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Wednesday 29 November 2023

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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

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

Fisheries and Coastal Communities

1. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the proposals outlined in its latest “Building a New Scotland” paper, “Our marine sector in an independent Scotland”, will support Scotland’s fisheries and coastal communities. (S6O-02798)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Scotland’s marine sector plays a critical role in creating jobs and prosperity in coastal and island communities. As set out in the “Building a New Scotland” marine paper, the full potential of the sector can be realised only with independence. Unlike the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government will always champion Scottish marine sector interests. With independence and European Union membership, Scotland would enjoy full access to the EU single market for our seafood exports, freedom of movement to address post-Brexit labour shortages, and the ability to negotiate directly for priorities such as fisheries at the heart of Europe.

Karen Adam: Scotland’s marine sector is a key contributor to Scotland’s success; in 2019, it generated £5 billion in gross value added and accounted for 3.4 per cent of the overall Scottish economy. We know that Brexit has had and continues to have adverse impacts on Scotland’s coastal and island communities, businesses and industries. What recent and on-going engagements has the Scottish Government had with fishers regarding the future of the industry?

Gillian Martin: The Scottish Government regularly meets representatives of the Scottish fishing industry in pursuit of our shared vision of a vibrant, prosperous and sustainable fishing industry that will provide opportunities and good jobs for generations of fishers to come and

continues to help our coastal and island communities to survive and thrive.

Recent engagement has included close partnership working with the industry at annual fisheries negotiations to secure the best possible deal for Scotland, as well as Mairi Gougeon’s attendance at an event to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation and identify opportunities for future collaboration.

As environment minister, I have responsibility for inshore fisheries, and I engage every week with representatives of that most varied of sectors. Ms Adam knows, of course, that my first engagement in that area of my portfolio was in her constituency—at Peterhead harbour in June—with multiple sector stakeholders.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): While the Government continues to speculate about hypothetical scenarios, our coastal and island communities need support right now. One way in which the Government could support our coastal and island communities is by ensuring that fishing in Scottish waters works for the benefit of Scottish communities. Given that only 50 per cent of Scottish fish are landed locally, how is the Government using the powers that it currently has to increase that proportion and ensure that our coastal and island communities benefit from fishing?

Gillian Martin: The answer to that question will be wide and varied. I will write to Rhoda Grant on the full suite of measures.

The cabinet secretary deals with the pelagic aspects, and I deal with inshore fisheries. I will talk about inshore fisheries in particular.

We are working with inshore fisheries organisations to collect more data with remote cameras on vessels so that we have a clear picture of what is out in the Clyde areas and inshore fishing waters, and we can see where there are vibrant fishing grounds that could be better monitored and where the species are. Obviously, climate change is having an effect on where species of fish are moving, in particular around the inshore waters.

That important piece of science and data collection from working with the industry is really important in having a sustainable inshore fishery. Working with the fishers is the only way to do that.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Scotland’s largest seafood sector—and, indeed, the UK’s largest food export—is Scottish salmon. That supports 2,300 jobs directly and up to 10,000 indirectly in Scottish coastal communities.

Innovation is essential to the future of the sector and its ability to compete internationally—indeed,

aquaculture is identified specifically in the Scottish Government's innovation strategy as a key sector. However, recent reports indicate that the future of the Sustainable Aquaculture Innovation Centre may be under threat. What is the Government doing to guarantee the future of that centre to ensure that the sector continues to grow, create jobs and compete internationally?

Gillian Martin: We set out our support for the sustainable growth of Scotland's aquaculture earlier this year, recognising that innovation is a key enabler to delivering our vision for sustainable aquaculture. In light of the outcome of the Scottish Funding Council's review of the innovation centre programme, the Scottish Government is working closely with the Scottish Funding Council, the Sustainable Aquaculture Innovation Centre and other partners to explore transitional and future funding arrangements.

Wildfires

2. Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to tackle the increasing risk of wildfires in rural areas. (S6O-02799)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): We are working with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on the implementation of its wildfire strategy. We have asked it to continue to invest in the provision of specialist resources, technological advancements and forward-thinking operational practices. We know that wildfire incidents are likely to increase due to climate change, so it is vital that we continue to work together to plan for and deliver an appropriate response. That is why we committed in this year's programme for government to explore what more can be done to prevent and manage wildfires.

Kate Forbes: As the minister said, it is highly likely that wildfires will continue and grow bigger. During the summer, I visited the site of one of the largest wildfires, at Cannich. It is well accepted locally that it was gamekeepers, who used their many decades of experience of fighting fire with fire, who responded and stopped the fire. The Parliament will discuss the issue of muirburn tomorrow. Does the minister agree with me on the importance of muirburn for firebreaks and of ensuring that gamekeepers are allowed to continue to fight fire with fire?

Gillian Martin: I am happy to reassure Ms Forbes that the Wildfire Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill contains provisions that would allow the continuation of muirburns by practitioners to prevent or reduce the risk of wildfires. The bill also contains provisions that would allow practitioners to undertake muirburn without a licence in emergency circumstances,

such as those that Ms Forbes has described. That flexibility is absolutely necessary and important.

We recognise the knowledge and skills that are held by practitioners such as gamekeepers, and NatureScot has ensured that they are a key part of the development of the new code of practice that accompanies the bill. I take the opportunity to commend the swift action taken by the gamekeepers that Ms Forbes mentioned.

I am happy to discuss that aspect of the bill or any other concerns that Ms Forbes has about muirburn provisions. However, as she said, we will have an opportunity to debate the matter in full tomorrow.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): In its recent "Firestorm" report, the Fire Brigades Union Scotland found that 93 per cent of its members who participated in a survey believed that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is not adequately resourced to deal with the increase in climate-related incidents such as wildfires. Does the minister accept that assessment? What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that the fire service is properly equipped?

Gillian Martin: I will refer the information that Katy Clark has asked for around the funding of the fire service to the minister whose portfolio covers that matter.

The Scottish Government has continued our commitment to support Scottish Fire and Rescue Service delivery and reform with a further uplift of £10 million of resource for 2023-24. In recognition of the pay and inflationary pressures that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service faces, we have provided it with an additional budget of up to £4.4 million on top of the allocations that were set in that budget announcement.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The minister mentioned the use of muirburn without permission in an emergency. However, is it not the case that, if we wait for an emergency, it is too late? Everyone whom I speak to in rural Scotland who deals with wildfires says that, if muirburn is reduced, the risk of loss of human life increases. Does the minister share my concern that any such diminution of muirburn, particularly on a significant level, will significantly increase the loss of human life in Scotland?

Gillian Martin: I do not wholly share those concerns. Fergus Ewing has pointed out that we need a flexible system that allows a speedy response to any potential emergency without a licence. I think that the issue will be in the detail of how we define an emergency.

A muirburn licensing scheme is required by the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill in order to ensure that muirburn is undertaken in

accordance with the code of practice in an environmentally sustainable manner. We intend that applying to the licensing scheme will be straightforward.

We recognise that muirburn has a positive impact by helping to reduce fuel loads and lower the risk of wildfires. The bill contains provision to enable NatureScot to issue licences for that purpose on non-peatland and peatland.

The practice will be allowed to continue, but the scheme will ensure that those who are undertaking it are trained and that we have a full picture of where and how it is being done. Of course I recognise that the practice can prevent wildfire. I give Mr Ewing assurances that there will be flexibility around emergencies in order to mitigate the potential issues that he described in his question.

Food Security Unit

3. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of the food security unit in relation to the monitoring of food system resilience. (S6O-02800)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The initial focus of the new food security unit is to develop evidence-based systems to monitor risks or threats to supply chains and to mitigate future shocks and impacts on food security. It is still early days for the unit, but enhanced monitoring should mean that the Government and industry can be on the front foot and are able to react as quickly as possible to future shocks as they arise. Although it is not possible to predict all impacts, improved monitoring should, in turn, help to bolster industry confidence during these hugely challenging times.

Carol Mochan: In my South Scotland region and beyond, food insecurity and hunger are becoming increasingly prominent issues that have no place in a modern Scotland. Although I welcome the establishment of a food security unit, it is my belief that a right to food should be enshrined in Scots law as independent legislation, because that is critical to ensuring food security. Why does the Scottish Government continue to reject calls from Labour members to introduce that important right?

Gillian Martin: There are quite a lot of drivers of people not being able to eat, which relate to poverty. The Scottish Government has tried to identify meaningful and efficient measures that we can take to alleviate poverty. The Scottish child payment of £25 a week has been hailed as making a “significant difference” by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations in the report that it published this week. I recommend that Carol

Mochan has a look at the report if she has not already done so.

The energy part of my portfolio delivers the fuel insecurity fund, which has been tripled since the current First Minister took office. The biggest drivers of poverty are the costs of food and energy. We are calling for a social tariff on energy bills and for the two-child benefit cap to be lifted. Those measures would tackle at source the issues that Carol Mochan rightly brings to the chamber and would alleviate the poverty that many families in her region are experiencing. That is where we are putting our efforts.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Each week, butchers in Orkney buy locally reared beef and lamb at the auction mart and ship it to Dingwall for slaughter, with carcasses returning to Orkney by refrigerated lorry. Reliable ferry services are key to that trade and to butchers fulfilling their contracts with local schools, care homes and NHS Orkney. However, the Government’s failure to provide cover during the dry docking of MV Hamnavoe in January puts all that at risk. Previously, a Ropax—roll on, roll off passenger—vessel was used, and then Scottish National Party ministers approved the use of a freight vessel. Now, the Government has abandoned the route completely during the refit. Will the minister explain how that meets the requirements of food system resilience or, indeed, a lifeline ferry service?

Gillian Martin: Although Liam McArthur’s question strays away from my portfolio and into the transport portfolio, he raises an important point about the geographical locations of abattoirs, which is in my portfolio. We are actively looking at that with the chief vet. Although my constituency is not across any body of water, we, too, have an issue with getting animals to slaughter in a way that is not distressing for them and does not involve long journeys. We are looking at a range of measures that might improve that situation.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinrossshire) (SNP): I will take this back to the original question about the food security unit. A few weeks back, there was a debate in the chamber, which the Labour Party tried to stifle, that touched directly on our ability to create a secure and resilient food system. In the debate, I pointed out to members that berry farmers had, in fact, given up on growing soft fruit and that Brexit was undoubtedly sitting at the heart of that problem.

What is the Scottish Government’s latest assessment of the impact of Brexit on our food security? Does the cabinet secretary agree that the hypocrisy of Labour’s current pro-Brexit stance proves that Labour is not what Scotland needs?

Gillian Martin: I thank Jim Fairlie for the questions. I absolutely recognise the issues that he has outlined, particularly about the soft fruit-growing industry. The food and drink sector as a whole has undoubtedly borne the brunt of the United Kingdom Government's hard Brexit, which has brought with it disrupted supply chains, new trade barriers and the costs of higher food prices. We are all paying for a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for.

Of course, access to labour is a fundamental part of the issue that Jim Fairlie outlined. That is what makes Labour's position all the more cynical. Labour knows that Brexit is hugely harmful, yet it will continue to impose it on Scotland if it wins the next Westminster election. That fact shows that it does not matter who is in power in Westminster—neither Labour nor the Tories will stand up for Scotland.

The only route for food producers in Scotland to once again enjoy the benefits of access to the European Union labour force, removal of export red tape and unfettered access to the European single market is to have an independent Scotland, whose first priority would be rejoining the EU.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn. Question 5 was not lodged.

Agricultural Funding (Engagement with United Kingdom Government)

6. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the United Kingdom Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other relevant UK Government departments regarding the provision of future agricultural funding for Scotland. (S6O-02803)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government has regularly pressed the case that rural Scotland has been short-changed as a result of Brexit and that the United Kingdom Government must ensure certainty around rural funding for the future and give Scotland an equitable share of available funds that meet our needs and interests.

Mairi Gougeon wrote to the new Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Barclay, this past week. She also raised the issue at interministerial group meetings with the previous secretary of state, and our Deputy First Minister raised it with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in June this year.

David Torrance: The Tories cannot be silent on the scandal that is leaving our farmers in the dark over future funding. They are complicit in Westminster's treatment of the sector with utter contempt, while at the same time they cast

themselves as champions of Scottish agriculture without any credibility.

Farming is a long-term endeavour, and people need clarity now to plan for the future. Has there been any indication that the new DEFRA secretary of state understands those concerns? Does the minister know whether Labour is promising anything different?

Gillian Martin: Agriculture is devolved, and it is crucial that Scottish Government policies are unhindered by any threats that are posed by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the subsidy control regime and the lack of long-term replacement European Union funding.

We have not yet received any response from the new secretary of state at DEFRA, Steve Barclay, on Ms Gougeon's recent letter to him, in which she stressed that we need to work together closely on the certainty of future agricultural funding. We continue to raise the issue regularly and urgently with the UK Government. We will, of course, also do so with any Labour colleagues who might be looking to be in the Government after this one.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The Scottish National Party-Green Government's disdain for our farmers and crofters is all too clear to see. One columnist even described Mairi Gougeon's approach as something that one would see at the "Mad Hatter's Tea Party" in "Alice in Wonderland".

It is little wonder that one of the rabbits that was pulled out of the hat last week in Shona Robison's budget statement was the slashing of £28 million from the agricultural budget. Further, £61 million of agricultural funds that were allocated to the SNP by the UK Treasury have gone missing over the past two years. Where has the money gone and when will it be returned?

Gillian Martin: I say to Rachael Hamilton that the most pressing issue for farmers—certainly in my constituency—is the long-term certainty of funding. His Majesty's Treasury has provided yearly allocations for the current UK parliamentary session, but there is no funding commitment for 2025.

Rachael Hamilton: Where is the money?

Gillian Martin: I will continue my answer if I can do so without interruption.

That has direct implications for the management of current agricultural programmes, including the Scottish rural development programme and the work that is under way in the agricultural reform programme.

Agriculture requires future funding certainty due to its multi-annual funding commitments and long

lead-in times for farmers, crofters and land managers—a fact that I am sure that Ms Hamilton is absolutely aware of.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Of course, it would be helpful if the Westminster Government gave some clarity, but it would be equally helpful if the Scottish Government did not cut £28 million from the agriculture budget. That is not providing any certainty for the farmers in my constituency or in the minister's. When will she restore the money that has been cut; indeed, when will she restore the £61 million that should be in farmers' pockets?

Gillian Martin: Willie Rennie's point is probably for the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands to answer. I will refer his question to the cabinet secretary and I am sure that she will write to him with the detailed answer that he requires, giving assurances.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Sixty-one million pounds of ring-fenced money that was allocated to the Scottish Government by the United Kingdom Government has been withdrawn. The scale of the Scottish Government's hypocrisy has no bounds. Does the cabinet secretary—sorry, I mean the minister, because the cabinet secretary is not here. Does the minister not share the anger of farmers and crofters right across Scotland about the fact that the Scottish Government is asking for money from the UK Government but, when the Scottish Government gets £61 million, it disappears? As a matter of urgency, will you find out when that £61 million will be returned to the agriculture budget?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to speak through the chair.

Gillian Martin: I will tell Finlay Carson one thing on which I absolutely share the anger of farmers in Scotland, and it refers back to the question that Jim Fairlie asked about how the hard Brexit has impacted on our farmers. We were assured that multiyear funding allocations would be given. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Gillian Martin: That is the most pressing issue for farmers in Scotland.

Flooding (Mitigation of Crop Losses)

7. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding action to mitigate any future crop losses due to flooding, including by updating its water management plans. (S6O-02804)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The cabinet secretary has witnessed and discussed at first hand the impact

on crops on farms affected by the severe flooding that the country experienced in October. Roz McCall will know that the cabinet secretary's constituency was the worst affected. The issue has been central to her discussions with ministerial colleagues on our collective response. At the AgriScot conference on 22 November, the cabinet secretary confirmed that the Scottish Government has now established and funded a scheme for agricultural flood bank repair. A budget of £1.8 million has been set aside and the scheme will be open for applications shortly, offering up to £30,000 per individual farm business to reinstate flood banks to their pre-damage levels.

Roz McCall: At a recent meeting of the Fife branch of NFU Scotland, the issue of adverse impacts of recent flooding on food security was raised. We know that the general increased groundwater and the submersion of vast areas of land after intense flooding are having a detrimental impact on all winter crops. What is the Scottish Government doing to mitigate further against future crop losses in the light of current environmental policies that are preventing farmers from using tried and tested methods of water management?

Gillian Martin: The weather events of recent weeks have affected communities and farms right across our water catchments. It is right that we take a holistic approach to our work on flood risk reduction and recovery response. We are committed to promoting and advancing our understanding of natural flood management programmes. As part of that commitment, we are funding the long-term Eddleston Water research programme and the Allan Water improvement project—which, I believe, is in Ms McCall's region. Those projects are helping to develop an evidence base to improve our understanding of how floods operate and to help stakeholders to understand the potential value of alternative flood prevention measures.

Through the farm advisory service, the Scottish Government funds a range of support for farmers, crofters and land managers, which is delivered through events, videos, technical notes and advice line support—to name just a few—as well as bespoke specialist advice on dealing with floods.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if we have a brief question and answer.

Pesticides (Impact on Rural Environment)

8. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its pesticides policy, how it monitors any impact of the use of pesticides on the rural environment, including watercourses. (S6O-02805)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): A range of pesticide monitoring strategies operate in Scotland. The Scottish Government performs annual surveys to monitor patterns and estimate Scottish pesticide use on agricultural and horticultural crops. Pesticide records are inspected as part of cross-compliance inspections to ensure that pesticides are used in line with their approval conditions. The Scottish Government also participates in analysis of pesticide residues in food and wildlife.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency monitors the chemistry and ecology of surface waters, which are indicative of pesticides and their impacts. Monitoring has recently been carried out at nearly 100 freshwater locations.

Audrey Nicoll: I recently joined experts at the James Hutton Institute to discuss the Dee catchment management plan, which aims to protect the river catchment ecosystem. Among the issues that were raised was the recent discovery in a remote stream in the Cairngorms of imidacloprid, an insecticide that has been banned for use in agriculture but that is still used in domestic pet flea treatments. A dog or another treated animal entering the stream is the most likely source of the pollution.

Given that nature is our first line of defence against climate change, what action is being taken to ensure that agricultural pesticides are used in accordance with regulations? What action is being taken to halt the use of banned pesticides in domestic pet flea treatments?

Lorna Slater: I thank Audrey Nicoll for highlighting those important issues and for the good work that is being carried out as part of the Dee catchment management plan.

The issue of pet treatments is reserved, but I emphasise that all pet owners should follow the guidance that is provided with such a treatment, which says that pets should not enter water for a period of time after it has been applied.

I agree that non-chemical control of weeds should be considered wherever possible, which is why the Scottish Government promotes integrated pest management and encourages a limited and targeted approach to pesticide use. My officials and I have contributed to the development of a United Kingdom national action plan for the sustainable use of pesticides, which is due to be published this year.

NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

Mental Health Directorate (Impact of Spending)

1. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the budget for its mental health directorate having increased substantially in the past three years, how it plans to measure the impact of this spend, including outcomes for people with mental health conditions. (S6O-02806)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The new 10-year mental health and wellbeing strategy, which is jointly owned by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, was published in June. It includes outcomes that describe the differences or changes that we want to see as a result of the strategy. We will use those outcomes to monitor and evaluate progress as the strategy is implemented. That will build on work that we have already delivered to improve data collection by health boards and to publish new core standards for mental health.

Willie Coffey: As the minister will be aware, my question relates to one of the central recommendations in Audit Scotland's report on adult mental health. In the Public Audit Committee's evidence sessions, it has been noted that people are unclear about the range of options that are available to them and are rarely surveyed about the quality of service that they receive and whether they feel that their outcomes are improving. Can the minister offer reassurance that that will be a priority in the coming years?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. The mental health standards that I referenced are crucial to ensuring that everybody—those accessing care and those delivering care—knows what standards are expected from them. Those standards will be really empowering for people who try to access support services, because they will ensure that people understand what to expect in the way of care.

The strategy sets out national sources of support. In the first instance, people are encouraged to phone their general practice, which is, of course, the front door to the national health service. However, there is also the NHS 24 mental health hub, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on 111. Staff from that service will direct people to the right help. We also provide online resources, such as the mind to mind service, which is situated on NHS Inform—the Scottish NHS on the net. All of that sits alongside a range of community support.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The member for Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley mentioned an increase in funding for the directorate, but that

does not reflect the reality on the ground. Last week, the Scottish Government confirmed an in-year cut of £30 million to mental health funding. This is the second year running that in-year cuts have been made to mental health spending. How does the Government expect patients to have confidence in mental health services when the only consistent thing about its approach is budget cuts?

Maree Todd: The financial pressures that we face as a result of rising inflation and the on-going impacts of Covid and Brexit are by far the most challenging since devolution. As a Government, we have had to make difficult decisions to balance and prioritise the budget, including making a record pay offer to our national health service staff to support them through the cost of living crisis and to avoid industrial action.

The new “Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy” strongly signals the priority that we place on mental health. Despite the 2023-24 savings, we have supported overall increases to mental health spending over a period of years. The mental health directorate’s programme budget has more than doubled since 2020-21, from £117 million to nearly £260 million in 2023-24. Between the Scottish Government and national health service boards, we expect spending on mental health to be well in excess of £1.3 billion.

We continue to focus on the delivery of our new mental health and wellbeing strategy, as well as supporting delivery plans for learning disability and autism services and cross-cutting trauma work.

Type 2 Diabetes Drugs (Supply Issues)

2. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any supply issues with drugs for people with type 2 diabetes. (S6O-02807)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government is aware that there are global supply issues with glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists, which are licensed for treating patients with type 2 diabetes. It is anticipated that supplies of all GLP-1 RA products will be limited and intermittent until at least mid-2024. The supply of medicines and the associated legislation are reserved matters for the United Kingdom Government. NHS Scotland has robust systems in place to manage medicine shortages when they arise. I recognise the impact of those global shortages, and anyone who is affected by them should speak to their clinical team.

Rona Mackay: I am aware that people can get help from the Diabetes UK helpline.

Will the minister detail any collaborative efforts with pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors to mitigate the supply issues with drugs for people with type 2 diabetes? What steps are being taken to enhance the resilience of the supply chain in order to prevent future disruptions?

Jenni Minto: As I mentioned, the UK Government remains responsible for the supply of medicines. The UK Department of Health and Social Care has a dedicated team that has been working with the companies concerned to establish the current supply position by modelling demand and supply and to consider how to mitigate shortages. I am pleased to say that our chief pharmaceutical officer attends those meetings and that the Department of Health and Social Care is carrying out modelling and drawing on intelligence that is received from the devolved nations.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my declaration in the register of members’ interests as a practising national health service general practitioner.

Access to diabetes technology is a postcode lottery, with patients having to battle to get it and having to justify why they deserve to get it. That is demeaning for my constituents Rachel and John and for everyone involved, and the process adds mental strain to their struggle. Will the Scottish Government provide an update on its plan to address the unequal access to diabetes technology for people living with type 1 diabetes, as highlighted in Diabetes Scotland’s “Diabetes Tech Can’t Wait!” campaign report?

Jenni Minto: We are working closely with NHS boards to deliver effective evidence-based options for those who are at risk. In 2023-24, we have provided health boards with core funding of just under £6 million to deliver various services in relation to diabetes. We aim to reduce unequal access and we are working closely on how we can include closed-loop mechanisms in those discussions with health boards.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): As always, there are supply issues for those with type 2 diabetes. The recent report by Diabetes Scotland on its “Diabetes Tech Can’t Wait” campaign highlighted that only 14.5 per cent of adults with type 1 diabetes are using an insulin pump and only 5.9 per cent are using continuous glucose monitors. Does the minister agree that more funding is vital to provide fair and equal access to life-saving diabetes technology across Scotland?

Jenni Minto: As my colleague Ms Todd highlighted, we are in probably the most difficult financial circumstances that the Government has found itself in. I agree with the member that we

need to find innovative ways of improving technology support for those living with diabetes, which is why I have been working closely with various third sector organisations and health boards.

Long Covid (Children)

3. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support children with long Covid. (S6O-02808)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Across NHS Scotland, local primary care teams are providing assessment and initial investigation for children and young people with symptoms that are consistent with long Covid. Primary care clinicians can give advice about the management of symptoms and any potential treatment options for those in the first instance. They can also refer people to occupational therapy and physiotherapy for further support where that is appropriate. In cases where referral to secondary care is required, children and young people may be referred to general paediatric services for investigation and on-going management.

Meghan Gallacher: The Scottish Covid inquiry has heard that children with long Covid have been dismissed and ignored by those who are supposed to support them. The charity Long Covid Kids told the inquiry that healthcare professionals were not appropriately trained, that there is a postcode lottery of care and that healthcare professionals had been given no education regarding the condition. Does the minister agree that the Covid inquiry should be an opportunity to learn lessons from the poor treatment of people with long Covid? What training is being provided to healthcare professionals now so that they can adequately support children who are living with long Covid?

Jenni Minto: The member might be interested to know that, earlier this month, I met a range of organisations that represent people who are impacted by long Covid, including Long Covid Kids, which is part of our national strategic network that has been set up to inform our approach to long Covid. I have committed to holding a follow-up meeting with Long Covid Kids to discuss that important subject in further detail. I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to comment at this stage on detailed evidence that is presented at the inquiry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jackie Baillie, who is joining us remotely, has a supplementary question.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Long Covid Kids Scotland has raised concerns that the Scottish Government has produced no detailed

report on the development of long Covid services for children and young people in the national health service. No dedicated services are up and running or even close to opening nearly four years after the start of the pandemic. Will the minister advise when paediatric long Covid services will be fully up and running? Given the growing numbers of children and young people who are developing the condition, can she confirm the forecast spending requirements for treatment over the next 10 years?

Jenni Minto: I reiterate that I will be meeting Long Covid Kids to discuss the issues that the member has highlighted. With regard to her more detailed questions, I will be happy to respond to her in writing.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Will the minister provide further information on the work that the long Covid national strategic network is undertaking to improve treatment for children and young people with long Covid?

Jenni Minto: The long Covid national strategic network has a dedicated workstream that is looking at the needs of children and young people and it includes representation from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and the charity Long Covid Kids, which I have already referenced. The group is reviewing and updating the information that is available to NHS board colleagues and primary care clinicians on the appropriate assessment, referral and management pathways for children and young people with long Covid symptoms. Once updated, the information will be shared with NHS boards as a clinical pathway for local implementation. The aim is to improve consistency of approach across Scotland.

People with Gambling Addiction (NHS Support)

4. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work the national health service is undertaking to support people with gambling addiction. (S6O-02809)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): People with gambling addiction in Scotland can get support through a range of services including those that are signposted on the NHS Inform website, primary care services and, where appropriate, mental health services in secondary care. We have established a gambling-related harms working group with Public Health Scotland to consider what needs to be prioritised in gambling harms research, prevention and treatment.

The United Kingdom Government white paper "High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age" includes proposals on a levy to fund research, prevention and treatment. The Scottish

Government continues to engage with the UK Government to ensure that Scotland will benefit from those proposals.

Kevin Stewart: Problem gambling and debt often lead to relationship breakdown, homelessness and mental ill health, and they can even lead to suicide. It is galling that the UK Government has failed to introduce a gambling reduction bill. Will the minister outline what discussions she has had with the UK Government about the proposed gambling levy that would feature in such a bill? I would also like to know how she envisages that the money that a levy would raise would be spent on boosting NHS services in Scotland in order to support problem gamblers in relation to their addiction.

Jenni Minto: I recognise the description that Mr Stewart gives in his question, because I met a young man who is living with a gambling addiction and he explained the situation that he is in.

I met my counterparts in the UK and Welsh Governments on 21 November to talk through the proposed gambling levy. At that meeting, we discussed the fact that the proposed levy would need to take account of the different landscapes across the three nations and that the devolved Administrations must be involved in decision making at all levels. Health is devolved and any decisions on the use of funding to support prevention and treatment for gambling in Scotland must remain with the Scottish Government.

The NHS is one avenue for support for people with gambling addiction. We will continue to work with the UK Government on the levy post-consultation to ensure that individuals can find support and advice that addresses their needs and circumstances.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Gambling harms and addiction can destroy lives, families and communities. According to the 2021 Scottish health survey, in the least deprived 20 per cent of Scotland, 2 per cent of people had or were at risk of having gambling problems. In the most deprived 20 per cent of Scotland, the figure was 11 per cent of the people who were surveyed, which is more than five times higher. Does the Government have plans to introduce a public health-based approach to tackling gambling harms? Will such a plan have measurable objectives that will seek to eradicate the divisive health inequalities that exist?

Jenni Minto: The Scottish Government treats gambling as a public health issue and we know that the voices of those with lived experience are critical to developing policy, especially in areas where the harms are often hidden—I refer to women gambling, the increase in online gambling and the possibility of stigmatisation. We are

working with the gambling-related harms working group to bring in the voice of lived experience.

Mental Health Services (Winter)

5. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what services people experiencing poor mental health can access this winter. (S6O-02810)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): People who experience poor mental health and wellbeing will continue to be able to access a range of specialist services and community-based supports over the winter. As I mentioned in a previous answer, people who require clinical support should first telephone their general practitioner's surgery or, where possible, their usual mental health team in the first instance. If they are unable to access mental health support that way, the NHS 24 mental health hub is available 24/7 on 111.

There is further information and support, including the mind to mind section of our NHS Inform website, which is useful and can be found in our mental health and wellbeing strategy. I would be more than happy to share the details of those resources with Mr Simpson.

Graham Simpson: I will certainly take up that offer.

Too many people are falling through the cracks, as we have heard on the Public Audit Committee recently. Audit Scotland's recent report on adult mental health referenced a person-centred model of mental healthcare in Trieste in Italy. It is a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week service that requires no appointments and is a one-stop shop. As well as being better for those who need help, it has saved money. Would the minister be willing to consider that model as a way forward in Scotland?

Maree Todd: I am always keen to learn from other countries where we can. Undoubtedly, there are challenges in lifting strategies from other healthcare and support systems and putting them into ours but, as ever, I am keen to learn from other systems.

Audit Scotland reported positively on the mental health and wellbeing strategy that the Government has produced. It said:

"It recognises the importance of a whole-system approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing and provides a foundation for better joint working."

Admittedly, as was referenced in the previous answer and as Audit Scotland pointed out in that report and others, we are doing that in very challenging financial circumstances.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Poor mental health and long waits for treatment are

affecting national health service staff, too. In Fife alone, the NHS sickness rate is 7 per cent, and much of that is mental health related. That is contributing to the current overspend of £15.86 million. The Scottish Liberal Democrats secured £120 million for mental health support in the 2021 budget, so why are mental health waits still so long?

Maree Todd: Mental health waits are improving. The statistics that I am seeing, which will be in the public domain very soon, show a continuing decrease in the waiting time for psychological therapies. That indicates a sustained improvement in recent times. Our new psychological therapies and intervention specification will ensure that psychological therapies are delivered to a high quality and with consistent standards across Scotland.

I absolutely acknowledge that, for somebody who has been waiting for a long time to get an appointment, that is not the answer that they want to hear, but I assure members that things are improving in mental health. The steps that we are taking are working, and we are managing to improve the situation.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The minister mentioned the mental health strategy delivery and workforce plan, which is welcome. Can she say more about how the plan will help to ensure that we are meeting changing mental health needs across Scotland?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. As the member said, the delivery plan and the workforce action plan that were published on 7 November jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are key if we are going to make the progress that we want to see. The strategy's vision and outcomes take a whole-systems approach. We know that mental health ranges from severe and enduring mental illness to everyday worries and feelings of distress and hopelessness. Mental health is a cross-Government priority, and it is supported by a strong collective ambition in the Government and leadership to influence the range of issues that contribute to whether we are mentally healthy or not. Those include poverty, employment, housing, our communities and many more. A diverse range of services and supports will ensure that people can access the right support in the right place at the right time.

Healthcare Services (Edinburgh)

6. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure the sustainability of healthcare services in Edinburgh, in light of the significant increase in the population of the Lothian region in recent years. (S6O-02811)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): It is for territorial national health service boards and their planning partners to organise and provide high-quality services that meet the needs of local people in line with national guidelines and frameworks. Those services will be developed over time to account for a range of factors such as population growth, alongside others such as changes in clinical best practice and significant technological developments.

On the Government's commitment to and investment in local health services, NHS Lothian's resource budget, which is currently more than £1.7 billion, increased by 28 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 and 2023-24; and by just over 100 per cent, or £874.6 million in cash terms, between 2006-07 and 2023-24.

Ben Macpherson: Population growth in Edinburgh has been significant and future projections are also significant. The Granton waterfront development in my constituency is projected to bring an additional 10,000 patients to the area by 2028. As I have raised previously, there is a proposal to create a new general practitioner practice in the Ocean Terminal shopping centre, and that could be a quick, accessible and cost-effective way of meeting current demand and creating much-needed additional capacity, as the Minister for Public Health saw on a recent visit to the vaccination centre. I appreciate the current public finance pressures, but will the Scottish Government work constructively with NHS Lothian and the Edinburgh health and social care partnership to seriously consider the proposal for a GP practice at Ocean Terminal?

Michael Matheson: The member raised that issue with me in September this year, and I am conscious of the significant pressures on primary care services in different parts of Edinburgh, including in the member's constituency. He will recognise that the Scottish Government's approach to capital infrastructure projects is to use existing buildings rather than to build new buildings for the provision of health services where possible.

As I have highlighted to the member in previous correspondence, a decision on whether a particular development at Ocean Terminal could be used as a GP facility would be a matter for the health board and City of Edinburgh Council. However, I can advise the member that I understand that NHS Lothian will be looking again at that issue as part of its capital reallocation and reprioritisation process at its December board meeting. I encourage the member to continue to engage with NHS Lothian as it considers the matter in the coming weeks.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am glad that the cabinet secretary mentioned capital. The First Minister committed to a new eye pavilion when he was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, yet the eye pavilion is still in a building that has been condemned. The Royal Edinburgh hospital is still only in phase 1 of a three-phase plan. The national treatment centre at St John's is supposed to be a national priority. A new sterilisation unit must be built. My constituents in Lothian are asking where those things are. They are all projects that have been promised in the past. I am not asking where the money will come from—I am asking where the money has gone.

Michael Matheson: I recognise the member's interest in issues such as the eye pavilion, the proposed national treatment centre and the Lothian cancer centre. However, as she will be aware, the capital allocation review has had a direct impact on capital projects throughout the country, not just in health but across the public sector. That has happened principally as a result of the United Kingdom Government cutting our capital allocation. That is why so many capital projects are not able to progress. Alongside that, Liz Truss's disastrous budget resulted in significant increases in the cost of capital projects. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Michael Matheson: That means that projects are now well over what they would previously have cost. That, along with the cut in capital, makes it very difficult to take forward capital projects of that nature.

Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership (Meetings)

7. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met Renfrewshire health and social care partnership, and what was discussed. (S6O-02812)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport met the integration joint board chief officers on 2 November this year. The chief officer for Renfrewshire health and social care partnership was in attendance at that meeting, at which the substantive agenda item was the national care service. The director of social care and national care service met the chief officer of Renfrewshire health and social care partnership on 21 November this year to discuss delayed discharge performance and unmet community need.

Neil Bibby: The Scottish Government frequently claims that it is protecting health services and giving local councils a fair deal, but

the Renfrewshire health and social care partnership faces a £14.7 million black hole, which will likely lead to the closure of Montrose care home, Hunterhill care home or Renfrew care home, the merging of Mirin and Milldale day services, and the closure of the Flexicare service, as well as the use of vital reserves. What will the Scottish Government do to protect those vital services, which so many people in Renfrewshire rely on?

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government has been putting in additional investment to support the provision of social care across the country. From the health budget alone, we provide £1.7 billion for social care and integration, which means that social care spending has increased by more than £800 million compared with 2021-22. That is well ahead of the trajectory of an increase of some 25 per cent that we intend to deliver over the course of the current parliamentary session.

Notwithstanding that, I recognise the significant challenges that our social care partners are facing, and we continue to engage with them to provide support where we can. However, Neil Bibby will be well aware of the very difficult financial environment in which we are operating. In last week's autumn statement, little more than £11 million was provided as health Barnett consequentials. That has the direct consequence of making it much more difficult to invest in key parts of our public services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We can squeeze in question 8, if members are succinct.

People with Chronic Hepatitis B (Financial Support)

8. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it is doing to provide financial support to those infected with chronic hepatitis B due to receiving contaminated blood. (S6O-02813)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): In its second interim report, the United Kingdom infected blood inquiry recommended that there should be a UK-wide compensation scheme for people who had been infected or affected by infected national health service blood or blood products, which should include compensation and support payments for people who were infected with chronic hepatitis B.

The UK Government is currently considering those recommendations, but it has made it clear that it needs to see the inquiry's final report, which is now expected in March 2024, before confirming its plans. The Scottish Government understands the concerns of the people who have been affected by this terrible tragedy, which is why I

have written to the new Paymaster General to request a four-nations meeting to discuss the issues.

Marie McNair: My constituent was infected by hepatitis B and now has cirrhosis of the liver, but she has missed out on all financial support. She wishes to remain anonymous due to the still pervasive and profound stigma around her personal situation. In the second interim report, the chair of the infected blood inquiry stated that people who had been infected would be eligible for support. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the inquiry's interim recommendations? Will the minister meet me and my constituent to discuss a way forward for hepatitis B victims who are missing out on urgent financial assistance?

Jenni Minto: I understand how difficult the long wait for the conclusion of the infected blood inquiry has been for all those who were infected and affected, including anyone infected with hepatitis B.

The report specifically recommends a UK-wide compensation scheme. As I have already said, I wrote to the UK Paymaster General earlier this week to ask for another four-nations discussion on next steps. That follows two four-nations meetings earlier this year with the previous Paymaster General. I have asked that we specifically discuss hepatitis B, as well as a number of other matters, including interim compensation payments for certain bereaved relatives, and I have requested action on that as soon as possible. Once I have met the Paymaster General, I would be happy to meet Ms McNair and her constituent to discuss the particular issues that have been raised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on NHS recovery, health and social care. There will now be a short pause to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Relationships and Behaviour Policy in Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on relationships and behaviour policy in schools. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The issues that are associated with behaviour and relationships in our schools are thorny ones for any Government, but it is imperative that we address those issues and that we do so honestly. That is what I will do today.

Yesterday, the Government published the "Behaviour in Scottish Schools 2023" research, which provides the accurate national picture of behaviour in our schools. I thank the researchers at the Scottish Centre for Social Research for their work on the publication and, of course, the teachers and support staff who contributed. The report is a substantive one. It does not shy from the real challenges in our schools, and I will not seek to sugar coat the Government's response to the seriousness of the challenge that is ahead of us. It is essential that we get this right.

Members will recall that, in May this year, I committed to engagement with teachers, support staff, local authority staff, parents, carers, and children and young people's representatives through a range of behaviour summits. In June, I convened a headteachers task force to hear directly the views and concerns of headteachers from across Scotland on issues surrounding school exclusion. In September and October, I chaired behaviour summits that focused on the recording and monitoring of incidents, and the final summit, which took place yesterday, focused on the outputs from the behaviour in Scottish schools research, or BISSR. The summit sessions and engagement events, along with the research evidence, will inform the areas that we need to focus on in the joint action plan.

The research shows that both primary and secondary school staff have been reporting generally good behaviour among most pupils. Indeed, the most commonly reported positive behaviours were pupils following instructions and seeking support from staff or peers when needed. It is important that we keep that big picture in mind.

I ask colleagues across the chamber to bear in mind that these issues are not unique to Scotland.

Context is important. The research noticed that the pandemic's impact has contributed to delays in relation to communication skills and dysregulation. Indeed, as I outlined in the statement to the Parliament earlier this month, the number of young children experiencing speech and language delays has increased since Covid, with the figure in our poorest communities being double that in our wealthiest ones.

Covid has not created challenging behaviour. Rather, it has exacerbated the conditions that allow it to flourish. Similarly, Action for Children reported earlier this month that, as the cost of living crisis has deepened, more children are going to school hungry. More of our young people are anxious or stressed, and they bring that with them to school.

It is worth saying that Scotland is not unique. The Welsh education minister, Jeremy Miles, spoke only last week about similar challenges, and the chief inspector of schools in England has confirmed an increase in disruptive behaviour since the pandemic. Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has confirmed that shift through its own research. That context is important in terms of the framing.

The research tells us that low-level disruptive behaviour, disengagement and some forms of serious disruptive behaviours have increased since 2016. That includes increases in behaviours such as violence and abuse between pupils and towards staff. I am absolutely clear that our schools should be safe and consistent learning environments for all.

No teacher or support assistant should ever face violence or abusive behaviour at their place of work. It is clear that low-level disruption rather than violence has the greatest impact on staff day to day; its impact can be debilitating for teachers, and it disrupts others from learning.

The research identifies a number of emerging trends in behaviour from our young people, including in-school truancy, vaping, disruptive use of mobile phones and misogyny. At one of the task force events that I chaired, a headteacher told of young people who lap the school building. They are present during registration but not during lessons; instead, they wander the corridors or sit in the toilets. Those young people are not learning.

The research shows that many of our children are struggling, which is particularly true of those who missed out on transitions from early years to primary or from primary to secondary. It is extremely concerning that some of the biggest challenges with violence and aggression are seen in our youngest children, in primary 1 to 3.

Our young people should not be demonised. When the BISSR was first commissioned in 2006, we had antisocial behaviour orders and David Cameron hugging hoodies, and, although Mr Cameron might be back, we do not want a return to punitive approaches—society has moved on. Equally, we should all be mindful of citing in the chamber specific events that involve our young people, because none of us knows the context. These are all Scotland's children. We have to commit to a plan for improvement; the status quo is not an option.

Scotland's schools are not run by me as cabinet secretary, nor would I wish them to be. It is imperative, therefore, that local authorities are engaged in the action that is required to improve behaviour and relationships in Scotland's schools. The BISSR report mentions lack of support from some local authorities and disparate approaches to behaviour management policies.

To that end, we will develop a national action plan to set out parameters to improve behaviour and support better relationships in Scotland's schools. The plan will include a range of practical suggestions and solutions. It will be established with representatives from education, parents and carers, teaching unions, directors of education and, of course, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

We will ensure that the plan is informed by the experiences of children and young people. The multi-year plan will set out actions at national, local and school level. We will use the feedback from the behaviour summits, alongside the BISSR, to inform the areas that we need to focus on in the action plan.

To drive that work forward with urgency, I have asked the newly appointed interim chief inspector of education, Janie McManus, to strengthen the evidence that His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education gather during school inspections, which will ensure that we have an accurate picture of behaviour in Scotland's schools to support improvement.

The BISSR report discusses challenges with teacher confidence, with some teachers believing that approaches to promoting positive behaviour have a detrimental impact on overall behaviour. There is a perception that the focus on positive relationships means that there are limited consequences for inappropriate behaviour. I am clear on the need for local authorities to identify their own approaches to supporting the staff who they employ, but, to that end, I am pleased to announce that the Scottish Government will provide support of £900,000 for local councils to use to support staff training for responding to the new challenges in our schools post-Covid.

I am grateful to the Educational Institute of Scotland and the NASUWT for their recent research on behaviour in our schools. The EIS research points to an increase of 80 per cent in violent incidents involving its members. It also mentions underreporting and staff feeling unsupported.

NASUWT's research considered the gendered impact of challenging behaviour, which was also captured by the BISSR. It indicated that female teachers experienced misogyny and sexism, and more frequently had verbal abuse directed at them. The gender equality task force in education and learning provides the context for the forthcoming gender-based violence in schools framework, which will provide guidance on tackling the issue proactively and preventatively. It will launch in the coming weeks.

My former colleagues in teaching talk of the corrosive impact of social media influencers, who poison everyday teaching with the type of intolerance towards women that we all thought was long over. That has wider implications for a workforce that is predominantly female.

We need to be pragmatic about reporting, because, without consistent and accurate recording of incidents, there will be limited evidence for schools and councils to use for improvement. Therefore, I encourage—in the strongest possible terms—more accurate recording of all incidents of inappropriate, abusive or violent behaviour in our schools. I recognise that, in so doing, the data on incidents will increase, initially. However, it remains my view that it is necessary for us to continue to strengthen the evidence base to inform improvements at school and local authority levels.

The fifth iteration of the BISSR presents a challenge to all of us who are interested in improving education in Scotland. We cannot suggest that the pandemic has not exacerbated inequity, and nor must we blame it for these challenges. Equally, schools cannot address that alone; they need help. Scotland's parents and carers are crucial to supporting the improvements that we need in our schools. To that end, I have asked Connect and the National Parent Forum of Scotland to directly contribute to the national action plan, so that, nationally, we can support the development of whole-school behaviour-management policies that embed the home-to-school link.

The BISSR is a substantive body of work. I have invited Opposition spokespeople to meet me and the researchers to allow them to present the findings in more detail.

I am conscious of the expectations from within the education portfolio to meet the challenges that

are posed by the report. Many of the levers that I believe that we require to pull sit in other parts of Government. I have therefore asked for cross-portfolio engagement with health and justice colleagues on their responsibilities to ensure that we can better support an approach that recognises the need for joined-up policy making.

Today, I have set out a five-point plan that attempts to respond to the rallying cry for support that underpins the BISSR. The first point is that there will be a national plan for action, which will be developed in partnership with key stakeholders and informed by headteachers from Scotland's schools. Secondly, there will be support that is spearheaded by our new chief inspector to ensure that HMI inspections document an accurate picture of behaviour in Scotland's schools to support improvement. Thirdly, there will be funding for staff training to allow our local authorities to best support their teams. Fourthly, we have made a call for more accurate and consistent reporting of incidents in our schools, and finally, there will be a dedicated approach to responding to issues surrounding misogyny.

However, I also call to action all those who have a role in supporting improved relationships and behaviours in schools. To support that, Education Scotland has published a suite of practical materials—developed with teachers—on areas such as expectations and consequences. I encourage their use by all Education Scotland staff as they engage and support our schools.

The summits and the research have shown that, at school, local and national levels, there are things that we can and should do better. I ask all partners to reflect on whether there is action that they could take now to drive local improvement.

Let me be clear that violence in Scotland's schools is unacceptable. It is unacceptable for the staff in our schools and for the young people whom we entrust to their care. It is essential that pupils and their families are reassured that our schools are safe and consistent learning environments for our young people and for those who work in them.

We have much to build on in Scotland. Our education system is focused on achieving excellence and equity for all children and young people. We now have to enact a national plan that better supports our teachers and support staff in the workplace and that recognises the role of local government as employer. That plan has to better protect learning outcomes for our young people—the vast majority of whom are well behaved. That is the prize that better behaviour and relationships in our schools can deliver, and I look forward to working with our partners across Scottish education to deliver just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes, after which we will move to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question and who have not already done so to press their request-to-speak button.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

Many people who are listening will be concerned about what amounts to plenty of talk but precious few solutions. There is still no new specific guidance for school staff, there is no review of exclusions policies—which many stakeholders have called for—and there is no plan for dealing with attendance issues. Therefore, I hope that I can prompt the cabinet secretary to give some details of actions that are being proposed.

First, given that the report shows that social media and other identified triggers are less prevalent in primary schools, what has the cabinet secretary's research told her is causing the increase in incidents there, and what solutions will be implemented specifically to address those?

Secondly, the £900,000 for local councils to use for training is welcome, but from which budget is that being taken, when will it be distributed and how much training can be provided for £28,000 per council?

Finally, the cabinet secretary has, apparently, belatedly realised that the issues are not generated in—and will not be solved by—schools alone. As she said, context is important.

Inexplicably, the cabinet secretary refused repeated pleas from Opposition spokespersons to help her at the behaviour summits, so why has it taken until now to acknowledge and seek support from other portfolios, such as health and justice, whose context—and, presumably, budgets—will be key?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Kerr for the number of points that he has raised. I will attempt to respond to them all.

At the end of his contribution, he asked about engagement with the Opposition. Since my appointment, I have been pretty clear about my engagement with the Opposition. Of course, I engaged directly with his predecessor on that matter and with members from other parties.

In relation to the behaviour summits, I was very clear that it would not have been appropriate for Opposition members to be in the room where we had parents and carers, teachers and a variety of stakeholders talking about their experiences. However, I have written to the Education, Children

and Young People Committee to say that I am more than happy to come to the committee to talk to the matter in more detail. I have also engaged directly with Liam Kerr on that.

The important point is that the report that we are discussing today is a 200-page document. It is important that members have an opportunity to engage with the researchers directly on their contributions.

I very much recognise the opportunity for engagement with Opposition members on the issue, which is substantive. [*Interruption.*]

Jenny Gilruth: I hear Liam Kerr chuntering from a sedentary position, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I encourage you to ignore comments from a sedentary position. I also discourage such comments, Mr Kerr.

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome Mr Kerr's offers of help, and it is important that we work on the issue cross party, because the report throws up substantive and seriously challenging issues.

Mr Kerr noted that I belatedly recognised that the issue cannot be just about schools, but I am not sure that he has been listening to my contributions since March. As a former teacher, I have always recognised that the issue has never just been about schools. That is why it is important that the Government takes a cross-portfolio approach to how we respond to challenges. For example, we should engage our health colleagues directly in challenges that we experience in our early years, where they have responsibility.

Mr Kerr asked a question in relation to the additional budget. It will come from the education budget, and, as I understand it, it will be delivered in this financial year. I am happy to write to him with more detail on that, but that is the agreement that we have come to with local government colleagues. It is for them to decide on the training that they think is appropriate for the staff in their local area, and not, I think, for the Government to dictate.

Mr Kerr asked a question in relation to primary schools. Obviously, a number of factors interact with that change and challenge. I have witnessed that and heard anecdotal examples on visits to Scotland's schools. The type of learning and teaching in our early years is changing, and a range of factors play into that. I mentioned the pandemic, which has undoubtedly had an impact in relation to speech and language delays.

We also see the on-going impacts of the cost of living crisis, with some of our youngest and poorest children attending school hungry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask the cabinet secretary to conclude.

Jenny Gilruth: A variety of factors are contributing to the matter. However, I commit to working with Mr Kerr—and members across the Parliament—on the issue, because I recognise the scale of the challenge.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a lot of members to get in, so I will need briefer responses, and members should not ask multiple questions within a question.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement, but I cannot hide my disappointment. Teachers will feel blamed, parents will be sidelined and pupils could feel abandoned.

Many of the issues that have been mentioned have been known about for a long time, so I imagine that school staff, pupils and parents will wonder why today's announcement is about the development of a plan rather than a plan. I would welcome clarity on when the Government will publish the plan.

We also know from the research that was published yesterday that support staff are experiencing higher levels of disruptive behaviours than other staff. Support staff are often the lowest-paid staff, but they barely get a mention in the statement. I am, therefore, deeply concerned that not only does the announced £900,000 suggest that the problem is in staff training, but it is unlikely to scratch the surface of the investment that is needed.

At a time when leadership is needed, the statement feels a bit like the cabinet secretary believes that she is a bystander. Although local authorities might be the employer, what is the cabinet secretary going to do to equip them and schools to properly support and resource the whole-community approach that is needed to sort out the problem?

Jenny Gilruth: Similarly to Mr Kerr, Ms Duncan-Glancy raises a number of points, but I will try to respond to them.

I really take issue with her point about being a bystander. We debated the issue substantively in May. From my recollection—although maybe not from the member's—we had a very good debate at that time. In June, I held a task force with headteachers to talk to the issue of exclusion. In September, I chaired the first behaviour summit, which was focused on recording. In October, the second behaviour summit was focused on some of the variants in the system. Yesterday, I chaired the summit to talk to the evidence, and in that room were parents, teachers and representatives of

young people's organisations. So, I take issue with Pam Duncan-Glancy on that point.

On her second point, in relation to the action plan, as I set out in my statement, I do not employ Scotland's teachers, nor do I wish to. Some of the action that needs to be taken requires to be taken at local authority level, which is why we will need to come back with the agreed action plan. I am more than happy to write to the member on that. I expect to come back to Parliament, subject to parliamentary approval, to confirm the action plan, but it will need to involve engagement with COSLA, teachers and parents.

The member spoke about parents. I take issue with her point, because I had a very helpful meeting yesterday with Connect, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in the Parliament. I believe that the member was there. Connect is a really worthwhile organisation that we work closely with.

We also support the National Parent Forum of Scotland, which has agreed to support some of our work by considering what it can do to support parents' understanding of whole-school policies on behaviour, which is hugely important to developing the support that we need to see. Fundamentally, schools have a responsibility to respond to issues such as challenging behaviour, and they usually do that very well. They need support from their local authorities, and I have taken leadership at national level.

So, I have to say to the member that it is now for other partners to come forward and for us to work together on that action plan. I commit to Parliament to doing just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have less than 13 minutes and we have 10 members who want to ask questions, so the questions, and particularly the responses, will need to be briefer.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The cabinet secretary highlighted the need for accurate recording of all incidents in school, even if that means that the figures rise. Does she agree that it is incumbent on all of us in the chamber not to demonise children and young people and to engage with those figures constructively rather than sensationalise them or use them to focus on individual schools, noting that that is precisely what can put teachers off reporting?

Jenny Gilruth: I absolutely agree with the member. There is a level of fear in the teaching population around reporting, because they are concerned that, when they report, their individual school will be identified. All members need to be cognisant of that.

As I indicated in my statement, it is essential that schools—and our councils, of course—base their actions and policies on those issues on the

best available evidence. During the summit process, I heard that some schools and school staff were concerned about recording incidents because of the negative perception of increased incidents. However, I am absolutely clear that we must record all incidents in order to address those issues appropriately. That has been a key theme of today's statement.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I received an email from a father in Fife, telling me of the horrendous bullying that his care-experienced son experienced. The attacks were filmed and jeered on by onlookers. Months of physical abuse have been met with empty promises of investigation that have come to nothing, and there have been months of continual attacks, with the boy hiding in the toilets and teachers and staff impotent in the face of classroom behaviour, forcing the family to remove their son on the grounds that the school simply could not keep him safe.

What does the cabinet secretary have to say to teachers, school staff, parents and carers who have waited six months with a promise of action only to hear nothing but talk of yet another future plan that has not been developed yet?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure that I agree with that characterisation. However, the member outlines a very sensitive case in Fife. My thoughts are with that family, which must have gone through a very challenging time. I recognise some of the individual challenges that will be associated with that. I am sure that we all hear of examples in our constituencies of similar events, which can be deeply challenging.

In relation to the support that exists for parents and teachers, the local authority has an obligation and responsibility at that level, and it can take a range of actions. Of course, we have national guidance on exclusion. Liam Kerr raised the issue of exclusion specifically but I did not have time to respond to him on that issue. The national action plan is something that we might want to consider in more detail, so that our staff are equipped with a range of different actions that they can take to manage challenging behaviour as and when it occurs. It does occur in classrooms—we all accept that—but it is important that teachers have those actions at their disposal and that they are supported in taking the necessary action when challenging behaviour arises.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary joined me last night at the reception for the parent-led organisation Connect, which was celebrating its 75th anniversary and some of its fantastic achievements over those years. What engagement was there with parents and carers in publishing the report? Does the cabinet secretary

think that changing relationships and behaviour in school will truly happen only if there is proper collaboration with those who care for our young people outside school times?

Jenny Gilruth: Last night was a fantastic celebration of Connect's 75th anniversary, as I mentioned in my response to Pam Duncan-Glancy. Connect is a really powerful organisation that has done a power of work over a number of years campaigning for Scotland's children. I believe that our parents and carers are absolutely key to driving the improvements in behaviour that we need to see in our schools.

From the start of the process, back in May, I made it very clear that the summits would include parent representatives, who have made a very valuable contribution to our discussions. Their role remains critical to progress and, with that in mind, I have asked Connect and the National Parent Forum for Scotland to contribute directly to the national action plan.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The Scottish National Party Government's statement fails to offer any meaningful actions to tackle the problems in our schools, fails to understand the pressure that staff are working under and fails to recognise the wider consequences for the majority of bad behaviour by a few. Teachers up and down Scotland will be dismayed that point 1 of a five-point plan is to make a plan. How many plans will it take for teachers to get the support that they need? Does the cabinet secretary not recognise that the Government will have to commit far more resources to addressing the challenges in our schools?

Jenny Gilruth: The member seems to think that, as cabinet secretary, I am in charge of Scotland's schools, but our local authorities have a responsibility to run them and they have to be part of the process of the agreed action plan. In my response to Pam Duncan-Glancy, I committed to updating the Parliament on that action plan, and it is fundamental that local authorities take a role in it.

If the member has read the report, he will know that there is some critique of the current support in Scotland's schools. Whether that is provided by quality improvement officers or by other education support managers, there are a plethora of different ways that local authorities can provide support for good behaviour in our schools. Education Scotland also has a role to play in that regard. We have 32 attainment advisers who work with our local authorities to provide support on the ground. Today, Education Scotland has provided further advice that will help to support the development of good practice in our schools and will support staff with some of the strategies that they need.

The other thing to be mindful of—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, we have seven minutes left and six members want to ask a question. I have to ask you to conclude.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): The research pointed to worrying increases in the abuse of teachers and support staff by young people, but it also showed that the majority of abuse takes place between pupils. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the Government's anti-bullying guidance "Respect for All" and say how the findings of BISSR can feed in to the planned refresh of that guidance?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Macpherson is absolutely right to raise the issue of bullying. Roz McCall alluded to an incident in her region that may be related to bullying, and it seemed to be a common theme that came from the summit discussions. We are currently reviewing our anti-bullying guidance and we have established a working group to help with that process. Priorities that have been identified for the review, particularly in the light of BISSR, include online bullying, prejudice-based bullying and the recording and monitoring of incidents. As part of that review, we are engaging with children and young people to ensure that the update reflects their experiences and expectations.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The statement just misses the point. It is not more training that staff need; it is more support resources, such as educational psychologists and specialist teachers. There is not much new that addresses boundaries and consequences. Does the cabinet secretary think that the plan is going to cut violence in schools by the time that the next survey is done?

Jenny Gilruth: The member asks for additional resources. Of course, we are already providing £145 million in next year's budget to protect increased teacher numbers and support staff. That is fundamental, because we recognise the role of teachers in supporting good behaviour in our young people. Willie Rennie talks about the plan identifying consequences and how they might be dealt with, but it is not for me, as cabinet secretary, to respond to individual incidents. We need to ensure that we are not disempowering the teaching profession, which has trained professionals who know how to respond to challenging behaviour as and when they see it. What they need is better direction in relation to the national support that is available. They also need support from the local authorities that, unlike the Government, employ them. It is important that we have a joined-up approach. That is why the action plan will set that out in more detail.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Many respondents to an EIS survey on violence and aggression in schools perceived an increase in misogyny against staff. What steps is the Government taking to dismantle gender stereotypes and address sexism in schools?

Jenny Gilruth: The findings of the EIS survey correlate with some of the findings from BISSR. As I indicated in my statement, I will bring forward a joint action plan with partners to fully respond to the findings of the research. The plan will also give us further actions that are specifically targeted to address concerns about gender-based violence. In particular, I reconfirm that the Scottish Government will shortly—in the coming weeks—publish guidance for schools and education authorities that will provide a framework for responding positively to gender-based violence in schools. That framework will provide comprehensive guidance on how to address those concerns, including by challenging inappropriate and abusive language and by responding to incidents of gender-based violence in our schools.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The use of mobile phones has been highlighted by secondary school staff as one of the most frequent and disruptive behaviour issues in class. In Edinburgh, the headteacher at the Royal high school has taken the opportunity to strengthen its mobile phone policy that devices are not permitted to be used during the school day, and that policy is being strictly enforced. As a result, there has been a marked improvement in pupil engagement, with pupils talking more and being less heightened about what they are missing on their devices. Does the cabinet secretary agree that a consistent and enforced mobile phone policy that restricts their use is vital if we are serious about tackling behaviour issues in our schools?

Jenny Gilruth: That is a very important point, and we have discussed it very recently. I am aware of the work at the Royal high school on the issue and the impact that it seems to have had on learning and teaching in that school. Of course, it would be a matter for individual headteachers to look at their school context and, in particular, how they could enforce such a policy by working with parents and carers in their wider community.

I am always struck by our own use of mobile devices in this parliamentary chamber. I think that we could all learn a bit of a lesson from some of the work around mobile phone bans. In the previous session, after I was first elected, in 2016, we were not allowed a phone or a laptop. Mr Adam, who is sitting next to me, might recall that. I think that our use of mobile phone technology has changed the way in which all of us—not just our young people—interact with each other. We should be mindful of that, because schools are

teaching us how we can go about our business in a more effective way by listening to each other.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I fully support the Scottish Government's hard work to successfully reduce pupil exclusions, including removal from school registers, while maintaining education and support when exclusion is necessary and proportionate. However, in "Behaviour in Scottish Schools: research report 2020-23", teachers warn that a "lack of consequences" is fuelling unacceptable behaviours. Can the cabinet secretary provide reassurance that schools and local authorities can act to exclude a pupil when their persistent, aggressive and violent behaviour poses a risk and an on-going threat to the wellbeing and safety of another pupil?

Jenny Gilruth: In answer to the member's question—yes. To be specific, the power to exclude pupils from schools rests with education authorities but it is devolved to school leaders—that has not changed. However, our national policy position, which is set out in the guidance "Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2", confirms that exclusion should be used as a measure of "last resort", once other responses to such behaviour have been exhausted. As I have already said this afternoon, violence in Scotland's schools is unacceptable, both for the staff in our schools and for our young people.

Nevertheless, I recognise what the member says about consequences. I have heard that throughout the summit process, and I encourage local authorities and schools to consider their policies in the light of the findings of BISSR. It is also important to be clear that, where it is appropriate, schools are empowered to use the consequences that they have at their disposal.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The summits are all about Scotland's children, but young people have not been involved in any of the summits. Their voice is absent from the minister's statement, the report and even the action plan.

Feeling safe in Scotland is the thing that matters most to young people, according to the national discussion on education. In England, one in 10 pupils feels unsafe in school. Does the Scottish Government know how many young people in Scotland feel safe in schools?

Jenny Gilruth: I should say that youth groups were involved in the summit process although young people themselves were not. However, I have committed through the action plan to engage them directly. The member raises an important point.

I do not have the detail to answer the specific question that the member asks, but I would be more than happy to write to him with a little more

detail if we have that detail in the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business, to allow the members on the front benches to change.

Gender-based Violence

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11469, in the name of Siobhian Brown, on the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible. I advise members that there is no time in hand and that speaking allocations will therefore be enforced vigorously.

15:29

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): During the annual 16 days of activism against gender-based violence campaign, individuals and organisations worldwide call for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls. I am proud that the Scottish Parliament remains an active part of that worldwide call, but we should all be saddened that it is necessary in 2023. Although I welcome Scotland's and the Parliament's recognition of the 16 days campaign and a debate in which the Parliament can unite in calling for continued action to tackle violence against women and girls, it is shocking that we still need to address that devastating issue and its harms to individuals and our society.

No matter how far we have come as a society, abuse and violence against half of our population are still prevalent. Violence against women has a profound impact on women's and girls' lives, with detriments to health, wellbeing, financial stability, the fulfilment of potential and, ultimately, gender equality.

Each year, the 16 days campaign focuses on a specific theme. This year, Scottish partners agreed the theme "Imagine a Scotland without violence against women". That is the vision at the heart of "Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls". The strategy, which is co-owned between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, sets out a vision of a strong and flourishing country in which all individuals are equally safe and respected and in which women and girls live free from all forms of violence and abuse and the attitudes that help to perpetuate them.

I am really pleased to see in the public gallery today Councillor Maureen Chalmers, who is COSLA's community wellbeing spokesperson and my co-chair on the equally safe joint strategic board—I know that we will all welcome her. Councillor Chalmers's presence reminds us of the necessity of visible leadership across all spheres

of government and our institutions to address violence against women and girls. Leadership and action are absolutely necessary, as we all know.

The equally safe strategy provides a framework for action to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls. Over the past year, we have worked with Councillor Chalmers and our joint strategic board to gather views on how that important strategy could be strengthened and reinvigorated as part of a refresh. Engagement with our partners across the sector provided an opportunity for us to reflect on recent societal changes and understand the key issues that we must address to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls.

I am grateful to everyone who has generously shared their experience to help to create a strategy whose ambition we can look to with pride. I recognise those who work in the specialist support organisations, who have amassed a wealth of experience from supporting victim survivors over many years. Their insight and wisdom are valued by all of us, and we will continue to work with those stakeholders as we develop our policy responses across the entirety of government.

The strategy will be launched next week. It is not an end in itself but a continuation of our focus and practical work. We need to make progress on advancing women's equality in a range of spaces—economic, civic, social and cultural.

Although there has been significant progress in policy, practices and responses to violence against women, and there are more people who will call out behaviour and action, we all know that women's lives continue to be constrained by the threat and experience of rape and sexual abuse, domestic abuse, stalking, sexual harassment and other forms of violence.

Women and girls continue to feel that it is up to us to modify our behaviour to keep safe. However, as we all know, it is men—it is predominantly and overwhelmingly men—who carry out the violence, harassment and abuse, and, to tackle and end the violence, it is men who need to not just modify but fully change their behaviour and attitudes. They—not the victims or those who are threatened—are responsible for their actions, and they need to change, just as society needs to change the systemic inequalities that can underpin that behaviour.

Women's inequality is both a cause and a consequence of violence against women. Gender stereotypes and norms continue to limit women's access to labour market opportunities and economic resources, which affects levels of economic independence.

Eradicating violence against women will require us to tackle entrenched gender inequalities. That is why our refreshed equally safe strategy places even greater emphasis on primary prevention to stop violence against women and girls before it occurs by tackling the root cause of the problem: gender inequality. That means focusing on the structures, systems, policies and assumptions that we all live with. It also means understanding the issue through data, which is why further work on supporting data is being progressed through the domestic abuse justice round-table process. Extensive engagement over the past year with a wide range of stakeholders in the public and third sectors has shown just how important that is.

The equally safe strategy is the anchor of our approach, which emphasises the importance of primary prevention of violence by tackling women's inequality, building the capability and capacity of mainstream and specialist services, ensuring a robust justice response to supporting survivors, and holding perpetrators to account for their actions and choices.

We recognise how important it is to educate children and young people and to challenge outdated stereotypes, and we continue to take forward a range of actions in schools to address gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Rape Crisis Scotland provides a national sexual violence prevention programme to all local authority secondary schools in Scotland, and our mentors in violence prevention Scotland programme is working to tackle gender stereotypes and attitudes that condone violence against women and girls.

As part of the refresh of the equally safe strategy, we heard concerns relating to online and technology-enabled violence against women. Although everyone recognises the positive benefits of digital communication, I recognise that it offers additional tools and channels for perpetrators of abuse. Our ever-growing reliance on social platforms can exacerbate the dangers with which we are already familiar.

In response to those online dangers, we are progressing the development of evidence briefings on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls to inform our policy development. Furthermore, we are providing funding to organisations such as South West Grid For Learning Trust Ltd to raise awareness and increase understanding of intimate image abuse and to facilitate the delivery of practical support for people who are affected by it.

We have been told of concerns about the negative influence of pornography and of the need to work collaboratively to consider how it drives the societal issues that lead to violence against women and girls. The refresh of the equally safe

strategy enables us to adapt to changes in the social and legislative landscape without altering the strategy's valued aims and objectives.

Public policy can be a powerful tool for creating a context that is hostile to violence against women and girls. That is why the equally safe in practice training modules on gender equality and violence against women are now available to Scottish Government civil servants. The modules, which were developed by Scottish Women's Aid, offer valuable insights to help officials to create policies and acknowledge the impact of violence against women on the lives of women and girls. In addition, Engender has been funded to explore primary prevention policy approaches and create a toolkit to enable policy makers to embed primary prevention in policy making.

I have met survivors and many people who work with them. They have told me about the harms caused to individuals, their families and their communities. They have told me about the challenges of getting support and of being heard and taken seriously. They have told me about how perpetrators continue to use systems and services to abuse. They have told us about the challenges that they face as a result of the cost of living crisis. Black and minority ethnic women have explained the specific challenges that they face in getting their voice heard and the need to better understand the violence and abuse that they experience.

In that context, the Scottish Government, alongside our partners in COSLA, will consider the funding and procurement recommendations in "The Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services". We are committed to working with partners to ensure the sustainability of funding, and a project board of key public sector and specialist stakeholders is being formed to oversee that work. I take this opportunity to thank the chair and the advisory group for the breadth of work that was undertaken.

The 16 days campaign is an opportunity to highlight the blight of violence against women and girls. However, that violence is a concern 365 days a year, each and every year, and sustained action is needed to address it. We must seek opportunities to work collaboratively and constructively wherever possible. We must continue to work together with partners, organisations and society to stamp out violence and misogyny wherever we see it.

It is vital that we keep our eyes on the prize of ending men's violence against women and girls. We must move forward with a shared understanding of the underlying causes and therefore what needs to change to end violence for good and ensure that the equally safe strategic

approach continues to deliver the galvanising focus that it has had to date.

Engender recently noted that women who have experienced abuse found it

“difficult to imagine a world without abuse”

and that they lacked hope that prevention of men’s abuse of women is possible. Is that not a depressing indictment of our society?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, minister.

Siobhian Brown: However, as difficult as it is, I imagine a world in which women and girls are free from the violence of men. We all have a role to play in challenging everyday sexism and the systems, cultures and norms that perpetuate violence against women and girls. Let us continue to do that today, for the rest of the 16 days, and every day.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign; welcomes the 2023 national theme, “Imagine a Scotland without Gender-based Violence”; condemns any violence against women and girls, and acknowledges the significant damage and harm that it causes to individuals and to wider society; recognises that the eradication of such violence can only be achieved through social change and changes in attitudes, actions and behaviour, and acknowledges, therefore, the responsibility of collective leadership across all spheres of government and society to challenge the gender inequalities that fundamentally underpin violence against women and girls.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

I have warned members that there is no time in hand and that the chair will intervene, so your peroration should start before the end of your speech, not at the point at which you should have concluded it.

15:41

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to open this debate for my party, and I welcome the Parliament taking the chance to discuss this crucial issue during the international 16 days of activism against gender-based violence campaign. As the minister has noted, this year’s theme in Scotland is “Imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence”. The sad fact is that we can only imagine that. It is a fantasy at the moment; it is not anywhere close to reality.

Violence against women is everywhere. It is ingrained in society. A recent survey by the NASUWT, the teachers union, revealed that, although male teachers experience more threats of physical violence or abuse, women experience more actual physical violence, and the frequency

is substantially higher. That is not acceptable, and we must take action to stop the increasing violence and abuse in our schools.

The police record more than 170 incidents of domestic abuse every single day in Scotland. Almost 65,000 instances of domestic abuse were recorded in 2021-22. Attacks and abuse are common, not rare, for women, and that needs to change.

The Government motion is right that we need a radical social change to prevent this violence. We agree with the motion that there is a need for a system-wide approach. We support the motion’s demand for collective responsibility—for everyone in Scotland to take an active role in preventing violence against women.

That said, we feel that the Government can and should lead the way. It could make changes to the justice system so that it does a better job of protecting women and preventing harm. We have also put forward a suggestion to improve it. My colleague Pam Gosal MSP has proposed a domestic abuse prevention bill that, if enacted, would make Scotland a world leader in tackling domestic abuse. There are many changes that could be made to the justice system to prevent violence against women from occurring in the first place. We hope that the Government will take the spirit of its motion forward and fully consider accepting and introducing that proposal.

However, it is not only on prevention that the Government can make a difference. The system needs to be improved, so that, when violence does occur, there are effective deterrents against future offences. So many acts of violence against women are repeat offences. More than half of all domestic abuse crimes fall into that category. We need to focus on changing criminals’ behaviour to prevent further attacks on women.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Sharon Dowey: There is no spare time and my speech is full of points that I want to make—sorry.

If offenders believe that the police do not have the resources to monitor or pursue them, that will not help women. If offenders think that the punishments for crimes are fairly soft, that will not help women. What will help women is making sure that they are supported on the road to justice. As it stands, it often feels to victims and survivors as if the system is working against them. Women feel that the system lets violent men continue to harass them in a number of ways. They feel that the court process and its aftermath can be exploited by violent and sexual offenders.

I am sure that every single MSP will be able to cite a constituent who has contacted them because a violent man will not leave them or their family alone. I will raise the experience of one family I have been working with since I was elected. As per their wishes, I have protected their anonymity. The family have been plagued by a violent man for years. Two years ago, in the chamber debate on the same topic, I spoke about their experiences. To our shame, their troubles are on-going.

From 2005 onwards, the man terrorised multiple families, including three of his own children. He has abused and assaulted mothers, and he has abducted a child. He received no jail time; his punishment was barely a slap on the wrist. The man threw the children along hallways, grabbed them by the throat and hair, and dragged them upstairs by their ears. He was charged with six counts of child abuse but was released on bail. He received non-contact orders but quickly broke them, just as he had broken every non-contact order that had been placed on him for more than 15 years. The family was forced to flee their home.

Finally, it seemed that the woman and her family might be free of that individual—until she sought a divorce. Not only did this violent man decide to contest the divorce; he now wants access to one of the children. That young child has recovered brilliantly from the hell that she has been put through. Her family say that she thrives in school, where she gets glowing reports. She has little to no memory of this horrible man. However, now he is trying to force himself back into the lives of that child and her mother.

The man is using the court system to try to gain access to the child, forcing the family to relive the traumatic events in order to justify why he should not have any access. That is despite the fact that the man pled guilty to child abuse, and despite the fact that he has been documented as having hit the little girl and her siblings. Why is he allowed to get away with continuing to traumatise the girl, her mother and the family? Why is he not prevented from contesting the divorce in the first place? Why is there not an immediate block on his attempts to see his child? There is no good reason why the man should be allowed to continue harassing the family. He must be forced to leave them alone, to allow them to move on. He should not have the right to continue dragging them back to relive what he did.

The Government may argue that everyone has rights and that legal processes must be respected. However, until it steps in to make changes that stop violent men such as this from continuing to abuse women, what will happen? The same crimes, the same violence and the same abuse will happen to women year after year. We can

keep coming to the Parliament and talking about the issue—and that is welcome—but, at some stage, reality needs to dawn on the Parliament that we need to act. It is 16 days of action not talking that we need.

Anyone committing violence against women needs to be apprehended, brought to justice and punished. They need to be stopped in their tracks, not allowed to keep attacking, abusing and traumatising women. Only then will we see the change in society that women deserve.

15:48

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence, as the motion says, and imagine a world without violence against women and girls. Scottish Labour is pleased to support the Government motion today.

Sadly, sexual crimes in Scotland have increased by 8 per cent in the past four years, and one woman is killed by her partner or ex-partner every six weeks. It is still the case that a quarter of women and girls in Scotland will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. We are, indeed, further away from our goals, not nearer, unfortunately.

It is clear that we need a significant shift in social and cultural norms, as well as a legal reform framework. It is also clear that our work begins with talking to boys in school settings if we are to have any chance of breaking the cycle.

I look forward to the refresh of the equally safe strategy, which we will get a chance to debate next week. Last week, Scottish Labour launched its own report on how to tackle violence against women and girls. During a year's consultation that we conducted, we heard how prevalent misogyny is in our society—not surprisingly. We heard from some amazing women and organisations. I sincerely thank them for their involvement, and I put on record our thanks to Scottish Government officials for attending our round-table discussions.

It will not be a shock to any woman that the report found that the justice system continues to fail women and that more needs to be done to invest in and diversify far-reaching services that support women and girls who are affected by sexual harassment and abuse. Educating boys and young men is key to long-term change. Getting men involved in our conversations from a young age is one way that we can start to make serious steps towards tackling the epidemic of male violence. For too long, as the minister, Siobhan Brown, said, the onus has been placed on women and girls to regulate their behaviour to accommodate boys and men.

Sharon Dowey referenced the report by the NASUWT, so I will not go over the points that she already made. Suffice it to say that, although I am not in any way downplaying the extreme violence in our schools towards male teachers, female teachers experience more violence than male teachers do. In the past 12 months alone, one in five women teachers reported being hit or punched by pupils. Some have been spat at or headbutted. Meanwhile, 64 per cent of girls and young women report that they have been sexually harassed at school over the past year.

The online environment plays a huge part in teaching boys that that behaviour is okay. As we have discussed many times in debates, social media influencers who use platforms to spread misogyny pave the way for a growing rape culture. That is precisely why we need a comprehensive cross-campus strategy that includes lessons to educate boys and young men on the links between gender stereotypes and violence. How many more discussions can we have that are only women talking to women? We need more male role models to step up and challenge other men when they witness women and girls being harassed and abused. That applies to online environments as well as everyday life.

As we know, it is also a global fight. As the minister said, the theme for the 16 days of activism is “Invest to prevent violence against women and girls”. The need for prevention is increasingly clear. Human trafficking, female genital mutilation and child marriage are ruining the lives of hundreds of millions of girls across the world. Child marriage, for example, is rooted in gender inequality. It limits access to women and girls’ health and education and their political participation. It limits the amount of control that they have over their own bodies and increases their risk of experiencing gender-based violence.

However, those problems are happening in our communities. The number of human trafficking cases in Scotland is at its highest since records began. Seventy-two per cent of trafficking victims are women and girls, who are often trafficked for sexual exploitation. In trying to address the issue, we face criminal gangs that are running on a global scale. In 2023, a large number of women who are trafficked to Scotland are found to be Albanian or Vietnamese. They are sometimes held in a network that spans the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

At the Scottish Police Federation reception last week, one police officer told me that there was an incident in which one person in London was directing men to residential properties around Glasgow. That was not uncommon. In fact, some of the call centres have operated in Glasgow. Human trafficking has been identified in all 32

local authorities in Scotland. Those groups are organised and have a formal structure that operates in plain sight. It is important that we recognise how horrific the crime is. The youngest person involved was just 13 years old.

As I have said in previous debates, I will continue my own work on image-based abuses. We need to have clearer law on men who abuse private images. The Women’s Support Project, which some people had a chance to talk to—it is an incredible charity—talks about many incidents of that. I will mention how images on the OnlyFans website are misused. There have been countless cases of creators’ content being screenshotted, recorded or hacked. It is important to note that, although they consented at the time, a lot of those child and adult performers are sadly haunted by those images for the rest of their lives.

It is important to debate this important issue in Parliament. Scottish Labour is delighted to support the motion.

15:54

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the motion.

I thank the many organisations that have been in contact prior to today’s debate for the materials that they have provided in preparation. They work tirelessly to reduce gender inequality and gender-based violence.

It is important that we dedicate time and thought to the issue in the chamber each year. As a member of the cross-party group on men’s violence against women and children, I know that colleagues across the chamber spend a large amount of their time addressing the problem. By tackling misogyny and unchecked behaviour, we can break the link between casual sexism and its development into violence against women and girls and ensure that

“every act of violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, is unequivocally condemned, and must be fully investigated with the utmost priority.”

Those are the words of Sima Bahous, the United Nations under-secretary-general and executive director of UN Women.

Today’s debate also serves as a reminder of the patriarchy and misogyny that prevent women and girls in Afghanistan, Iran and other countries from being free to have an education. We are once again faced with daily images of the impacts of conflict on communities. In times of hardship during conflict, women often act to absorb the shocks of the impacts that are felt hardest by them and their children. It is crucial that women play a significant role in conflict resolution.

The cost of living crisis has shone a light on that same shock-absorber role of women here at home. Shetland's Compass Centre highlights that women are more likely to do low-paid work; more likely to rely on public transport, which is much patchier in remote, rural and island areas; and more likely to struggle with high childcare costs. They are twice as dependent on social security as men and they have less access to resources and assets such as home ownership and occupational pensions. Women are also disproportionately impacted by welfare reforms, and the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaigners have waited too long to see redress from poorly communicated pension reforms.

As the motion highlights, this year's national theme invites us to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence. That may seem a daunting prospect when we read that, in 2021-22, Police Scotland recorded 64,807 incidents of domestic abuse. In cases where gender was recorded, 81 per cent of those incidents involved a female victim and a male accused, as Engender highlights. Figures that were released this week through the Scottish crime and justice survey for 2021-22 show that perceptions of crime and safety also reveal gender inequality. Although, overall, people are more likely to feel safe in their communities, there are sharp differences among the population when that is broken down. Ninety per cent of men said that they feel safe walking alone after dark, while only 63 per cent of women agreed.

Shetland's Compass Centre has also raised the matter of island jury trials. Trials that were previously heard in Shetland are currently being heard on the Scottish mainland because of staffing challenges with the prisoner escort provider. Some of the trials that are affected are for GBV-related crimes, and the situation is having a serious impact on Shetland survivors and witnesses—including professional witnesses, who have to deal with travel logistics on top of everything else. The centralisation of access to justice for island survivors is unacceptable and it must be addressed. Failure to do so will be a barrier to reporting and, ultimately, justice will be denied. It is a backward step and one that must not become permanent.

15:58

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): According to the Scottish Government's recorded crime figures, 14,834 sexual crimes were recorded in Scotland in the year ending June 2023. The police recorded 64,807 instances of domestic abuse in 2021-22, four out of five of which involved a female victim/survivor and a male perpetrator. The figures are extremely concerning,

but gender-based violence is not merely statistics. There are women and girls behind every one of those figures. Gender-based violence is a harsh reality that is experienced by our mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. It happens in the home, in workplaces and outside in public spaces. It knows no bounds and it has a lasting and damaging impact on the individual and wider society.

Unfortunately, every woman has her own experiences of sexual harassment, assault or violence. I know that my colleagues across the chamber agree that, to tackle that, it is time to change the narrative and ask why men are harassing, abusing or being violent, rather than suggesting that women are doing wrong. This year's theme invites us to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence. That should not be difficult. The campaign calls on us, as elected representatives, to show what we are doing to eradicate such violence. We must invest in that for the future of our women and girls.

Key to achieving that is primary prevention, as the charity Zero Tolerance has highlighted. Secondary prevention—that is, investing in support during a period of violence or after violence has occurred—is not enough. That is why I welcome the Scottish Government's proposed misogyny bill, which will put a real focus on protecting women and girls.

We know that serious violent acts do not usually happen out of nowhere. Men do not just wake up and decide to commit heinous violent acts against a woman. We know that such acts are often an escalation of more low-level misogynistic views and behaviours. For too long, there has been a societal tolerance of misogyny across Scotland, which has made our women and girls feel unsafe, distressed and humiliated. That is why the bill is so important. Tackling the root cause and catching misogynistic behaviour early, before there is a chance of a serious crime being committed, could be revolutionary.

However, although the misogyny bill will be vital, it can only be part of the response in tackling harassment and violence against women. How do we stop young men and boys perpetrating such misogynistic behaviour in the first place, before it escalates? Various pieces of the academic literature have pointed to the link between traditional, toxic views of masculinity and harassment of and violence against women. On its own, holding such views would not be enough—plenty of men adhere to traditional views of masculinity but would never commit such violent acts. However, it is still vital that we consider those traditional views, as that will help us to challenge harmful views of masculinity that condone violence against women and emphasise men's dominance.

Across the academic literature, it is suggested that we must reshape those views of masculinity at a young age. That could be done in primary schools by having more discussions about consent, the use of language, healthy friendships and what it means to be a good man, rather than just talking about what boys are expected to do. I would be interested to see further work being done in that area and such discussions being included across the curriculum.

Imagining a Scotland without gender-based violence should not be difficult. It is achievable, and I am pleased to see the work that is currently being done. However, we can always do more, and it is on us to call out low-level misogynistic behaviours when we see them so that they do not escalate into the unthinkable.

16:02

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, which marks the international day for the elimination of violence against women and the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence that follow it. This is the third year in a row that I have contributed to the debate, and I cannot help but feel disappointed that the debate is still considered to be so necessary every year. However, violence against women is still a fact of life, and until it is stamped out in every part of the world, it is only right that the Parliament calls out such violence every year. Another year may have passed, but it is clear that change on the issue is no less needed.

This year's national theme asks us to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence. That is a reminder that violence against women is not just something that happens far away, in distant corners of the world; every year, it affects women right here in Scotland. Last year, there were seven domestic abuse-related murders and nearly 500 charges of attempted murder and serious assault related to domestic abuse, and nearly 1,800 charges were reported to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service under the domestic abuse legislation. We also know that domestic abuse incidents are almost at a record high. Nearly 65,000 incidents were reported to Police Scotland in 2021-22, more than half of which involved repeat offenders.

Three years ago, the Scottish Government promised to set up a leavers fund for victims of domestic abuse, so I welcome last month's announcement of the new fund for women to leave an abusive relationship, which has been backed by £500,000 of funding. Too often, women face a financial barrier when attempting to leave their abuser. I hope that the funding will prove to be effective in breaking that barrier down. As it

stands, the pilot funding will be offered to those who are fleeing domestic abuse in five local authority areas. I hope that the full scheme, which will cover the whole of Scotland, will follow soon.

In last year's debate on the subject, I was pleased to be able to speak about my proposed domestic abuse prevention bill, which had just completed its consultation phase. I am pleased that my bill has now received the cross-party support that it needed to process to the next stage in Parliament and that it is being drafted. More needs to be done to keep tabs on abusers who still pose a risk to potential victims. At a recent round-table event in the Scottish Parliament, I had the opportunity to speak to a number of victims of domestic abuse, and one issue that keeps arising is why the onus is on the victim to speak when they are at risk. A domestic abuse register would change that. It would place the onus firmly on the abuser to keep updating authorities such as the police, so that victims could be kept safe.

My bill has expert and grass-roots support, and I hope that members across the chamber will consider my proposals with an open mind when they are introduced to Parliament. The 16 days of action against gender-based violence are a reminder that each of us needs to play our part on the issue. For my part, I hope that my domestic abuse prevention bill will take Scotland one step closer to stamping out this appalling crime.

We are all united in wanting to see real change on the issue. That means working together, backing the amazing domestic abuse organisations that do such great work in all our communities and ensuring that we all continue to condemn violence against women and girls in all forms, at all times and in all places.

16:07

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I have a daughter. I brought her up to be ambitious, hard working and feisty, and I think that I succeeded, yet I see that she and her friends have in their lives experiences that are similar to those that have occurred in mine. My reality has become her reality. How disappointing.

Women as a sex class are under assault like never before: disproportionately affected by Covid, disproportionately affected by a cost of living crisis, and told by some men what it is to be a woman. Bold changes are needed to mark significant change, and that needs to start with the plans to criminalise prostitution. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is unequivocal. States must address trafficking and prostitution if they are to eliminate discrimination and violence against women.

I know that work on that is under way in the Scottish Government, and I appreciate its complexity, but I add my voice to the voices of those who continue to press for ambitious change. As long as women are seen as a legal commodity to be bought by men, there will be no significant shift in men's violence against women. The ability fundamentally fosters a sense of male entitlement and ownership that permeates every aspect of our society. Logically, the term "men's demand for prostitution" will ultimately need to be reframed as "people's demand for prostitution". How offensive.

What does the current data tell us? Police Scotland recorded that sex crimes rose from more than 13,000 in 2020-21 to 15,000 the following year—a 15 per cent rise in one year. The breakdown of the 2021-22 data shows that, of all those sex crimes, there were around 2,500 rapes or attempted rapes and more than 5,000 cases of sexual assault, with the remainder including different types of online sex crimes.

We cannot just attribute that to the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and so on. Although many types of crime have declined, sexual violence in Scotland has been on the increase since 1974. Take that in.

We know that there is an issue with reporting, and the Scottish crime and justice survey of 2019-20 showed that only 22 per cent of victims/survivors of rape reported to the police. However, as much as we glean new insights, bemoan gender-based violence and condemn violence against women and girls, it will probably continue to rise unless radical action is taken.

In my short speech today, I want to explore a new theme—the threat of artificial intelligence. There has been exponential growth in the generative capacity of AI, which extends to its use in pornographic imagery. The use of superimposing faces on to nudes or even depicting women as already nude is already prevalent. Sexual acts using those images in the form of so-called deepfake images are prevalent.

Laura Bates, the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, writing in the Westminster Parliament's *The House* magazine, estimates that 96 per cent of deepfake images are pornography and that the vast majority are of women. The evidence tells us that women are targeted. She also states that the UK Government's Online Safety Act 2023, which is an entirely reserved matter that runs to some 260 pages, does not mention women once. How can that be?

I will finish with this comment. We have a significant issue at the heart of our society, and I take comfort from my colleagues such as Ben Macpherson and Jim Fairlie, who I know frequently call on men to play their part. The sense

of entitlement that some men have—"It does not affect us, so we do not need to care"—cannot be allowed to continue. I agree with Pam Gosal that it is depressing to have another debate on a matter that is getting worse rather than better.

16:11

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): We should tackle violence against women all year round, but the debate provides us with the opportunity to take stock of where we have reached. It is sad that Rape Crisis Scotland is this year again having to employ a waiting list for people needing its support. Nobody should have to wait for the support of Rape Crisis, but we need to imagine a Scotland where Rape Crisis is no longer required and where violence against women does not happen.

Violence against women is a symptom of women's inequality in society, so we need to change attitudes, we need social change and we need to stop commodifying women. We were promised legislation on commercial sexual exploitation, and I hope that the minister in summing up will let us know where the Government is with that, because if we live in a Scotland where women are commodities, we cannot possibly be equal.

We need equality on pay and wealth, and we need to stop women's poverty being exploited through prostitution in exchange for food, clothes, drugs, alcohol and money. Criminalisation needs to target those who feed the trade, not those who are vulnerable and exploited in it. We need routes out and we need to make sure that those who are being exploited get the support that they need. They need to have jobs, security and wealth.

I pay tribute to the Women's Support Project, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary. It supports survivors of prostitution by helping, healing, empowering and advocating for them. I hope that it continues to do that for many years.

Members have talked about the trafficking of human beings. Commercial sexual exploitation feeds that market like no other. If there were no market, there would be no trafficking. We need to look at things such as saunas, online pimping and so-called adult entertainment venues. We need to stop them being allowed to operate in Scotland without any intervention whatsoever.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests with regard to speaking engagements with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. It has warned that the threat that is posed to Ukrainian refugees by sex traffickers underlines the need for politicians across Europe to challenge trafficking. The OSCE also states that the countries that do not challenge

sex buying experience much higher rates of trafficking.

It is obviously in the interest of people who get wealth and power from trafficking that it continues. However, it is not only the people who are trafficked who come to harm; trafficking harms the whole of society through inequality, lack of opportunity and violence against women. Any woman in a society where women are for sale is fair game, and those who are especially vulnerable, such as refugees, suffer the brunt of that.

In Sweden, where they took action and imposed the Nordic model, not only did prostitution and trafficking decrease, the gender pay gap narrowed and caring responsibilities were shared more equally. The whole of society became fairer.

The motion says:

“Imagine a Scotland without Gender-based Violence”.

I can; I am an optimist. Together, we can make that a reality.

16:15

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): On 25 November 1960, three sisters, Patria, Minerva and María Teresa Mirabal—political activists who opposed the cruel and systematic violence of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic—were clubbed to death and dumped at the bottom of a cliff by Trujillo’s secret police. The Mirabal sisters became symbols of the feminist resistance and, in commemoration of their deaths, 25 November was declared the international day for the elimination of violence against women in Latin America in 1980. The international day was formally recognised by the United Nations in 1999. Today, we are having a debate that asks us to imagine a Scotland that is free of gender-based violence. It is 63 years later, and we are still asking ourselves to imagine it.

There will be lots to say about all the other things that have happened, but I will focus my discussion on the same area that I always do, which is the responsibility of men and boys in ending this scourge.

What does it mean to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence? What would that look and feel like? It might look like this: women not having to walk with keys in their hand; not having to have a safe word to use with bar staff; not having to worry about walking home alone or about being too provocative in the way they dress; not having to go into public toilets in pairs; not having to ensure that they are talking to someone on the phone when they are walking in a park or to stay on the phone until they get to their house; not having to cross the street to avoid males who are

coming the other way; not having to feel the grip of fear in the pit of their stomach because there are footsteps behind them in the street; not having to feel scared to voice an opinion in male company; not having to feel fear about challenging misogynistic groups of males; not having to ensure that all the doors in their car are locked when they are coming to a junction; and not having to live in a parallel universe to the people who inhabit the same space as they do, be it college, work, school, the streets or even their homes. It might look like them never doubting that the people they interact with, including and especially those who are there to protect them, are safe and pose them no danger.

A man does not need to imagine all of that, because that is already our reality, so the debate is asking women to imagine what it is to live in a society without gender-based violence, because men never—or very rarely—have to factor in the same issues that are the everyday norms for women and girls.

Many factors have already been suggested as the causes of gender-based violence—such as ingrained gender inequality—but toxic masculinity is definitely one of the worst factors that we need to tackle. Individuals such as Andrew Tate are allowed to spew bile and even talk about methods of dehumanising and objectifying women and girls, and they are allowed to give lessons on how to manipulate and brutalise them with absolutely no consequences. Perhaps we need to ask whether we are allowing people such as Tate free speech or whether we are enabling hate speech. When does it cross the line, or is free speech never hate speech, depending on your perspective on the issue, be it race, religious or misogynistic? Those are the questions that we have to wrestle with, and we should.

However, whatever the law can or cannot do, each one of us males has the ability to play a role in making our reality—one in which we have all of the freedoms that women do not—a reality for women as well.

We are seeing growing numbers of incidents of toxic, dangerous masculinity in schools and colleges and across society.

What are we males doing wrong or not doing enough of? I am happy to follow the work of White Ribbon Scotland and Zero Tolerance, which Ben Macpherson will talk about. However, as usual, the women have beaten us to the starting line. The Young Women’s Movement, and the Bold Girls Ken and Oor Fierce Girls campaigns are initiatives that young women set up to educate each other and their peers about consent and knowing what consent is. That is just one example of the stuff that is happening. I challenge their male peers. Where are the bold lads ken and oor fierce laddies

campaigns? Where will the first young group of men work alongside their female peers to make their imagined realities the same?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Fairlie, please bring your remarks to a close.

Jim Fairlie: If they meet that challenge, all our realities will be the same.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Fairlie. As was previously advised, we have no time in hand.

16:20

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): It is vital that we have this debate every year, but there is also a danger that, in the familiarity of the annual ritual, we lose the anger of activism, rest in a cosy consensus, think about the issue for 16 days and then return to the status quo. The status quo for millions of women and girls is a place of pain and horror. We must not treat gender-based violence as a stand-alone issue that is divorced from the rest of what we do. Every year, we need not just 16 but 365 days of activism, and we need to use them well.

This year, our national theme, which asks us to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence, is about our vision for this specific country, while the United Nations focus, “Invest to prevent violence against women and girls”, is about tangible action everywhere, especially economic and financial measures. We need both the vision and the bold action, and we need clarity about the breadth and depth of the work to be done.

Fantastic initiatives are happening during this year’s campaign, including much that is about survival, support and the stories that individual women share. It is crucial that we listen to those stories, but we also need to hear and learn from feminist experts about the kind of structural and policy changes that can transform the lives, safety and freedoms of women and girls.

In her award-winning book “The Political Economy of Violence Against Women”, Professor Jacqui True focuses on two key areas of potential solution: economic empowerment of women, and men changing men through positive example. I spoke about men this time last year—across a series of debates about violence against women, only a handful of our male colleagues spoke. I encourage all my male colleagues to read the email that Ben Macpherson sent to us all this morning.

This year, I want to talk about Professor True’s other focus, because gender-based violence is an economic issue on many levels. We know that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of

violence, with globalised economies that treat both women and men, and the lands where they live, as mere counters in a game of toxic capitalism.

We know that violence against women is not only a matter of physical acts that are perpetrated by one individual on another but includes, within the official UN definition, economic exploitation.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: I am sorry—I do not have enough time.

We know that women face violence in the workplace and in the experience of migrating for work—violence that is enabled and perpetrated through unjust and inhuman immigration and trade policies. We also know that, in the experience and aftermath of natural disaster, climate catastrophe and armed conflict, women and their children suffer the most, including from deliberate violence.

The imagined Scotland of this year’s theme would have transformed not just attitudes and behaviour—putting an end to acts of individual misogyny—but economic systems, power structures and global and environmental responsibilities. If we are to take that vision seriously, every time that we consider a policy, we must ask ourselves what effect it will have. Will it act to increase or decrease the violence that women and girls face?

I am grateful for the briefings from Close the Gap, Engender and Zero Tolerance, which set out some of the ways that we can do that. That means, within our devolved powers, looking not just at criminal justice but at the economy, social security, finance, education, health and the environment. It also means speaking boldly about reserved policy areas, especially defence, immigration and trade.

On Monday evening, I, with hundreds of others, walked through Dundee in safety and solidarity as part of this year’s reclaim the night march. Our task here is to help to reclaim not just the night, but the day and every day to come, for the women and girls of Scotland and of the world beyond.

16:24

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): We already know the many existing dangers that women face in everyday life. Violence against women and girls is never acceptable, but do we, as women, really understand the dangers that we face?

Online violence against women and girls has escalated rapidly in recent years and it poses a major threat to safety and wellbeing. Technology is not something to be feared—we should

embrace it—but we need to be mindful of it, as it constitutes a space where harm can be perpetrated.

The development of artificial intelligence brings a new discussion about the protection and promotion of women's rights. Biased attitudes linked to gender roles and identities are programmed into social media platforms through automated decision making. Therefore, algorithms and devices have the potential to spread and reinforce unwanted and harmful gender stereotypes, particularly when it comes to younger men.

Research by the Open University found that 17 per cent of women in Scotland have experienced online threats, trolling, unwanted sexual remarks and other forms of abuse. The 2022 Girlguiding "Girls' Attitudes Survey" found that 80 per cent of girls and young women between the ages of seven and 21 have seen or experienced sexism online, which is an increase from 68 per cent in 2018.

Therefore, there is a need for the Government to be proactive when it comes to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, because it takes many sinister forms. There is sextortion, image-based abuse, doxxing and cyberbullying. Those are all examples of how women can fall victim to gender-based violence. The same Open University survey showed that almost three quarters, or 73 per cent, of women in Scotland and more than half, or 55 per cent, of men want online violence to be made a crime.

The part that should concern us all is that many women and girls do not realise that they are a victim until it is too late. Sometimes, those who commit the crime are people whom women and girls should trust. Ex-teacher James Donoghue was jailed for predatory crimes after threatening two young women into having sex with him. He then posed as a modelling scout called Debie and threatened to share unconsented filmed sexual content if the victims did not keep in contact with him or arrange to meet up. He even hijacked and hacked into a computer of one of his targets during the horrific sextortion plot.

It was Donoghue's own girlfriend who helped the police to catch him in the act, to get him to confess to what he had done. He was handed only an eight-year prison sentence, which is not long enough in my view. The predatory behaviour shown by that vile individual will have caused unimaginable harm to the young women involved, but they are not alone. That one case shows the danger of access to filming devices and the rise of social media platforms, should someone wish to use them to inflict unimaginable harm on women and girls. Therefore, we need to get ahead of the

curve when it comes to AI, because AI can impersonate and, in the wrong hands, manipulate.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to strengthening the AI ecosystem, because we need to ensure that the right safeguards are in place and that we invest in technology to ensure that women and girls cannot be exploited through that growing technology.

We have been unable to eradicate revenge porn or the online abuse that women receive, as is evidenced by the statistics. Last year alone, there were 140 domestic abuse charges relating to those offences—and those are only the ones that were reported. Underreporting of violence against women and girls has long been a concern, and I encourage anyone who has been a victim of those vile crimes to come forward and speak out. Accurate data means that we are better placed to understand. As technology advances, so do the number of risks to vulnerable people.

Today is about 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Everyone has a duty to ensure that we improve the lives of women and girls by doing everything that we can to protect them from the advancements in new technology.

16:29

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Together, we are talking about gender-based violence in Scotland and around the world just days after the outpouring of grief and outrage that we saw on the streets of Italy following the death of Giulia Cecchettin, a 22-year-old woman murdered by her former partner. That awful case has thrown light on reports that, on average, one woman is killed every three days in Italy. In fact, research by the UN on gender-related killings of women and girls found that, in 2022, 89,000 women and girls were killed intentionally across the globe, which is the highest yearly number of female homicides recorded in the past two decades, despite an overall fall in homicide.

Sadly, the picture here, in Scotland, is similar, with 2021-22 homicide figures reflecting that shocking and shameful reality. Although I know that good partnership work is under way in Scotland through the multi-agency taskforce that is dedicated to saving the lives of women and children, we must be clear that, although gender-based violence affects us all, men's violence is a men's issue and all men must do more to tackle and prevent it. Gender inequality is both a cause and a consequence of male violence against women. If destructive attitudes towards women do not change and go unchallenged by men in the home, the workplace, the gym or the pub—wherever and whenever they occur—we will never

achieve the structural and cultural shift that is needed to eradicate this scourge in society.

The work of specialist organisations such as Zero Tolerance, White Ribbon Scotland and Social, Health & Education—SHE—Scotland is invaluable in documenting the lived experience of victims/survivors and ensuring that that is placed at the heart of decision making. That is why I pledge my support to campaigns for investment in effective primary prevention and to mainstreaming gender within all Scottish policy. Moreover, male politicians and parliamentarians have a responsibility and a duty to challenge and positively influence the behaviour of other men and boys, to bring about change and instigate allyship. MSPs must ask ourselves how our work affects women and girls, and, vitally, we must actively reflect on our own behaviours, beliefs and actions in order to show the collective leadership that is so desperately needed on the issue.

For some time, I have thought that it would be helpful to have a specific set of actions to guide us, which is why I have been working in collaboration with women's organisations that have expertise in gendered power dynamics to develop 16 tangible actions that male MSPs and others can take to help tackle and prevent violence against women and girls. We all have a meaningful role to play in creating the change that is needed to tackle the multiple drivers of men's violence and in building a Scotland where violence against women and girls is not tolerated and no longer takes place. Those 16 actions include engaging with local sports clubs and the media about the ways that they promote gender equality, as well as with local authority colleagues and Government agencies on their work to improve the safety of our streets and public places.

In addition, the Zero Tolerance report on its future tales project identifies the specific needs of marginalised women and girls from ethnic minority communities and the importance of taking an intersectional approach. I implore members to read the report and thank all the women who took part in the project for their bravery in sharing their incredibly insightful and powerful stories.

Gender-based violence does not happen just during the 16 days of activism, and work to end it must take place all year round. We can all commit to doing and saying more. The need for action and to amplify the voices of victims/survivors as well as the changes that they are calling for has rarely been so important or more urgently required. Men and boys, in particular, need to do more. The theme of the debate is "Imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence". All men and boys should be part of making that happen.

16:33

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to follow Ben Macpherson in the debate. I will start where he left off, by saying that it is important to note, from the outset, that although we mark 16 days of activism, our activism against gender-based violence must take place every day and every year.

We have heard a number of rich speeches in the debate; I hope that I will continue in that vein. I pay tribute to colleagues in the chamber who have campaigned tirelessly over many years and have worked deeply on such issues. In particular, I pay tribute to members on my party's front bench, Pauline McNeill and Katy Clark, for their work on the matter and on the Scottish Labour Party's consultation and subsequent report about how we tackle and end violence against women and girls, which was published at the party's women's conference this weekend. The report lays bare some of the challenges that are faced by women and girls and sets out some of the ways in which we can go about addressing the issues. Once again, I thank them and everyone who contributed to that work for all their efforts.

Like many of my male colleagues who have spoken this afternoon, I am clear in my mind that the burden of ending violence against women and girls cannot fall only on women and girls. Women and girls campaign actively and work tirelessly to raise the issues and often have to call out the perpetrators of the violence against themselves and share their own stories. It is important that we show them respect, stand in solidarity with them and offer them our support, but we must also be absolutely clear about the role that men must play in taking action to tackle violence against women and girls.

When I read the report that was prepared by Scottish Labour, a quote stood out for me as being critical. A respondent said:

"It is men who are missing in conversations focusing on tackling"

violence against women and

"it is men who need the courage to call out bad behaviour when they see male peers engaging in it."

As men, we must be responsible for our actions and for ensuring that we do not engage in or perpetrate behaviour that normalises gender-based violence. Men must be responsible for calling out their friends and colleagues and they must be active bystanders when they see other men engaging in misogyny and violent behaviour.

What all the numbers that we are hearing today and all the crime figures and reporting demonstrate to me is that we must get much more serious about educating young boys about

misogyny and gender-based violence, and we must do it much earlier. We need to ensure that schools have the resources and confidence to tackle such behaviour wherever it manifests, to educate both children and staff, and to ensure that female staff and students feel safe enough to report and challenge such behaviour.

I have been proud and pleased throughout my career in a council and in Parliament to support organisations such as White Ribbon Scotland. I commend White Ribbon on the work that it does to ensure that the root causes of violence against women and girls—namely, harmful and dominant misogyny—are effectively challenged. We need to change long-established attitudes and behaviours, and to take a preventative approach in order to stop violence against women and girls from occurring in the first place, rather than trying to deal with its consequences.

I close this speech where I began. I remind people that taking action on violence against women and girls does not end at the close of the 16 days of activism—it has to be an on-going effort. It has to be us, as men, who examine our own behaviours, listen to the experience of women and girls, and challenge the actions of the men around us. Only with that level of effort will we change the experiences of women and girls.

16:37

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I welcome the debate on the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence international campaign.

The theme of this year's campaign is imagining a Scotland without gender-based violence. That vision is important, but it is our deeds and our actions that count. We all have a responsibility to act and to do all that we can but, as we have heard, that is particularly so for men in our society.

As the motion recognises, addressing gender-based violence goes far beyond what public policy makers can do. It requires social change and changes in attitudes across society more generally. Without such change, the societal structures that are already in place, including within public policy, might compound issues around gender-based violence.

Public policy must set the tone and it must lead. I was privileged to invite a Glasgow-based project called financially included to Parliament today. It is run by Gemap Scotland and the Glasgow violence against women partnership and is the only project of its kind in Scotland. I thank Amber, Amy, Robin and Rosemary from the financially included project: I am pleased that they have been able to stay to listen to the debate. As they told me earlier today, the financially included project focuses on

economic and financial abuse and the economic impact of gender-based violence. I have heard about the significant and meaningful impact of the work that they do and the positive difference that they have made to the lives of women who have endured gender-based violence.

The small team of four—a project manager, a training and network officer, and two welfare rights advisers who specialise in advising survivors of gender-based violence—use trauma-informed approaches and make a real difference. To date, they have supported 296 women with specialist trauma-informed welfare rights and debt advice. They have also trained 71 staff in the wider advice sector in Glasgow to spot victims of economic abuse, ask them about it and provide them with support. The team have secured £857,000 in financial gains for clients through benefit gains or debt write-offs.

Significantly, the team has also identified and supported seven women who have been subjected to gender-based violence and who were losing out on welfare support because of the heinous two-child benefit cap. Those women were supported in completing the third-child exception application in order that they could get the financial support to which they are entitled. I cannot believe that, in our society, they must do that. The UK two-child cap is, in itself, institutionalised economic abuse. It must go—no ifs, no buts and no excuses.

The economic abuse of women might be invisible to some people, but it can be devastating to the women involved. I heard examples of women being pressured by exploitative and abusive partners into taking on unsustainable and unaffordable debt, and of many other debts being accrued—for instance, rent and council tax arrears—as a direct result of economic abuse. The specialist support and work of the financially included project team identifies such economic abuse and supports women who have endured it. It fits strategically very well with the recently announced £500,000 fund to leave. The financially included project is funded by the Scottish Government's delivering equally safe fund and will run until at least March 2025.

I hope very much that any review of the funding for organisations that deal with the consequences of gender-based violence will embed funding for projects such as financially included for the longer term, and will help to develop similar models of support elsewhere in Scotland.

Of course we all want to eradicate gender-based violence but, in the meantime, we cannot be naive. We must ensure that there is meaningful, appropriate and extensive trauma-informed support, such as that which is offered by

the financially included team and others, and that it is accessible to the women who need it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the closing speeches.

16:42

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I am also pleased that there has been a great degree of cross-party agreement.

The minister highlighted the need for leadership across all parts of Government. I look forward to seeing the strategy that she said would be launched next week. Time is short today. I hope that the Parliament gets the opportunity to scrutinise that document.

Clearly, violence against women and girls is not just a Scottish issue. Understanding why it exists relates to the fundamental power relationships that continue to exist between men and women. As many members have said, attitudes need to change.

There have been many improvements in women's position in society, and many women have won a significant degree of financial independence compared with women in previous generations.

Marie McNair and Pam Gosal spoke about the number of violent and sexual crimes against women in Scotland. That highlights that, although some things have changed, we still face significant challenges. Marie McNair also spoke about the historical tolerance of violence towards women. I think that most of us will have stories relating to that from previous generations.

Pauline McNeill spoke about the horrors of human trafficking now in Scotland and about the huge amount of work that needs to be done with boys, in schools in particular. Beatrice Wishart spoke about women's dependence on social security, and Michelle Thomson spoke about the need for bold and ambitious changes as well as the rise in reported rapes. Many contributions have highlighted the range and scale of the challenge that we face.

Sharon Dowey spoke about the significant problems with violence against women staff in our schools and referred to this week's NASUWT report that highlighted the rising levels of violence against women teachers in schools. We also know that there are significant increases in violence against other working women in schools, predominantly those in support roles, such as classroom assistants. There are also significant issues in other educational settings. Much work needs to be done in higher education and further

education, although we have not focused on that much today.

However, today's statement on the behaviour in Scottish schools research is timely. It is clear that we need a cross-campus strategy in schools to tackle sexism and misogyny and that the voices of girls, as well as those of women workers, need to be heard strongly when developing it.

Jim Fairlie and Pauline McNeill spoke about men's responsibility. It is clear that changing male attitudes through our work with boys and young men has been central to today's debate. That is vital if we are to achieve the societal change that we need.

A recent survey by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers showed that one in three women ScotRail staff said that they had been sexually harassed over the past year, but 80 per cent did not report those incidents. That highlights the challenges that we face on public transport and the need for it to be safe for women to use public transport. Trade unions have also campaigned on issues relating to safety at work in other areas—for example, Unite the union has campaigned for hospitality workers to be able to travel home safely.

In its briefing, Rape Crisis Scotland makes it clear that the six-month extension to the emergency funding that some Rape Crisis centres received during the pandemic—that funding has continued—prevented the jobs of 28 Rape Crisis workers from being lost. When I visited East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid recently, it said that its funding from the council had been frozen for many years. In effect, that means that, year on year, there have been real-terms cuts to front-line services for women who are being subjected to abuse. Given the cuts in council funding, that position is not unusual.

We face a significant range of challenges. We need to reflect on this year's UN theme—"UNITE! Invest to prevent violence against women and girls"—to which Maggie Chapman referred, and on today's motion, which highlights the vision of a Scotland where violence against women and girls has become a thing of the past.

I am pleased to close the debate for Scottish Labour, which is pleased to support the motion. We want to work on a cross-party basis. It is very welcome that the Parliament is united on the issue and that we have been able to have the debate in the way that we have. I hope that, as a result, we can put together a serious strategy that makes violence against women and girls part of our past.

16:47

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to say that my party supports the Scottish Government's motion on this year's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

We have heard a broad range of powerful and compelling contributions from across the chamber. Sharon Dowe highlighted the case of a female victim whose suffering has been made worse by a justice system that is supposed to protect her. Pam Gosal spoke about the incredible work that she is doing to protect women by bringing forward proposals for a domestic abuse register. Meghan Gallacher and Michelle Thomson discussed the rapidly evolving issue of gender-based crime in the digital space. Katy Clark and Pauline McNeill spoke about the sickening acts of violence that are being inflicted on female teachers. Maggie Chapman rightly said that we need 365 days of action, not just 16. My male colleagues talked about the need for men to address our own behaviour and to challenge others—hear, hear to that.

I intend to speak about only one woman: Esther Brown. Esther's friends say that she was generous of spirit, with a heart of gold, and that she dedicated her life to helping others. On 28 May 2021, aged 67, she opened the front door of her Glasgow flat. Jason Graham either tricked or forced his way inside. He punched, kicked and stamped on Esther's head and body. He used a wooden chair leg as a weapon. He raped and murdered her. Her body lay undiscovered for four days. He was a registered sex offender who was supposedly under the supervision of a multi-agency public protection arrangement—a serial criminal with a long, depraved history of targeting innocent women, young and old.

A significant case review of Esther's murder was published in April. The contents of those 60 pages are jaw dropping. It would take all afternoon to explain the breathtaking incompetence at every level of a system that is supposed to protect the public from sex offenders. There is page after page of failings. It is a system that seems to spawn perpetual meetings that achieve nothing. There are armies of obscure public agencies that appear to be collectively dysfunctional and casually complacent. There is no simple record keeping and no effective communication. It is a broken system from top to bottom. The report damns criminal justice social work, the police, the Scottish Prison Service and the national health service.

The report also generates many more questions than it answers. We learn that Jason Graham has a history of strangling women. However, when he first strangled a teenager, he was not prosecuted. The report says that the case was called in court

and then mysteriously vanished. How and why did that happen? Members will not find the answers in that report. When he strangled a second teenager two years later, what happened to him? What sentence did he receive? Members will not find the answers in that report.

Just a year later, Graham inflicted a sustained attack on a 50-year-old woman in her own home. He punched, bit, kicked, strangled and raped her. At long last, having amassed many other criminal convictions, Graham was finally put behind bars. He was jailed for seven years and six months but, due to automatic early release, he was back out after less than five years. An earlier parole bid was refused because he had not taken part in a prison programme for sex offenders. However, when he was automatically released, he had still not done that. He was set free with nothing having been done to address his offending. How on earth could that be allowed to happen? Again, members will not find the answers in that report.

The report also tells us that, after his release, he was subject to a curfew, but not once did anyone turn up at his home at night to see whether he was there. He was trusted to adhere to his curfew. The report calls that “self-reporting”; I call it naive and negligent. We also learn that his curfew was eased around Christmas time. What a thoughtful gift for a predatory sex offender. What about the safety of the women in Glasgow? Who decided that any of that was appropriate and why? Again, members will not find the answers in that report.

The report says that Graham should have been issued with an electronic tag to monitor his whereabouts, but it does not say why that did not happen. It does not contain a single word about media reports that Graham was living in the community under an assumed name. Why not? Where is the curiosity?

Had Graham been put behind bars for his earlier attacks on women, would Esther Brown still be alive? According to the report, the answer is no. It states that her murder

“could not have been predicted or prevented”.

Really? Well, I am sorry, but I disagree, as do Esther's friends.

The report exposes a catalogue of mind-blowing incompetence, but it fails to take the extra vital step and ask critical follow-up questions. It is like a page-turner novel in which the last page of every chapter has been torn out. It is sanitised. It is wilfully incurious. It smacks of protectionism. The omissions are glaring.

Fundamentally, this is about accountability—or, rather, a lack of accountability. That seems to have been allowed to become the norm in many of

Scotland's self-satisfied and self-serving public agencies.

Esther Brown should be alive today. Graham's actions were predictable. Esther's murder was preventable. She deserved better. The women of Scotland deserve better. God help the next woman who is targeted by a registered sex offender, of which there are almost 6,000 across Scotland.

Unless the Government acts, we will be here again: another murdered woman, another review, another report, more lessons to be learned, no accountability. And repeat.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Emma Roddick, to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. Ms Roddick, if you could take us to decision time at 5 o'clock, that would be helpful.

16:54

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I want to reiterate what I hope has been heard loud and clear throughout the debate from members across the chamber: the responsibility for ending violence against women and girls lies with the perpetrators of the violence—usually men—and not with the targets.

Like many women in this room and many women in society, I am a survivor of gender-based violence. Although I completely resist any suggestion that I change who I am to cater to the egos and expectations of abusive men, it is an experience that changes us. We know that the impact of those acts goes way beyond the immediate and the obvious. Every time violence against women and girls happens or is condoned, all of our safety is lessened, discrimination and other prejudices are strengthened, and we all suffer. I commend Michelle Thomson and others who have used their platform to share their experiences and have tried to prevent those things from happening to others.

I will be honest, Presiding Officer: I really struggle to imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence, because the ripple effect would be so wide ranging. What would this Parliament look like? How many women who have missed out on public life would be making change and history? To be honest, I do not even know how different I would be in such a country. That is how vast and deep the impact is.

As Rhoda Grant said, we need social change. She asked me to respond on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation, and she mentioned the likes of sex for rent in particular. That is exactly the type of exploitative, horrific and

violent activity that we need to put a stop to. I know that my colleague's focus remains on delivery of the commitment to develop a framework to challenge men's demand for prostitution. We will see that implemented over the next year and tested in full, which could lead to further change.

Over the past few years, extensive work has gone on across the Scottish Government to identify areas in which we can make improvements to support survivors and prevent violence from happening in the first place. As an example, I note that, last year, the best start grant was changed to ensure that individuals who are fleeing domestic abuse with children get the higher rate of support that is usually available for a first child. That recognises that, although they may previously have had the items that they needed to look after their children, those may have been left behind by necessity. Importantly, the grant was also extended to families who take on responsibility for children when they are already more than 12 months old and to individuals who are granted refugee status, humanitarian protection or leave to remain under the Afghanistan or Ukraine resettlement schemes, where their other children were born before their arrival in the UK.

Recognising that a human rights culture can be an extremely strong part of wider efforts to change attitudes, I remind members that we are preparing a human rights bill that will incorporate into Scots law, as far as possible within devolved competence, four international human rights treaties including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. I hope that the process of incorporation will provide an excellent opportunity not only to raise awareness of what everyone's rights are and to empower them to seek help when those rights are not being realised, but to educate people that many groups, including women, are still suffering discrimination, which is often invisible, in modern Scotland. That becomes even more important when we consider the intersectional nature of gender inequalities. We know that disabled women, women from racialised minorities and LGBTQI women face multiple inequalities and barriers to access to support. Understanding that is key if our efforts to tackle those inequalities are to be successful.

Just this morning, I heard from Gypsy Traveller women how racism and dehumanising attitudes towards them and their culture seem to further stoke or are even used to excuse misogyny and violence against them, particularly online. That brings me to a point that Meghan Gallacher and others highlighted. People who were born just a few years after some members in the chamber have spent their teens facing the prospect of

having videos created of them—Michelle Thomson mentioned sexual deepfakes—that cause untold damage to their self-confidence and, in the case of girls at school and girls from particular faith or racialised minority communities, loss of community when people are not sure whether the videos are real. It is only by understanding those specific, complicated barriers for people whom we all represent in our roles in Parliament that we can be allies in tackling those things.

On that point, I was very glad to receive a copy of Ben Macpherson's 16 suggestions for action. I am already making sure that I meet them all, and I hope that colleagues in all parties will do so, too. Ben Macpherson has really embodied the point of the equally safe strategy. We know that the inequalities that we are discussing run deep. They are so deep that people often reinforce them without even realising it. It takes real reflection and acknowledgement of responsibility at an individual level to recognise and reverse that, as was discussed at Close the Gap's equally safe at work event yesterday. Workplaces might genuinely think that they have good practice, but they will now have to show it, and in the process they might realise that they are not as on top of things as they thought.

If all of us in the Parliament follow Ben Macpherson's lead, reflect on our roles and commit ourselves to doing things such as proactively calling out dangerous behaviours, we can make important change and even spot things that we did not pick up on before.

It was quite surreal to hear Jim Fairlie—a man—describe the violence in the everyday steps that we take to protect one other and ourselves, because it was spot on. He has done the job of considering how it feels to be a woman or girl and feel unsafe. He was right to describe what men have as a power. There is the type of power that is relayed by an unequal society—the type that is too often abused—but there is also the power that he talked about: the power to change things, call out pals and realise that men listen to men. I have had male friends pretend to be my boyfriend, brother or uncle in a bar in order to get rid of an aggressive man. I say to men, "Please notice things, as Jim Fairlie has done. Call people out and protect women. Do not leave it all to us."

Together, we can work to make a Scotland where nobody has the job of imagining what the country would be like without gender-based violence. We can eradicate it, but we need to work together.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

Business Motions

17:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11478, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 5 December 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Post-school Education and Skills Reform

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Championing Disability Equality and Human Rights

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 6 December 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Fiscal Framework Review

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 7 December 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Reconsideration Stage Proceedings: United Nations Convention on the Rights

of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland)
Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 12 December 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Equalities, Human Rights and Civil
Justice Committee Debate: Asylum
Seekers in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 13 December 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and
Energy;
Finance and Parliamentary Business

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 14 December 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 4 December 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-11479 and S6M-11480, on stage 1 timetables for bills.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 29 March 2024.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Housing (Cladding Remediation) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 15 March 2024.—[George Adam]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-11481 to S6M-11483, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments and a statutory instrument, and S6M-11484, on substitution on committees.

That the Parliament agrees that the Colleges of Further Education and Regional Strategic Bodies (Membership of Boards) (Scotland) Order 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Parking Prohibitions (Enforcement and Accounts) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Vehicle Emissions Trading Schemes Order 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ariane Burgess be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Gillian Mackay be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Gillian Mackay be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Maggie Chapman be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Maggie Chapman be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;
and

Ross Greer be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.—[*George Adam*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-11469, in the name of Siobhian Brown, on 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign; welcomes the 2023 national theme, "Imagine a Scotland without Gender-based Violence"; condemns any violence against women and girls, and acknowledges the significant damage and harm that it causes to individuals and to wider society; recognises that the eradication of such violence can only be achieved through social change and changes in attitudes, actions and behaviour, and acknowledges, therefore, the responsibility of collective leadership across all spheres of government and society to challenge the gender inequalities that fundamentally underpin violence against women and girls.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the second question, I propose to ask a single question on four Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member objects, the question is, that motions S6M-11481 to S6M-11483, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments and a statutory instrument, and S6M-11484, on substitution on committees, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Colleges of Further Education and Regional Strategic Bodies (Membership of Boards) (Scotland) Order 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Parking Prohibitions (Enforcement and Accounts) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Vehicle Emissions Trading Schemes Order 2023 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ariane Burgess be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Gillian Mackay be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Gillian Mackay be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Maggie Chapman be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Maggie Chapman be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;
and

Ross Greer be appointed as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Age Scotland (80th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business this evening is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11200, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on celebrating Age Scotland's 80th anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates the 80th anniversary of Age Scotland's work to support older people; understands that the first meeting of an earlier incarnation of Age Scotland, the Scottish Old People's Welfare Committee, took place in Edinburgh in January 1943 to support the war effort and the wellbeing of older people in Scotland; acknowledges that the Committee's aims were to "gather information of the present position of the care and welfare of the aged and to raise awareness of the needs of older people"; considers that, in the past 80 years, Age Scotland has made an invaluable contribution through its work in helping older people to live as well as possible, in promoting positive views of ageing and later life, and in tackling loneliness and isolation; is aware that Age Scotland recently published the findings of its Big Survey 2023, which aims to take the temperature of what it is like to be an older person in Scotland; recognises that one of the events planned to mark this milestone is a parliamentary reception on 15 November 2023 to celebrate the contribution of older people and groups from the Cunninghame North constituency and across Scotland, including the winners of Age Scotland's annual awards, and to hear about the charity's latest research, which it understands outlines the political priorities of people over the age of 50 and how they feel about growing older in Scotland, and wishes chief executive, Katherine Crawford, and everyone at Age Scotland continued success in their future endeavours.

17:05

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank you Presiding Officer, as I do members from across the chamber who signed my motion and facilitated tonight's debate in celebration of Age Scotland's 80th anniversary. I thank Adam Stachura, who is in the public gallery, and his team at Age Scotland for providing much of the background briefing for tonight. Sadly, my colleague Christine Grahame, who had intended to contribute tonight, is unable to be here because she has extreme back pain.

I believe that this is a timely topic. Scotland's people are, on average, getting increasingly older. Indeed, by 2045, almost half the population will be over the age of 50—including me. In the past 80 years, Age Scotland has given older people a voice through myriad campaigns, research publications, workshops and community developments. On 22 January 1943, in the midst of world war two, the first gathering of the Scottish Older People's Welfare Committee took place here in Edinburgh. That earlier incarnation of Age Scotland had a clearly defined mission to gather

information about the welfare of older people, to provide a platform for discussion and to raise awareness and campaign for older people to ensure that their needs were met.

In 1943, the major challenges for people were homes and housing, poverty alleviation, practical support at home and addressing social isolation—many of the same issues that my elderly constituents have raised with me and, no doubt, that have been raised with members across Scotland.

It is undeniable that significant progress has been made in the past eight decades and that there has never been a better time to grow old, not least because of the tireless work of numerous older people's welfare committees over the years. Life expectancy has risen dramatically since the 1940s, and the past 80 years has seen the creation of the national health service, programmes such as meals on wheels, an increase in the number of residential homes, care at home, concessionary travel, improved state pensions, social clubs and outings, and activities for older people. More recent achievements include a pension linked to earnings and free personal and nursing care, as well as the rapid spread of the men's sheds movement and other support groups.

Although progress is undeniable, many overarching concerns and challenges faced by older people in Scotland remain. Age Scotland recently published its "The Big Survey 2023—Full Report", in which more than 4,100 people over the age of 50 shared their views and experiences. The three main issues that respondents highlighted were a lack of accessible housing, housing affordability and fuel poverty. The on-going cost of living crisis has exacerbated that, with the number of pensioners in fuel poverty having doubled in the past two years. Age Scotland's free helpline can help older people to maximise their income by running benefit checks and social security advice. So far this year, it has identified £1.13 million of financial support for older people.

Another finding in the survey was that, although the vast majority of older people have access to the internet, 19 per cent of over-60s do not use it—around 273,000 people. Unsurprisingly, therefore, digital exclusion is often a barrier to accessing services such as applying for a blue badge. For example, an elderly constituent walked into my Dalry constituency office yesterday to inquire about the local bin uplift schedule, as the local authority no longer delivers physical copies. Pensioners also do not always receive their due income—123,000 people across Scotland who are eligible for pension credit are not in receipt of it.

It comes as no surprise that older people, as the cohort that is most likely to require medical

attention, often express frustration at the difficulty in obtaining a general practitioner appointment, with many practices not even having telephone queuing systems—a matter that I have frequently raised. In the big survey, 82 per cent of respondents indicated that they preferred an in-person GP appointment, with only 1 per cent having a preference for a video or telephone consultation. I trust that the Scottish Government has given close consideration to the findings of the big survey and will take them into consideration when making decisions that affect older people.

After having talked about older people's challenges and concerns, I will now focus on the incredible contribution that older people make to life in Scotland. A third of respondents to Age Scotland's big survey currently volunteer, and a further 23 per cent have previously done so. Age Scotland supports more than 400 community groups across Scotland, many of which are run by dedicated local volunteers who work to make communities better places for older people and others. It was also inspiring to speak to winners of Age Scotland's annual awards at its recent parliamentary reception, which I was proud to sponsor. I again congratulate Saltcoats Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club from my constituency on winning the Patrick Brooks award for best partnership working for all that it does to support the significant number of ex-armed forces personnel who live in the area, because feeling lonely and missing the comradeship of serving together is still all too common.

Loneliness is an issue that still affects many older people, and almost half of the respondents to the big survey said that they sometimes felt lonely. Age Scotland's friendship line, which is operated by friendship caller volunteers, provides companionship and a listening ear for people who are 50 and over. It is open Monday to Friday, from 9 am to 5 pm. People may phone about absolutely anything, and someone will pick up the phone to listen, provide friendship and offer support.

I am sure that the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, whose portfolio includes the social isolation and loneliness strategy, will tell us more about the action that the Scottish Government is taking to address loneliness, but I will mention the recently launched social isolation and loneliness fund, which will provide £3.2 million to 53 community projects and organisations between August this year and July 2026. Groups that work to tackle social isolation and loneliness throughout Scotland include choirs, men's sheds, lunch clubs and many others.

Funding has also been provided to Beith Community Development Trust in my constituency, which is involved in numerous projects across the Garnock valley and which the

minister visited in August, when she met Alison Berry, the local lead of the lend an ear befriending service. That community-driven initiative aims to foster a sense of belonging and safety among individuals from the area who might otherwise be grappling with feelings of solitude. Such organisations make an invaluable contribution to the lives of many older people and others across Scotland.

I congratulate Age Scotland on its 80th birthday and thank it for eight decades of advocacy, support, campaigning, research publications and community projects, as well as its magnificent hot tips calendars, which are eagerly awaited. Crucially, it must be our goal to be a country where older people are always valued.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gibson. I send my best wishes to Christine Grahame for a speedy recovery.

17:11

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Kenneth Gibson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Today's debate is an opportunity for me to step into old shoes from the years that I spent as my party's spokesperson on older people, which was a role that I took great pride in. As I turn 61 today, I am a proud older person. *[Applause.]*

The debate also gives me an opportunity to discuss some of the biggest challenges that face older people across Scotland, some of which I have spoken about before in the chamber. Age Scotland's second big survey provides a detailed snapshot of the challenges that older people face in Scotland in 2023. The survey—to which more than 4,100 people over the age of 50 contributed—highlighted on-going issues with older people's mental health, which some respondents felt were long-lasting effects of the Covid-19 situation.

Loneliness is often an issue that comes up when the mental health challenges that older people face are discussed, and the survey confirms that it is still very much a live issue. Nearly half of the respondents to the survey said that they sometimes felt lonely, and 10 per cent said that they felt lonely either most or all of the time. Age Scotland supports 400 organisations and community groups with their vitally important work to prevent and tackle loneliness, but many of those groups are struggling to keep their doors open and keep the lights on. In recent years, at least 30 groups have been forced to close. Looking forward, it is important that those groups are supported to continue to provide support for individuals. They are a lifeline across

communities, and I commend and congratulate all of them.

The First Minister was entering office when Age Scotland's big survey was carried out, and respondents were asked about what priorities the Government should have. Unsurprisingly, social care and the national health service ranked highly among their priorities. Respondents suggested that the importance of reducing waiting lists and maintaining a seamless and joined-up approach in social care should be highlighted. Only 4 per cent of respondents thought that issues such as independence should be classed as priorities.

In looking at the findings, one of the biggest concerns is the fact that just 13 per cent of the older people who responded said that they felt valued for their contribution to society. That is even lower than the figure of 21 per cent that was recorded in the 2021 survey.

Along with the many other pieces of research carried out by Age Scotland, the big survey has provided an important spotlight on older people's priorities, and on the challenges that they face in their communities. That is very important at a time when the views of older people are rarely given the attention that they deserve, and I thank Age Scotland for doing that work and giving those people a voice.

Today's debate gives members the chance to reflect on the fantastic work that Age Scotland has done over the last 80 years, which has supported countless older people across communities. I know that in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, numerous organisations and individuals have benefited from Age Scotland's support, and other organisations and charities have supported individuals who are lonely. Kenneth Gibson talked about men's sheds. I have visited fantastic men's sheds in my region, where men come together to support one another, which provides a real benefit.

I know that Kenneth Gibson wishes the chief executive, Katherine Crawford, the best success going forward. I also do that, because it is vitally important that individuals in communities in our constituencies are supported, and that the voice of older people is truly heard.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Stewart. What better way to celebrate a birthday than by taking part in a members' business debate? Many happy returns.

I call Colin Smyth.

17:06

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Thank you for allowing me to speak early in the debate, Presiding Officer. I apologise to other members that the change of date means that I have to leave

before the end of the debate, to attend another event. However, I was keen to add my congratulations and my thanks to Age Scotland on its 80th anniversary, and I am grateful to Kenneth Gibson for his motion allowing us the opportunity to do so.

We owe Age Scotland a huge debt of gratitude for the work that it does every day supporting older people in our constituencies. Whether it is its excellent advice lines, its support for older people's community groups, of which there are more than 400 across Scotland, its equalities work, its research, its campaigns or its excellent about dementia initiative, the need for that work has never been more important.

We just have to listen to the heartbreaking evidence in the Covid inquiries about families who were not able to see their loved ones in their care home because we could not get our act together over testing, about social care packages that were removed at that time, about older people feeling under pressure to sign do-not-resuscitate agreements, about loneliness and the isolation that they felt during lockdown and, of course, about the devastating death toll among those in later life during the pandemic, especially in our care homes. I do not think that any of us can hold a hand on our heart and say that, during that dark period of Covid-19, the human rights of older people were being upheld.

Today, as we are all inundated with cases from constituents whose mainly older relatives are stuck in hospital because we do not value carers enough to pay them properly, we are still not meeting the needs of those older people.

There is a misconception that the current cost of living crisis is not hitting older people. However, the Scottish Government's own figures show that almost one in six people of pension age in Scotland are living in poverty, and that number is on the rise. We are in danger of another pandemic—a poverty pandemic.

Too many of our older people also regularly face multiple forms of discrimination and are too often negatively stereotyped. We should be celebrating, as Kenny Gibson rightly said, the immense contribution that older people make to our communities. I had the privilege of attending the recent parliamentary reception hosted by Mr Gibson to celebrate 80 years of Age Scotland. I had the honour of presenting one of the annual awards—wonderful, hand-crafted wooden awards, I have to say, which were made by the men's shed in Dalbeattie, in my South Scotland region—to Betty Glen as volunteer of the year. Betty's award and the other awards are a small reminder of the big contribution that older people make in our communities, and we should celebrate that more.

Too often, older people are underappreciated, and the issues that they face are too often way down the political agenda. None of us will be surprised by Age Scotland's big survey, which Kenny Gibson and Alexander Stewart mentioned, which shows that only 13 per cent of respondents felt that older people were valued—far less than the 21 per cent who felt valued just two years ago. All of us should be worried that just 3 per cent of older people felt that it was easy to have their voices heard by us decision makers.

That is why I hope that we do not just celebrate the work of Age Scotland but that all of us in Parliament listen to it a lot more. For example, it is calling, along with more than 20 other charities, for “older people” to be reinstated in the minister's title. It also calls, along with more than 35 charities and organisations, for the appointment of a commissioner for older people to give those in later life an independent champion and a strong voice with statutory powers, just as they have in Wales and Northern Ireland, and just as children rightly have in all four nations. That would show real backing for Age Scotland's work and for Scotland's older people.

I know that Age Scotland is under new leadership with Katherine Crawford as the new chief executive. That is an excellent appointment; she brings a wealth of experience and skills in working with older people to the role of taking Age Scotland forward. I wish Katherine Crawford and all her team well, and I thank them on behalf of older people in my region for all their outstanding work. I encourage all members to back that work with our actions in Parliament.

17:20

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I had not expected to speak in the debate, but I am very happy to be Christine Grahame's stand-in. I have not prepared anything, so it will be a short speech. It is the first time that I have heard Kenny Gibson admit that he is getting older, so that is quite something.

As Kenny says, there has never been a better time to grow old. Age Scotland is getting older—this is its 80th birthday. I add my thanks to those of Alexander Stewart and others for everything that it does for older people. It is easy not to value older people and the huge contribution that they make to our society.

The question of health is important. Physical health and, particularly, mental health are important, which is why organisations and charities such as men's sheds are so important. I have visited several men's sheds in my constituency. The wellbeing that they bring to the men who go there is fantastic. It keeps them

mentally strong and gives them a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Members mentioned volunteering. There is a thriving voluntary sector in my constituency. East Dunbartonshire Voluntary Action has many initiatives, including a befriender initiative that matches up young people with older people. That has been hugely successful and does so much to combat loneliness, which helps everybody's wellbeing.

However, as Colin Smyth and others have said, it is not all a bed of roses. Older people are struggling with the cost of living and to keep their homes warm. They must always be a priority and must be helped. I know that the Scottish Government takes all that on board, as much as it can, in order to keep people comfortable in their homes. Indeed, it is important to have homes.

I again thank Age Scotland for everything that it has done over the past eight decades. It would be too much to mention how many people it has comforted and supported. I wish it a happy birthday, and long may it continue.

17:23

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I echo members' congratulations and thanks for all the hard work of Age Scotland's former and current staff over the past 80 years, and I thank Adam Stachura at Age Scotland for the briefing ahead of the debate.

Poverty can affect people at all stages of life. Fifteen per cent of pensioners live in relative poverty, and one in 10 live in persistent poverty. Across the country, there are fluctuating factors that raise the chance of living in poverty. We must do what we can to support those in later life to prevent slips into poverty and best support those who find themselves in that position, and we must do so with dignity and respect.

The pandemic highlighted the loneliness epidemic—more than 100,000 older people feel lonely all or most of the time. That is exacerbated by perceptions of crime and lack of transport that push people to stay at home. For some people, that means not speaking to another person for long stretches of time. We can help to address that by ensuring that reliable public transport takes people where they want and need to go when they want and need to.

Rural and island public transport services are in particular need of such attention, and it benefits all ages, but especially older people, to be able to reach public services and lead an active social life. Age Scotland supports more than 400 community groups across the country, and improvements in

rural and island public transport would ensure greater opportunities to attend such groups.

We cannot forget that, as aspects of everyday life increasingly move online, almost one in five over-60s in Scotland do not use the internet. That is exacerbated in rural and island areas, where digital connectivity continues to be challenging in some places. We still need phone lines and in-person appointments to ensure that everyone is able to make medical appointments or pay their bills. Commitments to connect homes to high-speed broadband must be fulfilled to ensure that no one is left behind without communication. At the meeting earlier today of the cross-party group on poverty, of which I am a deputy convener, many of those issues, such as excessive heating costs, transport, isolation and stigma around poverty, were raised by participants.

Like Kenny Gibson, I will take this opportunity to talk about pension credit. Its take-up has been low historically, and it is estimated that 123,000 eligible households in Scotland are not claiming the payment. If a person has a low income—even if they have modest savings—pension credit can top up their income. Receiving pension credit can also entitle people to other financial support and assistance with other costs, including those relating to housing, energy and health. Age Scotland's helpline is on hand for anyone who is seeking further information about that.

Before I conclude, the final figures that I will raise today are that two thirds of over-50s say that they do not feel valued by society, and 56 per cent state that they feel that life is getting worse for older people. Those are both increases on previous responses. Older people make important contributions to society. Intergenerational connection is vital in communities and the workplace, and any narrative to the contrary needs to be reversed.

Age Scotland is not only a good resource for older people but a friend that is ready to provide support. From income maximisation to legal issues, the Age Scotland helpline and friendship line are available throughout the week. We should support its endeavours to provide opportunities for everyone to ensure that later life truly comprises the golden years.

17:27

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to support today's motion, which was lodged by Kenneth Gibson, marking the 80th anniversary of Age Scotland's work in supporting older people.

Our circle shrinks considerably from childhood to adulthood. That is the case for older people, in particular, as they witness lifetimes come to a

close. Losing a friendship or a relationship that someone once thought would outlive them must be a lonely feeling.

Currently, more than 100,000 older people feel lonely all or most of the time in Scotland—that is equivalent to one person in every street. That isolation leaves our older people in a vulnerable position. All too often, with no one to look out for them, the elderly are targeted and exploited by frauds and criminals. That is why Age Scotland's work is so important.

In 2020, Age Scotland introduced a friendship helpline, which has had an immense impact on users. One user said:

"It makes my day, makes my week. I've been very depressed and it's nice to hear another voice. The family don't phone and your friends do pass away. It can be lonely."

I thank all the selfless volunteers who kindly donate their time to help older people to feel a little less lonely.

This year, I got to witness at first hand the way that Age Scotland advocates for local community groups. The Milan day centre approached me for help, as it is under review for closure. The centre provides a lifeline for ethnic minority older people where they can get together and meet people who speak the same language and share their culture. However, ethnic minority older people in Scotland continue to face barriers and discrimination in accessing the services and facilities that they need. When it comes to cuts, ethnic minority older people seem to be a target, as service providers know that they do not have a voice and that they are very small in number. It is incredibly disheartening that Scotland is, in many respects, failing our most vulnerable older people from ethnic minority communities. They have contributed so much to our social, economic and cultural fabric but, when they grow old and need looking after, they are often made to feel like an afterthought or, worse yet, disregarded.

The ethnic minority communities in East Dunbartonshire are lucky to have Age Scotland fighting in their corner to keep that service open. However, the onus should not lie with Age Scotland alone. The Scottish Government must bear in mind that a one-size-fits-all approach to service provision does not work and that fair funding for local authorities is needed to ensure that fit-for-purpose services are available.

I am honoured to have had the opportunity to reflect on Age Scotland's important work on its 80th anniversary. By supporting Age Scotland and, better yet, supporting the expansion of service provision for older people, we can ensure that older people live comfortably, maintain their independence and receive the care that they

need. They have made invaluable contributions to society throughout their lifetime, and it is important that society gives back.

As ethnic minority communities make up a growing share of our older people, it is important that service provision reflects that. I saw that at first hand in the Milan day-care centre in my region, and that is why I am acting as a voice for those communities today in the Scottish Parliament. I thank Age Scotland for standing up for ethnic minority communities and Scotland's older people.

17:31

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Kenny Gibson for bringing this motion before us because, without question, it is right that the long-standing, outstanding work of Age Scotland is marked in Scotland's Parliament.

For almost two decades, I organised the GMB union's retired members section in Scotland. It was a huge privilege to work with and to learn so much from those giants of the Labour movement—people like Enoch Humphries, the former Fire Brigades Union and Scottish Trades Union Congress president, and Sammy Barr, a leader of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in; Betty Warden, Aileen Burr, Dorothy Bain and Georgie Cardoo, all principled women who spent their entire lives campaigning for equality, peace and justice; and boilermakers Hugh Boyd and Tommy Douglas, who led the workers who built the Grangemouth oil refinery back in the late 1960s through a bitter strike in 1969.

From all of them, there was always a clear message that the treatment of our older citizens is a test of our values as a society. They all held to the unswerving principle that human dignity comes before private profit and that the basic state pension is a right, not a handout, because—make no mistake—pensioner poverty and pensioner inequality are not an accident of nature. They are a political choice.

Look at the state pension system—for all the talk in the past week of cuts to national insurance contributions, the national insurance upper earnings limit has been frozen once again. In simple terms, that means that the rich do not pay their way.

That very same elite group—the richest 10 per cent at the top—also scoop up 58 per cent of all tax relief on private pensions. They will now get their hands on even more, with the abolition of the cap on the lifetime allowance. What we are witnessing is a redistribution of wealth, but it is a redistribution of wealth that is going in precisely the wrong direction.

Just last week, Prospect the union reported that the gender pension gap between women and men stands at 37.9 per cent. That is nearly two and a half times greater than the gender pay gap. Of course, the pension gap is fuelled by the pay gap, but it is made worse because women are much more likely to have taken breaks in employment or to have worked part time to look after family and, so, forfeited their pension rights.

It is now compounded by the disproportionate exclusion of women from pension auto-enrolment. The requirement that someone has to earn a minimum of £10,000 a year in a single job role locks 3 million working women out of an occupational pension scheme. Let us not forget the Women Against State Pension Inequality—victims of the injustice of financial loss, of the robbery of the years of retirement that they thought that they had, and of the gross maladministration of those responsible.

As Age Scotland reminds us, more than a third of pensioners who qualify for pension credit fail to claim it, and we know that many of those who do not claim are the oldest pensioners. We know that the oldest pensioners happen to be the poorest pensioners, that they are less likely to have an occupational pension and that they are more likely to have additional outgoings, due to the poorer health that comes with age. We also know that, because they are more likely to be women, they are much less likely to receive the full basic state pension.

So, tonight, we pay testament to Age Scotland for its leadership in ensuring that our older citizens get the best deal out of the current pensions and welfare system, but our goal must be to work with it to fundamentally change the current pensions and welfare system. That is our responsibility—to lift today's pensioners above the hardship of the present to see a vision of a better world. That is the very least that we can do to repay the debt that we owe them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick to respond to the debate.

17:36

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I thank Kenny Gibson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The motion is comprehensive and gets across just how much work is going on in Age Scotland, and I know that he places great importance on that work. Conversely, I am sorry to hear of Christine Grahame's back pain, but I reassure her that she is certainly here in spirit and that I can still hear her previous lectures on the subject loud and clear.

As the minister with responsibility for older people's equality, I have the pleasure of engaging frequently with Age Scotland. I know just how much work it does not only to support older people across Scotland but to communicate to Government how we can do better by them. It was a pleasure to meet Katherine Crawford for the first time just last week at the Age Scotland offices. As Colin Smyth mentioned, she is a fantastic and enthusiastic appointment, and I look forward to building a strong relationship with her in her new role.

Age Scotland is a committed member of the older people's strategic action forum, which I have the privilege of chairing. Of course, Age Scotland contributes the information collected in its big survey, which I recently read. The findings tell us, unsurprisingly, that more and more older people are feeling financially squeezed. That is expected to worsen in the next year. The Scottish Government does not have control over pensions, but we support Age Scotland's efforts in encouraging people to claim pension credit, which we know still goes unclaimed for far too many who may well be struggling with money.

We are incredibly concerned about the wider cost of living crisis and, specifically, how it impacts older people. Our strategic action framework, "A Fairer Scotland for Older People", identifies ensuring financial security as a priority area. We support older people's organisations and age-equality projects with more than £2.2 million from the equality and human rights fund. Our new £50 winter heating payment supported 400,000 low-income households last winter, including those in receipt of pension credit.

Age Scotland received £205,000 as part of our £971,000 emergency winter funding package for tackling social isolation and loneliness. I was glad to hear Mr Gibson mention our social isolation and loneliness fund. Over the past few months, I have been excited to meet many recipients of that fund, including the Beith Community Development Trust. I was almost as impressed with its cupcakes as I was with its helpline. It was wonderful to hear how, for people whom the trust has previously supported, the services meant so much that they are now contributing and volunteering, trying to return the support and friendliness that they received.

That echoes what I saw in Perth, Inverness, Inverkip, Fife and elsewhere. A little investment in the community sparks so much volunteering and has impacts far beyond the direct support services. Volunteers tell me that taking part in those groups gives them a reason to go outside. Befrienders often look forward to calls with their clients as much as their clients do. Those sound like natural connections, and for many people they

are, but we know that others are excluded or face extra difficulties engaging with their communities without extra help.

The funding is being used in a massive variety of ways. It is paying for sports groups, gardening, transport—which, as Beatrice Wishart mentioned, is a particular concern in rural and island areas—and for groups that support people who struggle to mobilise independently. There are many wonderful examples of intergenerational working, which the member also mentioned as incredibly important. We know that older people make a large and positive contribution to communities and that there is great value in bringing generations together. I am yet to engage with a group that does intergenerational work where both the young and old people who were involved were not enthusiastically and genuinely emotional when telling me how brilliant the concept is and that it makes such a difference to their lives.

I know and have seen the difference that the funding has made. I look forward to continuing to learn and share best practice through our social isolation and loneliness action group, and to encouraging connections between groups that can share with each other what has worked well and what has not. The social isolation and loneliness action group is responsible for driving forward wider actions in our delivery plan to tackle social isolation and loneliness, which we have, importantly, recognised as a public health issue.

Data tells us that disabled people, young people, those on low incomes and people over 75 are the groups that are most at risk of social isolation and loneliness. The cost crisis is only making that worse and causing more isolation for people, as they are unable to use funds for transport. We recognise that, which is why we are focusing on specific actions that support older people. Earlier, we had a debate about the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, and I met Age Scotland's ethnic minority older people forum just last week to discuss the particular barriers and difficulties that that group faces.

Older people are not a homogeneous group. They are diverse, experienced and highly valued members of society and culture. However, we know that age, along with gender, race, disability and other protected characteristics, can result in different and unequal experiences and access to services and that that can also result in discrimination. The Scottish Government is committed to tackling that, but we cannot do that without making use of crucial lived experience. Age Scotland is doing wonderful things in drawing attention to those issues and in giving people a voice to come to us and tell us what needs to change.

Pam Gosal: Does the minister believe that more has to be done with ethnic minorities and older people? Will the minister meet me about the Milan day centre in East Dunbartonshire, which is closing? Age Scotland is voicing the issue and is helping with the fact that the approach to delivering services needs to be tailored because of cultural backgrounds and language.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back for that, minister.

Emma Roddick: The member raises points that were echoed in the meeting last week, which will not be a surprise to her. I am more than happy to continue to discuss those matters. The issue of community groups closing can make marginalised groups feel that they do not have power or agency. We want people to be able to feel that and take action in their communities.

An important point that Age Scotland wanted to get across during the forum meeting last week was that the term “hard to reach”, which has been applied to ethnic minority older people, is a bit of a cop-out. We know where those people are and how to reach them. Certainly, they are at the Age Scotland forum regularly so, if any politicians need to hear exactly what people are going through and what issues are high on their agenda, that is the place to go.

I thank Kenny Gibson for championing the issue. As the minister with responsibility for older people, I will continue to welcome his scrutiny and support for measures that the Scottish Government is putting in place to support older people's equality.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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