms. Does the member agree that the clothes that sportswomen are asked to wear are another element of telling young girls that women are there to be looked at, not to compete, and that, therefore, sorting that situation out has a deeper purpose?

**Paul Sweeney:** I could not agree more with that. There is significant bias, which is potentially subconscious, but is certainly controlled heavily by sportswear manufacturers. We need to continue to engage with them on dealing with that.

We know that the media have a crucial role to play in promoting women's elite sport to a wider audience, and we have heard a lot about that today. Our report makes practical recommendations as to how we might make that happen in the future. A key focus should be on expanding routine coverage of women's sport outside the window of major international tournaments. Such tournaments are critical moments when it comes to people realising their potential—they are inspirational—but coverage cannot just be restricted to the Commonwealth or Olympic games. We need the idea that people can take sport to the next level to be more normalised.

**Sandesh Gulhane:** As an Arsenal fan, I listen to the "ArsenalVision" podcast and other podcasts about football and, on those, it is completely normal to hear about the women's team. I know as much about what is going on in the women's team as I know about what is going on in the men's team. Is that the type of thing that the mainstream media need to start doing to make women's sport mainstream?

**Paul Sweeney:** I will not hold the member's support for a London team against him, even though he is a member for Glasgow. Nonetheless,

he makes an important point about the role of podcasts and the increasing democratisation of fan media. That is an important part of what we should consider. It is not just for traditional media channels to normalise attitudes; it also falls to the fan base. We are seeing encouraging signs, particularly in the football world, that things are moving in a positive direction, which is to be commended. I thank the member for making that important point.

Although we see democratisation of fan-base media, it is too often used maliciously. Social media provide a platform for dissemination of negative body image content and misogynistic content that can further discourage women and girls from taking part in sport and physical activity. However, used positively, social media offer an opportunity for sports organisations, governing bodies and other key stakeholders to promote the positive health benefits of being physically active, to give positive role models a platform to demonstrate leadership and to challenge negative content.

I will conclude by echoing the convener's earlier words of thanks to all those who engaged so positively and constructively with our inquiry, often with distressing, detailed and nonetheless emotional evidence. I hope that the Scottish Government will give careful consideration to the key recommendations from this important and vital inquiry and that, by working together to implement them, we can close the gender gap in participation in sport and boost the long-term health and wellbeing of girls and women throughout our country.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Sweeney. That concludes the debate on female participation in sport and physical activity, on a motion on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. It is now time to move on to the next item of business.

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-11455, in the name of Clare Haughey, on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, on female participation in sport and physical activity, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the recommendations contained in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's 7th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Female participation in sport and physical activity (SP Paper 445).

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

## World AIDS Day 2023

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11334, in the name of Clare Haughey, on world AIDS day 2023. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises World AIDS Day, which falls on 1 December 2023; recognises that millions of people around the world live with HIV, which continues to have a profound impact on the health and wellbeing of people globally; believes that, thanks to scientific developments, if on the right treatment, a person living with HIV in Scotland today can live a long, happy and healthy life and cannot pass the virus on to others; notes what it sees as the impact that inequalities in accessing treatment, and stigma surrounding HIV, continue to have across Scotland, including in the Rutherglen constituency; commends the recent Terrence Higgins Trust advertising campaign that aired on STV, which aims to tackle the stigma of HIV; understands that this is the UK's first major public health campaign regarding HIV/AIDS in four decades; welcomes the Scottish Government's goal of ending HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030; further welcomes the Scottish Government's ongoing work to realise this goal, including the development of a pilot online HIV prevention service, to make it easier for people to get pills to prevent infection; considers that Scotland has been a recognised leader in real-world implementation of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) since the introduction of its NHS-delivered programme in 2017; welcomes what it sees as the continued progress being made in the decline of HIV diagnoses in Scotland; further welcomes increases in the uptake of PrEP, with the latest statistics reportedly showing the highest number of people accessing PrEP in any six-month period since the implementation of the programme in July 2017, and notes the belief that, while welcome progress is being made, substantial work remains to be done to meet the ambition to end HIV transmission in Scotland, and to tackle the inequalities that it considers are holding back progress.

17:01

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** I thank colleagues across the chamber for signing my motion marking world AIDS day, which falls on Friday 1 December. I look forward to hearing speeches from other members throughout the debate.

HIV remains a condition that has a profound impact on the health and wellbeing of people globally. However, with early diagnosis and effective therapy, HIV is, in many nations, no longer the terminal illness that it was in the 1980s. It is now established that, with effective treatment, the virus cannot be transmitted to others.

Of course, adverse impacts on physical and mental health remain, together with the requirement for lifelong healthcare and treatment. Living with HIV can worsen existing inequalities, and people might experience additional HIV-

related stigma and discrimination. Therefore, there is a real opportunity and a real need to prevent HIV from being passed on in the first place.

By the end of 2021, 6,415 people were known to be living with HIV in Scotland following a diagnosis. That compares with 5,617 people in 2019. HIV can and does affect anyone—people of any age, sexuality, ethnicity or gender. However, we know that rates of access to HIV specialist treatment and care are relatively high in Scotland. Based on 2019 data, 90 per cent of people who had been diagnosed were attending specialist HIV services, 98 per cent of those attending were receiving antiretroviral therapy and 95 per cent of people treated had achieved an undetectable HIV blood level.

Over the past decade, the annual number of people in Scotland diagnosed with HIV for the first time has declined. The number reduced by 37 per cent between 2010 and 2019, and by a further 54 per cent in 2021. Thanks to scientific and pharmacological developments and the expertise of our leading sexual and reproductive health services, if they are on the right treatment, a person with HIV in Scotland can live a long, happy and healthy life.

However, we can go further. The goal of eliminating HIV transmission is now in sight. On world AIDS day three years ago, the then public health minister, Joe FitzPatrick, set the goal of ending HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030. To make good on that commitment, excellent work has been undertaken to examine what is working well in driving down the number of new transmissions and how those successes can be further capitalised on, and people are investigating what more we can do.

Back in 2020, the Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish health protection network to develop a proposal on how elimination could be achieved. That led to the establishment of the HIV transmission elimination oversight group, which published its report on world AIDS day last year with a set of recommendations to inform the Scottish Government on how the elimination target can be met. That report set out a total of 22 proposed actions within five key pillars of intervention. Those pillars are testing; education, including awareness raising and stigma reduction; combination therapy; entry into and retention in specialist HIV care; and contact tracing.

One of the specific asks is for the Scottish Government to commit to piloting opt-out HIV blood-borne virus—BBV—testing in accident and emergency departments in areas of the highest HIV prevalence. A similar opt-out testing scheme was launched in England and proved to be successful in identifying cases of HIV and other

blood-borne viruses. There are estimated to be 500 people living with undiagnosed HIV in Scotland, and it is vital that we invest in ways to find all of them if we are to meet the 2030 goals.

I wrote to the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health about that earlier this year. In her response, she advised that there would be an

"element of prioritisation for the recommendations, and this will be based on a number of factors, such as available capacity within services, likely relative impact, and timescales for delivery."

Identifying undiagnosed and unknown HIV and blood-borne viruses should be a key public health priority. I ask the minister to consider the recommendation for opt-out testing as a matter of urgency. That action could save lives. I also look forward to hearing more from the minister in her closing speech about the actions that the Scottish Government will take to drive forward the recommendations to ensure that the 2030 goal becomes a reality.

World AIDS day affords us the opportunity to come together to stand in solidarity with all people who live with HIV. It allows us to remember those who have lost their lives to HIV and AIDS-related illnesses over the decades, as well as to celebrate activists and charities who have refused to let HIV stigma stand in the way of progress. As charities such as the Terence Higgins Trust say, nowadays, stigma is more harmful than HIV itself.

The stigma around HIV is not what it once was, but much more needs to be done to educate people about the virus, as a lack of knowledge about the medical progress over the years still fuels stigma. Research by the Terence Higgins Trust and the Scottish Government has laid bare attitudes to HIV in Scotland today. According to the study, only 35 per cent of people would be happy to kiss someone with HIV, 25 per cent would feel worried about receiving medical treatment from a doctor or nurse who has HIV and nearly half of the people in Scotland would feel ashamed to tell others if they were diagnosed with HIV.

Last month, I was pleased to lodge another motion in the Parliament, as well as to ask a question to the First Minister regarding the launch of the new national HIV anti-stigma campaign, led by the Terence Higgins Trust and funded by the Scottish Government. Aired on television in Scotland, the new advert provides an overdue update on the huge medical progress in the fight against HIV. It is the first TV advert on HIV since the UK Government's infamous "Don't die of ignorance" campaign, which featured falling tombstones, 40 years ago. I am sure that any of us who is old enough to remember that campaign does so.

Alongside providing up-to-date information about HIV, the new 60-second TV advert aims to tackle the stigma that still surrounds the virus, which usually results from misconceptions about how HIV has changed since the 1980s and 1990s. We still have a way to go in tackling stigma, but public information campaigns such as that one can make a difference and that, in turn, will save lives.

I remind members of the photo call to mark world AIDS day, which my colleague Karen Adam is sponsoring, after First Minister's questions on Thursday. I encourage all members to join and show their support. Across the parties, we all share the same commitment to do what we can to eradicate new HIV transmissions by 2030. It is a visionary and ambitious target, and one that we can and must achieve.

17:09

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** I refer Parliament to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a practising national health service general practitioner. I thank Clare Haughey for securing the debate.

On world AIDS day last year, the Scottish Government announced the laudable goal to end HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030. For those living with HIV, it is a lifelong infection that can be managed successfully through antiretroviral therapy, or ART. There is no vaccine or cure for HIV, but if tablets are taken daily, the virus will not replicate and progress to acquired immune deficiency syndrome, which we know as AIDS.

We now have drugs that reduce the likelihood of becoming infected in the first place. For those who think that they have been exposed to the virus, we have PEP, or post-exposure prophylaxis medicine. For those who are HIV negative but at high risk of HIV infection, we have PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis medicine—which reduces the risk significantly. The three groups with the highest rates of HIV are gay and bisexual men; people from countries with high HIV prevalence, especially sub-Saharan African countries; and drug users who share drug-injecting tools and people who have sex partners who inject drugs. Thirty years ago, HIV/AIDS was a death sentence. Now, the medical profession considers HIV as a chronic disease. In fact, the prognosis and life expectancy for a person living with HIV is actually better than those for someone with type 2 diabetes.

Let us return to the Scottish Government's goal to end transmission within seven years. Yes, we have PrEP for those at high risk of contracting the virus, but the Scottish Government has yet to add another key weapon to its armoury: namely, testing for HIV, in particular opt-out testing when

someone presents at an A and E department. Opt out means that an individual who is seeking other health services can be tested for HIV/AIDS without the need for pre-test counselling, unless the individual opts out of such testing.

Let us consider best practices. England launched its HIV/AIDS opt-out testing two years ago, and the one-year statistics have been phenomenal. Tangible progress has been made in tackling health inequalities and in reaching population groups who could be less likely to access HIV testing through traditional routes. In the first 12 months of the programme alone, nearly 2,000 new diagnoses of HIV, hepatitis B and hep C were found, including 343 new HIV diagnoses. Additionally, 209 people were found to have been previously diagnosed with HIV, but they were not receiving life-changing treatment—which we refer to as “loss to care”. The intervention also assists with tackling late diagnosis, which in 2022 made up 22 per cent of first diagnoses here in Scotland.

Early diagnosis not only reduces morbidity and mortality; it results in savings across health and social care. In the context of England, the first 100 days of testing cost around £2 million, but an estimated £6 million was saved in long-term care costs. Opt-out testing is not a new concept and has been a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence testing guideline since 2016.

An estimated 500 people are living with undiagnosed HIV in Scotland but, every day, opt-out testing is not on offer. Opportunities to test for HIV and other blood-borne viruses are being missed across our country. It is key to introduce such testing into Scotland’s emergency departments as a matter of urgency.

Ahead of 2023 world AIDS day, while there is much to welcome regarding our knowledge of the disease and advancements in diagnosis, treatment and management, there is still so much to do to reach the goal of zero transmission by 2030. With too many people going undiagnosed, opt-out testing is key.

17:14

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I thank my colleague Clare Haughey for securing the debate.

Forty years ago this year, a team of doctors at the Pasteur Institute in France reported that they had isolated a new virus that they believed was the cause of AIDS. The World Health Organization estimates that, since the beginning of the pandemic, as many as 113 million people worldwide have been infected with the virus, and as many as 51.3 million people worldwide have died as a result of HIV.

Four decades on, too many people across society are unaware of the basics of the transmission of blood-borne viruses or of the great scientific advances in treatment and prevention. Far too many are unable to say what the H in HIV stands for.

Like my colleague Clare Haughey, I welcome this year’s new public health campaign against HIV and AIDS, which was created in partnership with the Scottish Government. I vividly remember being a child in the 1980s and seeing the “Don’t die of ignorance” campaign, which was shocking and fearful. I am sure that it did nothing to help alleviate the stigma at the time. Ignorance, fear and misunderstanding about HIV and AIDS were at their peak, and the school playground was not immune to it. I remember children tagging each other in mock horror, claiming, “Now you have AIDS”. Those children, and many adults, did not know then that HIV could not be passed on through touch.

In 2023, sadly, stigma continues to take its toll. As Clare Haughey said—it is worth repeating—according to research funded by the Scottish Government, only 35 per cent of people in Scotland would be happy to kiss someone who is living with HIV, despite it having been known since the 1980s that the virus cannot be passed on through saliva. I found that quite sad to read. It also found that almost half of the people in Scotland who are HIV positive would be ashamed to tell other people that they are HIV positive, and only a third of Scots are aware that those living with HIV on effective treatment cannot pass it on, or that undetectable equals untransmittable.

The Princess of Wales played her part in dispelling HIV myths on a visit to the UK’s first specialist HIV and AIDS unit, where she shook hands with and hugged patients. That was in 1987.

This week, however, my office spoke with a number of people who are living with HIV about the stigma that they face day to day, and I wish to share some of their testimonies with members. A 47-year-old woman who is living with HIV told my office that she went into hospital for a routine bladder examination. Upon informing the doctor of her HIV status and treatment, she was told to wait in the waiting room in her medical gown. Her examination was then cancelled as a result of concern about the use of equipment for later patients. When she went to get her Covid jab, upon telling the nurse that she has HIV, which is under control, the practitioner pulled her hands away abruptly and walked away, saying that she needed to go and get gloves. This week, I have heard of doctors and nurses putting on two or even three pairs of gloves when dealing with patients who are living with HIV.

The importance of tackling stigma is twofold. It is about making the lives of people who are living with HIV better, and that is reason enough. However, the myths about HIV and the stigma surrounding the virus ultimately discourage testing, which delays or prevents treatment and, in turn, results in further transmission.

We must do all that we can to eradicate ignorance. The new campaign is a good start, but we have to go further. Scotland can be the first country in the world to end new cases of HIV, but if we are to do so, we must tackle the stigma wherever it rears its ugly head. Let us never forget what the H in HIV stands for; let us never forget that, behind every diagnosis and every disclosure, there is a human.

17:18

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this annual debate as we mark world AIDS day 2023. I congratulate Clare Haughey on her speech and on securing the debate. It is important that the Parliament continues to shine a light on HIV in Scotland and on-going efforts to reduce and eliminate transmission.

World AIDS day each year presents us with an opportunity to do a number of different things. It gives us the opportunity to recall and remember those who have lost their lives over many decades—as we have heard from colleagues—and also to renew our support and the fight for the living, particularly for those who are managing their condition, as well as those who are living in a situation in which they can take action to prevent transmission. It also gives us the opportunity to move forward in our ambition to reach zero transmissions by 2030.

Tonight, we stand with those in Scotland and around the world who are living with HIV. As we have heard from colleagues, we know that an HIV diagnosis still carries with it far too much stigma, along with fear and uncertainty. In that context, it is imperative that the Parliament and public figures continue to call out stigma and offer support to people who have received a diagnosis.

Estimates from Public Health Scotland show that, as of the end of the last calendar year, around 6,600 people in Scotland were living with HIV. The statistics around diagnosis and treatment are encouraging: 93 per cent of people living with HIV have been diagnosed, and 93 per cent of people receiving antiretroviral treatment had an undetectable viral load. There are positive developments, as we hear year on year when we gather in the chamber to debate these issues.

Every year, there is a theme for world AIDS day. This year, the theme that we are focusing on is “let

communities lead”. That is particularly important in the context of the excellent work that is being done in communities across Scotland in partnership with third sector organisations and charities in order to drive forward our ambition for 2030. I highlight the work of organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, which we have heard about already this evening. In particular, I will say something about Waverley Care and the work that it has done in continuing to focus on the journey towards zero new transmissions in 2030.

In the past year, I have been pleased to host a number of events focusing on that work. I held a round-table event in Parliament—which some colleagues in the chamber attended—where we heard about some of the lived experience to which Karen Adam referred in her speech, and about the stigma and the challenges that still exist for so many people in Scotland who are living with HIV.

During the summer, I was pleased to host the launch of the #GetToZero campaign by Waverley Care at an evening reception in the Parliament, which was very well attended. Once again, we were able to hear about the ambitious target for 2030, and we heard clearly from Waverley Care and others that the Government must continue to keep pace, do more and continue to take action to drive us towards that deadline. None of us wants to be standing in the chamber in 2030—if, of course, we are successful in still being here—talking about a missed target. We want to be talking about the target that we have achieved, and how we have moved Scotland to a position where there are no new transmissions.

In reflecting on the theme of communities coming together, we still have more to do to tackle stigma and to ensure that we support people who are living with HIV. The Government has more to do, with the support of all members in Parliament, to achieve the 2030 target. I look forward to hearing the minister’s update in that regard, and I am very grateful to have the time to share my views this evening.

17:22

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the debate and congratulate my colleague Clare Haughey on bringing it to the chamber.

I led the world AIDS day debate in 2020, in the previous session of Parliament, and I am pleased to continue my support for world AIDS day and the opportunity that it presents to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS. I thank the Terrence Higgins Trust, Waverley Care and HIV Scotland for their briefings and for the invaluable work that they do to support those who are living with HIV.

I start by emphasising that, thanks to scientific developments, a person in Scotland who is living with HIV today can, if they are on the right treatment, live a long, happy and healthy life, and—as we have heard colleagues mention already—they cannot pass the virus on to others. Once a person has received a diagnosis, receives the appropriate treatment, and HIV becomes undetectable in their viral load, they cannot pass on the virus through sexual transmission.

Waverley Care, along with NHS boards across Scotland, including NHS Dumfries and Galloway, continues its important work to promote the need for people to know their HIV status. It is also promoting the undetectable equals untransmittable, or U=U, message.

In preparation for the debate, I reflected on my time at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in the heart of west Hollywood, in Los Angeles, where I worked as an operating nurse in the early 1990s. That was when combination antiretroviral drugs were just starting to be used. The stigma associated with HIV and AIDS was absolutely rife back then, including from professional colleagues.

I am glad that we have moved on and that Scotland is leading the way in reducing stigma about HIV and AIDS. I note the work of LGBT Youth Scotland on its recent report on life in rural areas, which demonstrated that stigma about HIV and AIDS is more prevalent in rural areas. We must pay attention to that and ensure that rural Scotland is targeted to achieve stigma reduction.

When I led our world AIDS day debate in 2019, I spoke about the progress that was being made in Scotland to meet the United Nations 90-90-90 targets. The aim was that, by 2020, 90 per cent of people living with HIV would be diagnosed, 90 per cent of those diagnosed would be receiving treatment, and 90 per cent of those being treated would have an undetectable viral load. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Scotland has met those targets. Ninety-two per cent of those with HIV are now diagnosed, 98 per cent of those are receiving treatment, and 94 per cent of those in treatment have an undetectable viral load. That is good news.

I pay tribute to NHS Scotland staff, such as NHS Dumfries and Galloway's sexual health and blood-borne virus nurse consultant Marie Murray, for the trailblazing work that they do to support those living with HIV and AIDS. Marie in particular has broken down many of the barriers to people coming forward for screening and treatment, and she has been fundamental in helping to reduce stigma around HIV and AIDS, particularly among her colleagues in Dumfries and Galloway.

We have already heard that, today in Scotland, HIV is considered to be a manageable long-term

health condition, with treatments such as PrEP and PEP that allow people to live long and healthy lives. I caught up with the Terrence Higgins Trust at our conference in September, and I was pleased to hear about its new joint campaign with the Scottish Government, which says that stigma is more harmful than HIV. That landmark campaign, which is the first on TV for 36 years, takes the topic of HIV to the Scottish public and provides an insight into the stigma that people living with HIV in Scotland face today. It also provides important messages about HIV transmission, treatment and care. I encourage all members to engage with that campaign, share it on their social media, and promote the importance of people knowing their HIV status through testing. Testing has a central role to play in reducing the number of new infections, and it is as simple as giving a wee finger prick blood sample.

I ask the Scottish Government not to take its foot off the pedal but to continue public awareness campaigns on the importance of sexual health testing, including for HIV and AIDS, and to keep showing that stigma about HIV and AIDS has no place in Scotland.

17:27

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** I thank Clare Haughey for securing this important debate to mark world AIDS day on 1 December. I also express my condolences to everyone who has lost someone whom they love to HIV and AIDS, and I thank all the activists and organisations that have championed the issue for decades and have campaigned for better treatment, awareness and diagnosis of HIV. Organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and Waverley Care have undertaken amazing work to support people living with HIV and AIDS. I thank them for the work that they do in keeping the campaigns alive in the public sphere and in the minds of politicians at Holyrood.

I welcome the Scottish Government's pledge to end HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030. That must be our ambition for public health policy, but we still have much progress to make to achieve that deadline. I welcome the new sexual health and blood-borne virus action plan, and I look forward to engaging with the minister on how we put that into practice.

It is heartening that Scotland is moving towards the UN AIDS goals that were set out for 2025. Public Health Scotland currently estimates that, of the 6,600 people who are presumed to be living with HIV, 93 per cent have been diagnosed. Despite that progress, we must acknowledge the ultimate aim of getting to zero transmissions, and we must expand education about and awareness

of testing to ensure that individuals who are or may be at risk of contracting the disease are aware of the testing that is available in Scotland, so that they can receive the necessary treatment. Increased and accurate diagnosis also means that public health responses can be swifter and more targeted, which is vital to mitigating any inequalities that may exist.

Trends in diagnosis are also changing. For the first time since 2007, heterosexually acquired diagnoses in Scotland have exceeded, in both number and proportion, those among gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men. Trends in diagnosis need to be treated with caution, but the point remains that, in order to ensure equality across society, we must be vigilant, and we must repeat the message that anyone could be at risk of contracting HIV.

HIV treatment is an area that has seen significant medical advancement over recent decades. I draw attention to PrEP medicines specifically. As we have heard, PrEP is a medicine that reduces someone's chances of getting HIV from sex or injection drug use. When taken as prescribed, PrEP is highly effective for preventing HIV.

It is important to draw attention to PrEP as a life-saving drug that is available for free in Scotland from NHS sexual health clinics. It will have already saved lives.

In December 2022, the Scottish Government announced that it was developing an online e-PrEP clinic to make it possible for participants to order medication without needing to attend a specialist clinic. That is vital to enabling wider access to healthcare, including for people in rural areas, where access to sexual health clinics is limited by distance and availability. Beyond online clinics, pharmacies and other community health services might also offer accessible opportunities in communities in which access to sexual health clinics is difficult.

Action is needed to explore current provision and the combination of delivery that would make PrEP more accessible to all who need it. That work should ensure that education and awareness go hand in hand with equitable provision.

We also need to ensure, as many others have said, that stigma in the area is continually tackled. We should all know our HIV status, and I doubt that many of us in the chamber do for certain. We all agree that we should have opt-out testing. That would not only tackle stigma but accelerate our progress towards zero transmission.

HIV does not discriminate; attitudes do. That needs to end if we are going to get to zero transmissions.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Kevin Stewart, who is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:31

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** I thank Clare Haughey for securing the debate, and I express my gratitude to the Terrence Higgins Trust and Waverley Care for sending comprehensive briefings to members and, of course, for the work that they do day in and day out, campaigning for and supporting people living with HIV.

Today, we remember the lives lost to AIDS, celebrate the resilience of those living with HIV and renew our commitment to ending the pandemic. HIV has had a devastating impact worldwide and has claimed the lives of millions, but, despite the immense challenges, progress has been made in the fight against HIV. Antiretroviral treatments have transformed the virus from a death sentence into a manageable condition, allowing people with HIV to live long and healthy lives.

I am sure that all of us in the chamber fully support our national mission for Scotland to get to zero new HIV transmissions by 2030. I recognise the efforts of the Scottish Government over the years, but we have a way to go to reach that 2030 goal.

I fully support campaigners' three main asks: that the Scottish Government introduce a pilot of opt-out blood-borne virus testing, launch a Scottish national HIV testing week and ensure that people in Scotland have easy access to PrEP. I am keen to hear the minister's views, but I hope that the Government's attitude is, "Just let's do this."

I turn to tackling stigma, which we have heard much about today. Like many colleagues, I remember the AIDS advertising campaign of the 1980s, which filled a young me with dread and fear. That campaign, without a doubt, bred stigma. Times have changed, but, unfortunately, stigma still exists.

In *The Press and Journal* on world AIDS day in 2021, my fellow Aberdonian and friend Paul Robertson, who is living with HIV, wrote:

"All too often, people living with HIV still experience stigma linked to discrimination and judgement about their personal lives. Public attitudes and understanding of HIV have not kept pace with the advances that have been made in medical care ... Ending stigma matters, because it is one of the biggest barriers to people accessing HIV testing and care."

I am sure that many members in the chamber will agree with Paul's words.

Another person who is living with HIV spoke to the anti-stigma focus group in May 2023, saying, “Stigma kills. HIV doesn’t.” It is the job of all of us here to help to end such stigma by blowing up the myths, listening to the voices of people with lived experience and acting on what they have to tell us. Together, we can end stigma, improve lives and get to zero.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I invite Jenni Minto to respond to the debate.

17:35

**The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto):** I, too, am grateful to Clare Haughey for securing this important debate, and I thank colleagues for their thoughtful contributions. I welcome everyone who has joined us tonight by sitting in the public gallery.

As Paul O’Kane said, we should let communities lead. They certainly did at the event that he held in Parliament, which I was privileged to attend.

As other members have reflected, in the past four decades, far too many people have lost their lives to HIV and AIDS-related illness, leaving behind families and friends who continue to feel the pain of their loss. We must keep them in our hearts and minds today.

I reflect on the contributions of Emma Harper and Gillian Mackay, who described the position for people who live in rural Scotland. I attended this year’s Oban pride, where I heard about the impacts for them of living in a rural community. I am really interested to hear more about the work that is happening in Dumfries and Galloway.

On world AIDS day last year, my predecessor, Maree Todd, announced the publication of Scotland’s HIV transmission elimination proposal and committed to providing Parliament with an annual progress report. It is my pleasure now to provide an update on the significant work that has been undertaken over the past year and to announce the further actions that the Scottish Government is taking to achieve our transmission elimination goal.

Members will know that our ambitious goal is to end new cases of HIV in Scotland by 2030, with an interim target of achieving and maintaining the goals of the 95-95-95 strategy of the joint United Nations programme on HIV and AIDS—UNAIDS—by 2025. That will mean that 95 per cent of individuals with HIV will have been diagnosed, 95 per cent of those diagnosed will be on treatment, and 95 per cent of those on treatment will have a suppressed viral load.

It is estimated that 6,600 people in Scotland currently live with HIV, of whom 93 per cent have been diagnosed. Of those who have engaged with

HIV services, 98 per cent are receiving treatment and, of those, 93 per cent have been recorded as having an undetectable viral load. Those are reassuring figures, but we are not there yet. As Kevin Stewart eloquently said, there is more work to be done.

The proposal that was published on world AIDS day last year contained recommendations that were wide ranging and, rightly, ambitious. Over the past 12 months, an expert implementation group has been working to prioritise those recommendations to ensure that they can be progressed in the most effective way possible, to give us the best chance of achieving the results that we all desire. The establishment of the implementation group was an important commitment that Ms Todd made last year. I am delighted to say that the outcome of the group’s hard work will be seen shortly through the publication of the Scottish Government’s HIV transmission elimination delivery plan, which we intend to publish in the coming weeks.

I am happy to provide an update on two other commitments that the Scottish Government made on last year’s world AIDS day. The first was to fund a marketing campaign to address the fear and stigma around HIV that, sadly, persist and which, as other members have said, can be more harmful than HIV itself. As others have done in the debate, I commend the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust and thank it and our other partners who have contributed to delivering that outstanding campaign, which, throughout, has been informed by people with lived experience of HIV.

Reflecting on the speeches of Karen Adam, Clare Haughey, Paul O’Kane and Kevin Stewart, I, too, remember the horrendous and heartbreaking advert from the 1980s of the falling tombstones and reflect on the contrast with the current advert that we have worked with our colleagues to produce. I do not know how many colleagues are avid soap fans, but if members missed the launch of the campaign in a primetime slot between “Emmerdale” and “Coronation Street” last month, I hope that they will now have seen the campaign, whether that is through television, social media, billboards or the fantastic news and media coverage that it has generated. As Emma Harper said, please share it. To see the reality of living with HIV and the harm of HIV stigma portrayed so powerfully and discussed so widely felt like a landmark moment, and it is one that I hope will make a real difference to the lives of people affected by HIV.

Last year’s other major announcement was on funding for a pilot of ePrEP clinics. In 2017, Scotland led the way in offering free PrEP—a medication that prevents HIV infection—to those

at the highest risk of acquiring HIV. Since then, we have seen a significant reduction in new HIV diagnoses among gay and bisexual men. However, it is essential that we expand access to PrEP to reach a wider range of communities in Scotland. The e-PrEP pilot will support that.

Recently, I met the team at Glasgow Caledonian University and was delighted to hear about the excellent progress that they are making on the three-year project. The team is currently undertaking the vital development work that is necessary for the next stages of a safe and successful pilot.

I am pleased to announce today that we are working with national health service boards to carry out three pilots of BBV opt-out testing in accident and emergency units. Those pilots will help us to better understand the undiagnosed population of HIV and viral hepatitis, as well as the acceptability of such an initiative in Scotland.

Those projects are fantastic examples of the groundbreaking work that is already under way to achieve our transmission elimination goals, but there is a great deal more besides. I am pleased to announce that our new sexual health and blood-borne virus action plan was published today. The action plan is supported by £1.7 million of funding a year, of which £800,000 has already been allocated to a range of projects that support the actions in the plan. Along with actions to improve sexual health and wellbeing, the plan includes a recommitment to our HIV transmission elimination goals, and funding has been allocated to projects that support that.

I do not have enough time today to do justice to all those projects, but they include investment in research, developing education and training, improving access to information and resources, strengthening our data and digital capabilities, exploring the feasibility of providing PrEP in primary care and delivering community-based testing initiatives. Those projects are outlined in detail in the sexual health and blood-borne virus action plan that was published today and in the HIV transmission elimination delivery plan, which will follow in the coming weeks.

I know that the Parliament will be unified in its will to end HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030 and to improve the lives of people living with HIV in Scotland. As Karen Adam reminds us all, the H is for human.

*Meeting closed at 17:43.*

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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