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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 5 December 2023

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

Time for Reflection

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our leader today is Professor Joe Goldblatt, chair of the Edinburgh Interfaith Association.

Professor Joe Goldblatt (Edinburgh Interfaith Association): Deputy Presiding Officer, distinguished members of the Scottish Parliament and dear friends, good afternoon. As chair of Scotland's oldest interfaith association, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary of serving all faiths and none, I am indeed humbled and honoured to be invited to address this august body.

For 5,764 years, the Jewish people throughout the world have demonstrated great resilience despite our many challenges. When I was a wee bairn in my home town of Dallas, Texas, my mother, born to a Jewish mother and a Catholic father, always erected in our home and decorated the largest and most beautiful Christmas tree in our neighbourhood. We also lit our eight Chanukah candles. One night, the Chanukah candelabra was a wee bit too close to the tree, and several branches started to burn. My mother screamed for help and our papa ran into the lounge with a bucket of water and splashed the tree. He then turned to us and said, "Mama, it's a miracle—the burning bush!"

The story of Chanukah, which begins this year on 7 December, demonstrates that my ancestors had faith in the Almighty by hoping that only four days of oil would last for eight days to kindle their eternal light and their faith. The oil miraculously lasted. We now annually spin the dreidel top, and when a child wins they receive a gold-wrapped chocolate coin. I have played this game with thousands of our Scottish primary school pupils as I teach them about Judaism. They, too, must then decide whether to keep the treasure of the coin or share it with others who have greater need. In every classroom, when I invite them, they always donate. Bless our Scottish bairns.

One child in a Scottish Borders primary school told me that he had heard that Jews were often oppressed and punished. He then asked, "Can you ever just stop being Jewish?" I thought about this for a moment and I asked him whether he could ever stop being Scottish. He sprang up from his chair and said, "Never!" You see, our precious

individual identity, as you have debated many times in this chamber, is important to all of us.

As I discovered those many years ago, it takes not only a burning bush to make a miracle; there are miracles deep inside us. I wish all of you and yours a happy Chanukah and Christmas that will hopefully usher in the miracles of greater love and peace among every one of us. Thank you. God bless you. God bless Scotland. Amen.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Local Authorities (Risk of Bankruptcy)

1. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to protect local authorities from the risk of bankruptcy. (S6T-01678)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Despite a decade of austerity under the United Kingdom Government, Scottish local government revenue funding is 2.6 per cent higher in real terms than it was in 2013-14. Scotland is facing the most challenging budget since devolution as a result of a UK Government autumn statement that failed to deliver the investment that is needed for Scotland's public services—an autumn statement that delivered a real-terms cut to vital public services, including NHS England.

This Government will do all that we can within our powers to ensure that public finances are on a sustainable path. Work is on-going with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to establish a new fiscal framework through the Verity house agreement, and decisions on the local government budget for next year will be confirmed in the Scottish budget.

Mark Griffin: Yesterday, the Institute for Fiscal Studies challenged the assertion by the Government that local authority funding is increasing in real terms. It—not I—said that the figure being asserted by the Government is “highly misleading”,

because it compares apples with pizza:

“It compares updated 2023-24 funding (AFTER additions for pay) to original 2022-23”

figures that were announced in December 2021.

A month ago, Shona Robison said that the amount that is needed to fully fund a council tax freeze would be figured out by negotiation. However, neither the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance nor the Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance, has been able to tell me what “fully funded” means. Yesterday, COSLA said that it needs £14.4 billion to stand still—with £300 million for the council tax freeze. Will the councils get that funding to prevent the bankruptcy that is being warned of?

Joe FitzPatrick: The budget process is under way and discussions are on-going with COSLA. We go into this budget round in one of the most difficult and challenging times that we have seen. I know that the Deputy First Minister's door will be

open to suggestions from the Labour Party and the Conservatives as to how Scotland's pot of moneys can be increased or distributed in a different way. The Deputy First Minister will be keen to hear any suggestions from Mark Griffin.

Mark Griffin: The minister says that the funding settlement is “challenging”, but “challenging” does not cover councils saying that they could go bankrupt. They have already considered sweeping cuts to libraries and leisure services. The Scottish Housing Regulator has warned of “systemic failure” in homelessness services. When councils threaten bankruptcy and people are being failed by repeated cuts, the Government must surely see that local government services are breaking down. That will fall to the Government. What has it set out on what bankruptcy will mean for a local authority? What preparations has it made for that taking place? Would it step in to provide services in that area?

Joe FitzPatrick: Mark Griffin may be getting ahead of things. Local authorities in Scotland have a different framework from those in the rest of the UK. A number of local authorities in England—not just Birmingham and Nottingham city councils, and including those led by all the main English political parties—have gone bust because of UK Government austerity.

In Scotland, however, things have been different. In an interview on “Good Morning Scotland” on 6 September—the day that Birmingham City Council announced that it was going bankrupt—Dr Jonathan Carr-West, chief executive of the Local Government Information Unit, made the point that Scottish councils have not seen the same sustained austerity that English councils have seen over the past 13 years—that we are starting from a safer place. That does not take away the challenges that we all face across public service. We will have to make difficult choices. Are Mr Griffin and his party prepared to make some of those choices? If so, I ask them please to come to speak to us, and let us see what we can do for public service across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Thank you, minister. There are a number of supplementary questions.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Given that the Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, has said that he will not

“turn on the spending taps”

if he comes to office, does the minister share my concern that, ultimately, Scottish local authorities will continue to be at the mercy of Westminster's spending decisions, regardless of which UK party is in power, and that transformational change will come only with the full powers of independence?

Joe FitzPatrick: The challenges that are posed by the current cost of living and climate crises require additional funding. The autumn statement delivered the worst-case scenario for Scotland's finances. It is deeply worrying that Labour's leader, Keir Starmer, has indicated that he is likely to follow austerity. That makes it all the clearer that only the full fiscal powers of independence can ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality front-line services that they expect and deserve.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Nonetheless, bankruptcy is something that Scottish councils are talking about. Does the minister understand just how angry councils are that, two months after the First Minister announced that there was going to be a council tax freeze without, apparently, any consultation, we still do not have the details of how that will be funded? That is impacting on councils as they come to crucial decisions.

Joe FitzPatrick: The council tax freeze will help people right across Scotland. It surprises me that the Conservatives do not support the council tax freeze, which is making sure that Scotland continues to be the part of the UK with the lowest council tax. It is really important that, with the cost of living crisis, we do everything within our powers to support hard-pressed families.

We have said that we are speaking to COSLA to work out a fair settlement that meets the criteria for full payment for the council tax freeze. I would have thought that the Conservatives—of all parties—would support the Government in taking that action.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Today's programme for international student assessment analysis shows the worst performance ever for Scottish education. Does the minister believe that 16 years of council underfunding has been even partly responsible for that decline?

Joe FitzPatrick: I refer the member to my first answer, which made the point that local government finance in Scotland is 2.6 per cent higher in real terms than it was in 2013-14. The Scottish Government is working hard with our colleagues in COSLA to look at how we can loosen the ring fencing that is applied to that funding, to make sure that councils can make more decisions that suit their local needs better.

The difference between what is happening in Scotland and what is happening in the rest of the UK in terms of local government financing is black and white.

Nuclear Power

2. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of

the declaration by more than 20 countries from four continents at COP28 to triple nuclear energy capacity by 2050, recognising the key role of nuclear energy in reaching net zero, for what reason it is reportedly discounting nuclear power. (S6T-01673)

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

We are doing that because it is not safe, it is expensive and it is not wanted in Scotland. In addition, it is not needed in Scotland. We have abundant natural energy resources and capital that can contribute and are contributing to our energy mix.

As we are all seeing from experiences elsewhere in the United Kingdom, new nuclear power takes years—if not decades—to become operational, and it will push up household and business energy bills even more. Under the contract awarded by the UK Government to Hinkley Point C, the electricity that will be generated will be priced at £92.50 per megawatt hour.

We know that the Tories care little these days about achieving a pathway to net zero, but the Scottish National Party Government still does. We believe that significant growth in renewables, storage, hydrogen and carbon capture provides the best pathway to net zero for Scotland.

Edward Mountain: At the weekend, we had very cold weather, with not a gust of wind. We relied on nuclear power to keep the lights on in Scotland. Given that, why is Scotland's Government so hypocritical, being happy to import nuclear power and allowing our jobs and investment in the industry to go abroad?

Neil Gray: The National Grid Electricity System Operator conducted a study of the effect of the earlier-than-expected closure of nuclear generation in Scotland, which concluded that the system would be secure.

On the cost of nuclear power, compared with what I want to see, which is greater investment in pumped hydro storage, we can see that, in August, the UK Government announced a further £341 million investment to be made available to speed preparations for construction at Sizewell C, in addition to the £870 million stake that already exists. I would far rather see a market mechanism for the support for pumped hydro storage. Imagine if we had funding support for pumped hydro storage that was equivalent to that which is given to nuclear power. That would allow us to see power from the glens rather than white elephants from Westminster.

Edward Mountain: I was going to thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but it was not an answer to the question that I asked. Maybe it was

an answer to one that he thought that I had asked in his mind.

I went to Torness the other day and saw a very safe nuclear power station that employed plenty of people in Scotland. I asked them what they would change if they were to redesign the nuclear power station. They said, "Nothing," because what they do is good for Scotland and keeps jobs in the local economy. Why will the minister not accept that? Why does he believe that safety is the paramount failing of nuclear power, when no one else agrees with that?

Neil Gray: The evidence of the alleged hacking of Sellafield this week and what we have seen from Russia's invasion of Ukraine point clearly to the worries around safety. We in Scotland are not the only ones who have such concerns: many colleagues in the European Union are either moving away from or continue to oppose new nuclear power.

Mr Mountain spoke of hypocrisy. The announcement comes off the back of the Prime Minister spending as much time in the air in his private jet going to COP28—the 28th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—as he did negotiating a route by which we can address the climate emergency and take advantage of the economic opportunities that we have in Scotland by making a just transition to renewables.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Let us listen to the questions and the answers, please. We have a number of supplementary questions. I will start with Ivan McKee.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Because of nuclear power's high costs and the decades that it takes to build it, notwithstanding concerns about safety and the disposal of waste, it appears that nuclear power would do nothing to address the urgent need to drive down energy prices. Will the cabinet secretary provide further details of any assessment that the Scottish Government has made of the risk of nuclear power pushing bills even higher and say why significant growth in green renewables provides the best route to affordable and clean energy?

Neil Gray: The UK Government has awarded a contract for difference for 35 years for Hinkley Point C at £92.50 per megawatt hour, based on 2012 prices. That is higher than the strike prices of £73 and £64 respectively that have been set for offshore and onshore wind in the next allocation round. For that reason, significant growth in renewables provides the best pathway to net zero for Scotland, as it is a climate-friendly energy system that delivers affordable, resilient and clean energy supplies for our people, businesses and communities.

Of course, it is only with independence that our full energy potential will be realised. Scotland's massive renewable energy resources can be the bedrock of a newly independent country and, with independence, our economy can be the model for how an economy can transform itself by decarbonising and creating well-paid, secure jobs.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Nuclear energy is costly and dangerous, and it will leave a legacy of toxic waste and higher bills for generations to come. The Tories' epic failure to deliver Hinkley Point to time and budget shows just how unreliable and costly new nuclear is. In contrast, in Scotland, we are getting on with the job by building out new wind and solar energy at pace. Will the cabinet secretary join me in welcoming the new pledge from 118 countries at COP28 to triple their renewable energy capacity? Does he agree that locally sourced renewable energy is the real solution to ending our reliance on climate-wrecking fossil fuels?

Neil Gray: Yes, I do, and Mark Ruskell is absolutely right. The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that it could cost as much as £263 billion to manage the legacy of the UK's nuclear industries. That is quite the burden to pass on to future generations.

The Scottish Government's position on nuclear power is clear. We do not support the construction of new nuclear power stations in Scotland. We welcome the commitment of so many countries to accelerate the transition to renewables. The Scottish Government's draft energy strategy and just transition plan sets a high level of ambition for the further deployment of renewables of more than 20GW of additional generation capacity by 2030. That is enough renewable energy to power every house in Scotland for seven years. With the green industrial strategy that we will publish early next year, we will ensure that we take maximum economic advantage of the massive energy potential that we have coming through.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government is anti-science; that is the bottom line. The cabinet secretary would win first prize in a whataboutery competition in *The Herald*. All that we have heard is whataboutery.

Nuclear energy is a clean source of energy, and it is widely accepted as such, including by the cabinet secretary's friends in the European Union. My friend Edward Mountain mentioned Torness, where we have the last remaining nuclear power station. What about the jobs, the skill base and the high-income jobs that the nuclear industry brings to Scotland? We are about to have a statement on apprentices. How many apprentices will lose their positions at Torness when the cabinet secretary finally gets his way?

Neil Gray: There were a few questions in there from Mr Kerr.

On the position of our friends and neighbours in the European Union, in April, Germany shut down the last of its three nuclear power plants and joined other member states that have no nuclear power stations and remain opposed to nuclear power, including Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal. Several other member states, including Spain, have plans to phase out nuclear power. Perhaps that is because of the cost and the risk that it poses.

Actions speak louder than words. The fact that the Prime Minister was willing to spend only around 12 hours at COP28, where there was an opportunity to expand our opportunities—apparently, he and the Foreign Secretary flew in separate private jets—speaks louder than words. Our actions, which include those on the jobs—Mr Kerr appears to be so concerned about jobs—that we will look to harness from our green industrial strategy, demonstrate that we are taking economic advantage of the renewable power that we have in abundance in Scotland.

Post-school Education and Skills Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Graeme Dey on post-school education and skills reform. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:21

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The timing of the statement reflects the need to strike a balance between having developed sufficiently our thinking on plans for post-school education and skills reform, and satisfying the understandable desire in Parliament and beyond for insight into that. Today, I want to outline where we have got to in our work, and to note that there will be an extended and welcome opportunity for further exploration of those matters when I attend the Education, Children and Young People Committee in January.

I have been clear from the outset that the case for change that James Withers set out was convincing. That was evident in the priorities that we set out in “Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills” and other publications. Since then, we have been working through the practicalities and complexity of the proposed reforms and the choreography of change. We have, in some areas, completed that assessment phase and moved into developing our approach.

However, there are other areas—I want to be open about this—on which we are still finalising our thinking. I echo the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills’ point that reform is a process, not an event. However, members should be in no doubt that my intention is to deliver the change that is needed as quickly and effectively as possible, putting excellence and equity first. I believe that the time that is invested now in getting our approach right will pay dividends further down the line.

Our post-school education, research and skills system must deliver in two regards: it must give people the opportunity that they need throughout their lifetimes to fulfil their potential, and it must enable the vital research, innovation and knowledge exchange that underpin Scotland’s global competitiveness. That is how we will support communities and the economy to thrive.

Since June, I have visited colleges, universities, workplaces, community projects and schools, and have met employers, apprentices, learners and

educators. I have also met Opposition spokespeople. I have listened. I have been greatly encouraged by what I have heard, which is a genuine desire to rise to the challenges of reform. Nowhere is that more apparent than among the front-line staff at Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and the Student Awards Agency Scotland, where I have been met with enthusiasm and constructive and creative ideas about how to improve our offering to learners and about the areas of careers, apprenticeships and skills planning.

Reform is about more than the individual parts—it is about the whole system performing and seeing itself as more than the sum of those parts. Although reform must be a collective effort, it is for the Government to lead: we will lead the system through change, while seeking to ensure that no one is left behind.

Education is a fundamental right, not a privilege: everyone must have the opportunity to succeed. Community learning and development can be a first step along that path, through supporting some of our most vulnerable people.

However, eight months into post, I am not as clear as I want to be about how effective our current approach is. We need that clarity as we strive to ensure that all learning pathways deliver. That is why I am announcing a short independent review of community learning. The review will provide me and colleagues from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities with recommendations by June 2024. It will be undertaken by Kate Still, who will bring her extensive experience to bear on the issue.

Community learning is only one of many paths that are available in a modern economy in which technical and people-centred skills are increasingly important. There is no wrong or less-esteemed path, whether that path is via college, school, work, university or a community initiative. They are all essential parts of a modern education and skills system.

The strength of our universities is rightly recognised around the world, and I want to support our college sector to realise its full potential. An important step towards that has been the establishment of a tripartite group made up of the Government, the Scottish Funding Council and college principals that engages directly on matters that the sector believes will allow it to operate better.

There is an appetite to expand that approach to encompass other aspects of reform, capturing our universities, employers and others who are keen to champion change across the system. As part of that, I will invite representation from university and college principals on the ministerial group that the

cabinet secretary is establishing, in order to reflect their experience as practitioners.

Turning to skills, I have set out the intention that Government will lead skills planning at the national level in recognition that we must be clear about the country's strategic skills needs and to ensure that our education and skills system is able to meet those needs. To date, we have looked at skills on sectoral and regional bases, driven by demand and opportunity, but we need to improve how we translate that analysis into meaningful action.

I set out my intention to strengthen skills planning at the regional level, so that local partners, especially colleges and employers, are empowered to better align provision to regional needs and ambitions. We must take on that challenge with the support of employers, educational institutions, local government and training providers. We all have roles to play in improving skills planning and implementing it for the benefit of Scotland's economy and society. With a refreshed approach to planning, we must make sure that the right qualifications and provision are available where they are needed. Our national qualifications body will have a key role to play, which will require it to be agile in order that it can respond to the coming asks.

Apprenticeships will continue to be a vital part of the mix. Modern apprenticeships have been a huge success, and I want colleges to play an even more instrumental role in that area. Graduate apprenticeships show promise and scope for further development, so I look forward to working with universities and industry on that.

My officials will lead further development of apprenticeships policy and will bring together the full variety of voices, as well as creative and new thinking, in order to deliver the very best outcomes for learners and employers. I am also keen to explore how to develop apprenticeship pathways, for example, through modularisation, to make it easier for small businesses, including rural businesses, to benefit better.

Employers will continue to be central to the design and delivery of apprenticeships—as they should be to all provision. I have asked my officials to review and strengthen how we work with, and across, all sectors.

In reforming the system, we must, of course, address funding. The cabinet secretary and I have, since coming into our roles, had to make some incredibly difficult decisions, and the recent United Kingdom budget statement does little to improve the outlook for Scotland. We are in an era when both of the main UK parties are intent on doubling down on austerity, which means, more than ever, that every pound that is invested here

must deliver for Scotland's people. To do that, we need to reduce complexities and make sure that more investment supports learners, while we also ensure that funding makes the greatest possible impact. That will be done in line with our key principle, which is that education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

In the same way as we brought people together for the tripartite group, we will draw on the wealth of professional and practitioner expertise across the system to develop and design our future funding landscape in order to deliver the best value for money and the most seamless service for learners. Change of that magnitude will not happen overnight—in some instances, it might best be delivered incrementally.

James Withers called for the creation of a single funding body, and we do not rule that out. As an initial step, I commit to bringing learner support funding together in one place, and funding for apprenticeship provision together in one place. We will work closely with SFC, SAAS and SDS on how we will make that happen.

Let me also be clear, though, that public funding alone will not be enough. That has been and will be a key feature of discussions with businesses, with which I have already embarked on a series of round-table discussions. I have been heartened by the engagement in that space. Our system must meet their needs, but we must look at where business can go further to support the system and learners. I know that many businesses stand ready and willing to do that.

For people who are in the education system, we must ensure that the right information and advice are there to help them to make informed choices on their future. Grahame Smith is doing important work for us with the careers collaborative, which brings together many partners that support and contribute to careers information advice and guidance, in addition to SDS.

Our immediate focus is on developing a clearer and more coherent modus operandi for our national careers offering. Between the careers service that currently sits with SDS, the Developing the Young Workforce network and third sector initiatives such as Career Ready, we have the foundations to develop our careers offering into something that we can be truly proud of—and that is what we will do. We need not necessarily wait on structural change to begin progressing that work.

I am under no illusion about the scale of change that is required or the time that it will take to deliver, in certain respects. Nevertheless, today I can say without hesitation that the Government will take the lead on national skills planning and will strengthen regional approaches. There will be

simpler and more impactful funding for learners and providers; changes to apprenticeships to better reflect economic and learner needs; improvements in the quality and clarity of our careers offering; and a clear role for employers throughout.

We will take that forward with experts and practitioners while listening attentively to users, and we will be guided by their knowledge and experience.

I also know, however, that delivery of real reform requires commitment and direction from the Government, which is where my focus lies, so I look forward to continuing engagement with the Parliament on that.

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

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Today's PISA—programme for international student assessment—results make stark the need for action. However, seven months on from the Withers report, we have seen little progress, and we have even had an admission that, after eight months, the minister does not quite know what is working and what is not.

The minister has previously said—rightly—that the landscape is constantly changing, and that without action we risk being left behind. On the single funding body, can the minister give us any timeline for when that is going to happen, what the process will be and what form the body will take?

On the national employers forum, which was suggested by Withers but was not mentioned in the statement today, what is the minister's thinking, and what will be the role of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board within that?

Finally, when will we know the minister's view on the amount and payment of the flexible workforce development fund?

Graeme Dey: There was a lot in there. On the single funding body, I hope that Liam Kerr will recognise that that is a complex piece of work to carry out—not least because it involves the staff who will be captured by it. It is appropriate, therefore, that we take the right amount of time to develop our consideration of the matter. I say gently to the member that James Withers himself has welcomed the measured approach that we have taken to that, because we have to get it right.

On the employers forum, we are looking at that. Liam Kerr mentioned SAAB. I make it clear that

we want, and need, the widest range of employers' voices to be heard in the process. I emphasised that point when I met the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland. However, as I made clear when I met SAAB some months ago, we want, and we envisage, the expertise of the board and its members helping to drive and deliver reform locally and nationally. I have also committed to embedding the recommendations of SAAB's gender commission in the skills system, through the reform process.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. As he knows, this is an incredibly important area, and we need to get it right if we are going to address the opportunities and the challenges that we face in our economy. Again, however, six months on from the Withers review—I do not know exactly whether it is six or seven months—I worry about whether we have sufficient clarity specifically with regard to the what, the how and the when of reform.

Will a timeline come forward for implementation across the 14 recommendations in Withers? Will we have clarity on institutions, at least regarding whether it will be existing or new institutions that will take forward the roles in relation to funding, qualifications and employer voice?

Lastly, and perhaps most urgently, we need a plan for delivering flexible skills at the point of need for upskilling and reskilling. That does not need structural reform, so—given that it is the number 1 ask from business—will a plan be forthcoming?

Answering those questions would address the points on the urgency and clarity that the sector so badly needs.

Graeme Dey: I will deal with the last point first. I absolutely agree with the member on that. The reskilling and upskilling piece of work can be done without structural change, and it has been the subject of discussions in the past few days between myself and employers, and also the college sector, because that is a real opportunity for the sector as well. We are attempting to progress that.

I absolutely get the member's point about getting clarity as soon as possible. However, I am sure that if we dived into the process, Daniel Johnson would, a year or two years from now, be pulling me up about errors that had been made because we did not take our time to consider things.

On the point about developing a timeline, I absolutely get that. We need to provide Parliament and stakeholders with a clear idea of the timelines involved. Some of the reforms can be done relatively quickly without structural change or

legislation, while others will require that sort of work, so we will seek to deliver that as soon as we possibly can.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Workplace learning, including apprenticeships, provides a most effective route for skills acquisition for learners and employers. What will the skills review do to increase opportunities for workplace learning across the skills system?

Graeme Dey: Workplace learning that is co-designed with employers, including apprenticeships, is an integral part of a strong education and skills system. The planned reforms, particularly those to ensure that employers play a central role in the system, will help to strengthen the links between business, skills and education to integrate more workplace learning and support current and future workforce needs. That is certainly the intention.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As the beneficiary of an apprenticeship programme after I left school, I know where that path can lead. Apprenticeships are often the forgotten pillar of post-school education, but they are key to upskilling and providing a workforce that delivers for Scotland. However, the available funding remains minimal and, although the minister referred to bringing together funding for apprenticeship provision, he did not commit to providing more funding. Will he guarantee to spend on apprenticeships every penny that is raised through apprenticeship levies?

Graeme Dey: I do not know who has forgotten about apprenticeships, but it is certainly not me. The commitment to apprenticeships is hardly minimal. Substantial funding is provided for the delivery of apprenticeships. As I indicated in my statement, apprenticeships in all their guises—foundation apprenticeships, graduate apprenticeships and modern apprenticeships—will play an integral part in the work that we are going to do.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Will the minister expand on how training and course provision might be better aligned with employers' needs?

Graeme Dey: That is one subject that I have been having conversations with employers about. We want training and course provision to respond better to Scotland's economic and social needs and our future ambitions, which I am sure is exactly what employers want, too. That is at the heart of the skills planning approach that we are developing, together with employers, providers and other partners.

Our aim is to embed the role of employers in all aspects of the skills system, which includes skills planning at the national and regional levels,

training, course provision, qualifications and careers services. To give an example, as part of our national skills planning approach, I am asking my Government colleagues to identify our national economic and social priorities across portfolios, engage with employers to identify skills needs that are relevant to those priorities—not just the numbers of people who are required—and engage with training and education providers to understand how we can meet those needs.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am again, as I imagine many others will be, sorely disappointed that the Government has come to the chamber with another statement that has little substance. Nothing that the minister has said today will reassure the sector. Colleges are really struggling, finances are broken, staff are tired and angry, and students are seeing courses at risk of being cut. In some cases, there are serious questions about governance. Universities are in a similarly difficult position. More people are deferring entry or withdrawing, and institutions face a huge gap between the cost of providing education and the funding that they get to do it. Will the minister take the opportunity now to say what specific action the Government will take to address those immediate concerns?

Graeme Dey: I say with the greatest respect that that question might have been penned before Pam Duncan-Glancy heard the statement. I do not recognise at all the representation that the college sector is broken. I have been to colleges the length and breadth of the country. Colleges are doing good, innovative work, and I do not think that they would appreciate being characterised in such a way. My conversations with colleges have been entirely productive. Finance is an issue, and there are great challenges, but the college sector is as up as anyone is for taking on the challenge.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Can the minister say anything about how he sees the role of Skills Development Scotland? I understand that James Withers recommended reducing its role. Is there an opportunity to reduce the number of organisations that are involved?

Graeme Dey: Skills Development Scotland remains an integral part of our education and skills system, and it continues to undertake valuable work in a variety of areas, such as careers services and apprenticeship delivery. Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to meet a number of staff teams in SDS and have been struck by their passion, creativity and desire to improve our offer to individuals and employers.

Changes are likely to be needed in the public body landscape in the future, but it is too early to speculate on exactly what those changes will be. Decisions will be based on the evidence and informed by detailed policy development and

analysis. However, in the light of budget pressures and the overall drive for public service reform, it is clear that the status quo is not an option.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister knows that I have been critical of previous education ministers and their inaction on the skills agenda, and about the underfunding of colleges. However, I am moderately satisfied with the plan, which sets out a single source of skills funding, a national careers service and a central place for employers. I press the minister to give a bit more detail on the flexible workforce development fund. Is that continuing? Will he give us a sense of how urgent he thinks carrying out the reform should be?

Graeme Dey: I could say that I am deeply concerned that Willie Rennie is “moderately satisfied” with the plan, but that would be churlish of me.

On the pace of reform, we will go as quickly as possible. I look forward to engaging with Mr Rennie at the Education, Children and Young People Committee next month, when I am sure we will have the opportunity to get into that in more detail.

On the flexible workforce development fund, I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on this year’s funding shortly. I fully understand the desire for clarity.

With regard to the future, we are exploring the whole piece on upskilling, reskilling, training and how that is delivered as part of the wider offering.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I agree with the minister that everyone must have the opportunity to succeed, and that community learning and development is crucial in supporting some of our most vulnerable people. How does the minister envisage community learning and development interacting with the post-school reform agenda?

Graeme Dey: The independent review of CLD offers a timely opportunity to better understand how we can ensure that the proposed changes to the education and skills system have a focus on the most marginalised learner.

The review links directly to reforming the education and skills landscape. Without prejudicing the outcome, I think that connecting that work has the potential to create a more joined-up system that has clear routes for progression for adults and young people who are currently disengaged from learning and/or work. To be blunt, as the minister who is leading on the reform, I want to be as confident as I can be that we are not leaving anyone behind.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The minister speaks of the need to reduce complexities, and he

will be aware of the recommendations from the recent report on college regionalisation. In his statement, we heard of the need to ensure that more investment supports learners while ensuring that funding makes the greatest impact. Despite that, he made no reference to the disparity in funding between university and college students, with the latter receiving £2,500 less investment per person. Will the minister guarantee parity of funding between university and college students?

Graeme Dey: The member makes an important point about the landscape, but I point out to her that James Withers is clear that there is no shortage of funding in the post-16 landscape; rather, the issue is duplication, and he questions where some of the funding is deployed.

I am not going to stand here today and start a bun fight between colleges and universities about funding. However, I remember from serving on the Education Children and Young People Committee with Sue Webber that that was evidence that we took. I recognise that we need to have a detailed conversation with all parts of the landscape about future funding and how we ensure fairness of funding.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The minister knows, like we all do, that Covid has undoubtedly had an impact on our young people. How will he ensure that our young people—particularly those who are now furthest from employment as a result of that impact—have the skills and qualifications that they need to succeed?

Graeme Dey: Ensuring that that happens is heavily dependent on partners, and I pay tribute to all of them in that regard.

I am keen that we build on the excellent work that is being led by the developing the young workforce initiative, Career Ready and the many other partnerships that are already in place, linking institutions and employers, to increase the range of access to meaningful work experience opportunities for learners.

Where possible, it is clearly beneficial for those opportunities to have direct relevance to learners' abilities and interests. However, we should also recognise that work experience in itself brings many benefits and development for learners. I encourage all employers to consider what high-quality work experience opportunities they might be able to offer to learners and to help us to expand the offer. I know that that will be of mutual benefit to them and to learners.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I like the minister, and I enjoyed being on the Education, Children and Young People Committee with him, but he has come to the chamber with a statement that has nothing really in it. I do not

know whether that is to meet a commitment to make a statement, but there is nothing in it to get excited about, frankly.

I am delighted that the minister has an appetite for reform, but employers are impatient, because they see and are living with the consequences of a skills crisis. Demand for apprenticeships is outstripping the supply that the Government is prepared to fund. Many businesses pay an apprenticeship levy, but the fact is that not every penny of that levy goes towards apprenticeships. That is just not right. Will the minister confirm that it is his intention, as well as that of the cabinet secretary, that every penny of the apprenticeship levy that is accrued for apprenticeship schemes in Scotland is actually spent on apprenticeships, and that the demand that there is among employers will be met by the supply that he provides?

Graeme Dey: It is impossible to answer that question, and I will tell Mr Kerr why. Mr Kerr's party's Government in the UK does not share with us the amount of money that is raised in Scotland through the apprenticeship levy. We are blind to that figure. It is incorporated into the block grant.

However, I can tell Mr Kerr that a substantial sum of money is spent on apprenticeships in this country. I have to say that his negativity—predictable though it is—is completely at odds with the positive engagement that I have had with employers. Yes, they are anxious that we get on with this, but I have found only positivity among employers, and long may that continue.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): How will the minister guarantee that universities' autonomy will not be threatened by any plans for a single funding body?

Graeme Dey: I think that Mr Lumsden is referring to the research aspect. Universities have aired that concern. We are very much alive to that, and it is very much in our thinking as we take our work forward.

Disability Equality and Human Rights

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11537, in the name of Emma Roddick, on championing disability equality and human rights.

14:47

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I am very glad to be speaking to the motion, because, for many reasons, it is an important time of year for us to mark. First, we are just five days away from the 75th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which set out, for the first time, fundamental human rights that are to be universally protected. We have just marked the international day of disabled people, the theme of which was “United in action to rescue and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for, with and by persons with disabilities”. As many people of faith and none celebrate various holidays and events at this time of year, it is a good opportunity to reflect on where we are as a society—as humans across the world—and how we are delivering on our principles and supporting people who have less than we have.

Creating a fairer and more equal society is a priority for the Government. We know that a fairer Scotland can be realised only when we secure equal rights for everyone—when someone’s age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion and family and socioeconomic status do not decide the course of their life or present them with barriers and prejudice. Despite great steps forward having been made, we know that, in many areas of life, disabled people are often the furthest away from having their rights realised.

The core principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights include that human rights are universal and inalienable—they belong to everyone equally. We are all

“free and equal in dignity and rights.”

“Dignity” is a familiar word to disabled people. From the perception that requiring support is undignified to suggestions that showing any kind of vulnerability, be it social or medical, means that someone is not living with dignity, so much pressure is placed on people to present a certain way, to mask feelings of pain and to suffer in silence.

As a disabled person, I know how strong we often are because we have had to be. I know how

often we have been ignored because we are often easy to ignore. I know how much work is needed across the board not just to improve the visible and practical issues that we face, but to undo the systemic inequality that stacks everything up against us. Not only do we face discrimination and prejudice in the workplace, but we have to listen as Conservatives down south suggest that disabled people have value as human beings only if they are able to work and that relying on social security, which keeps many disabled people alive, is somehow a failure of character.

The changes to work capability assessments that are proposed by the Tories concern us greatly, because we know that they would lead to people with long-term health conditions or people who are disabled being at risk of benefit sanction. On 2 October, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice wrote to her counterpart in the United Kingdom Government, seeking assurance that any changes would be evidence based and in the interests of those they are there to support. However, research by the Department for Work and Pensions has found that the move from legacy benefits to universal credit has resulted in more and more disabled people being subject to sanctions, including those who are waiting for work capability assessments.

We are opposed to that widespread use of sanctions. It is clear that they do not work. However, the vilification of disabled people and the message that is being sent, that they are of less worth than others and that harm done to our community by welfare cuts is some kind of necessary evil, continue to show up again and again. That betrays an inaccurate and degrading view of disabled people.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I do not disagree with anything that the minister has said thus far in an excellent speech. Does she agree that the gold standard for protecting the rights of people with disabilities is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? Given that this is the week when we will reconsider our attempts to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into law, what steps will her Government take to do something similar with the UNCRPD?

Emma Roddick: That is an excellent point. The member will be aware that the UNCRPD is one of four treaties that we are seeking to incorporate into Scots law as part of our forthcoming human rights bill, which I will talk about shortly.

At the disability summit that was held a week and a half ago, Tressa Burke from the Glasgow Disability Alliance noted the recent comments by the UK Government on disabled people working from home and rightly pointed out that, currently,

not many work-at-home opportunities are available to disabled people.

We see things differently in Scotland. We reject the notion that everyone is able to work and that those who cannot work or have not received the support that they need in order to do so do not deserve help from the Government. We also accept that many disabled people can work and want to do so, but changes are needed to open up the job market to them. Although employment law remains reserved to the UK Government, we use our fair work policies to promote fairer work practices across the labour market in Scotland. That includes our fair work action plan, which takes an intersectional approach to minimising the structural barriers that disabled people, racialised minorities and women, in particular, face.

The action plan also reinforces the Scottish Government's ambition to at least halve the disability employment gap by 2038 from the 2016 baseline of 37.4 per cent. We work closely with disabled people and their representative organisations to ensure that their voices and experiences help to shape our policy and the actions that we take to meet our ambitions. Through a combination of locally designed services such as no one left behind and our national employment service, Fair Start Scotland, we are delivering all-age, person-centred and tailored employability services, including in-work support, to those who are furthest from the labour market.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): That is not the feedback that I often get from young people in my constituency. Those living in rural areas find those programmes very hard to access, and good services that have cross-party support, such as the Usual Place in Dumfries, do not meet the criteria for funding. Will the minister look at that again?

Emma Roddick: Oliver Mundell asked me recently about that particular service, and I am more than happy to reach out and speak again about what is happening. Obviously, our equality and human rights fund is under review at the moment—as is the whole budget—but we will always work to see what more can be done to achieve our shared ambitions. Those services are entirely voluntary and, of course, have no threat of benefit sanction.

The cost of living crisis, Covid and inflation impact on everyone and on every Government in the country. Where equality comes into play is that the impact is not the same for, or felt the same by, everyone due to systemic issues. Last year and this year, we have allocated almost £3 billion to support policies that tackle poverty and protect people, as far as possible, from the cost of living crisis. That includes our £30 million fuel insecurity

fund, which was tripled this year, and our new winter heating payment that is targeted at low-income households, including those with a disabled adult or with responsibility for supporting a disabled child.

We have invested almost £2.7 billion in our adult disability payment, which replaces the personal independence payment in Scotland. From the beginning, we were committed to delivering a benefit that was centred on treating people with dignity, fairness and respect. From keeping assessments in-house and compassionate to not using brown envelopes to write to people who are in receipt of ADP, disabled people co-designed the system with us. In the Scottish system, nobody is subject to DWP-style assessments or degrading examinations, and we never use the private sector to carry out health assessments.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister recognise the significant challenges in relation to delays in the administration of ADP and the challenging wait times to get through to Social Security Scotland to get the support and advice that people need?

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. I would point out that Social Security Scotland has taken urgent action around decision making to speed it up. In the past quarter, we processed the highest number of applications since the benefit launched, which was almost 55 per cent more applications than in the previous three months. From April to July, the median processing time was reduced by eight working days. We know that some people are still waiting too long, and speeding up processing remains an urgent priority. I reassure Paul O’Kane and anybody who has applied that eligible people will have their payments backdated, because we know that disability costs money.

From funding care to paying what is often named the disability tax that is applied to simple adaptations and household items for disabled people, disability benefits are vital to keeping people safe and well. Our funding to support people with energy bills recognises the extra energy costs that being disabled often creates and how much more at risk many people are from having to self-ration their energy. For some, it means putting on an extra jumper, putting on the slow cooker or being quite uncomfortable; for others, it can take years off their life. Disabled people can access our winter heating payment, and the fuel insecurity fund is so important for that reason. We need to increase awareness of such difficulties across Government and public bodies so that, when we look at where to focus spending, we do so with disabled people's needs and priorities at heart.

In my role as the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, I work closely with disabled people's organisations, which play an important role in championing disabled people's rights across Scotland and in keeping the Government right on disability competence. I am currently working with them to develop and implement an immediate priorities plan, which will deliver actions to help to tear down the barriers that disabled people face, focusing on the things that need to change immediately if any future strategies and plans are to achieve the impact that we need.

It has never been a given that disabled people's voices are at the core of decisions about disabled people. It still is not. Many people still try to speak for us, so I recognise the importance of continuing to work with DPOs and putting lived experience at the heart of decision making—nothing about us without us.

However, we will always be fighting against the tide if we cannot pull society forward, create a human rights culture and—to steal a line from the LGBT poet laureate—make equality fact. That is why it is so important that, in our forthcoming human rights bill, we will incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into Scots law as far as possible within devolved competence.

Scotland has the potential to be a world leader in human rights, in both the implementation and the realisation of them. We are doing that in an extremely difficult context—a context in which the UK Government is trying to roll back those very same inalienable rights. The Scottish Government strongly opposed proposals to replace the Human Rights Act 1998 with a bill of rights. The Lord Chancellor's decision in June not to proceed with that regressive bill of rights was widely welcomed across the political spectrum, but there are still serious and legitimate concerns about the UK Government's current trajectory. Suella Braverman advocates withdrawing from the European convention on human rights. She may have been sacked, but her views are shared by many others in the UK Government.

It is international human rights defenders day on 9 December, and the Scottish Government wholeheartedly supports the work that is being done by human rights defenders. As we see rights breaches across the globe, the day is an important reminder—especially now—to stand up for human rights, to challenge any example of them not being met and never to take for granted that they will always be there. The Scottish human rights defender fellowship is funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by the University of Dundee. The fellowship enables human rights defenders facing difficult conditions in other

countries to spend several months in Scotland, where they can rest, continue their work, further develop their skills and expand their networks in a place of safety.

Just as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not the final step towards the universal realisation of those rights, our bill will not be the end of our journey. It is an important and big step, but it will require the right, effective implementation and work by people from across society and across the public, private and third sectors, and it will require the intangible acceptance of a human rights culture by everyone in Scotland.

The bill will not give disabled people equality overnight—nothing could—but it will give us the chance to educate people about what their rights are and to provide them with routes to justice when those are not being realised. It will force duty bearers to treat us with dignity, fairness and respect, creating a structure that allows the potential for equality, and it will send a message that Scotland is a place where everyone matters. I hope that members from all parties will join us, when the bill is passed, in being part of that movement and part of the campaign to educate people about, and to ensure, rights.

I am really looking forward to today's debate, because I know that there are people in every party who care deeply about human rights for disabled people, including many disabled people themselves. Just two Saturdays ago, this chamber was full of disabled people and our allies for the first summit to mark the international day of disabled people. That was a wonderful feeling. I hope that today will bring a similar show of solidarity. Although we may disagree on the finer points of implementation, or about who is most to blame for rights not currently being met, I am sure that today will also offer an opportunity for all parties to unite in agreement on the need to uphold and progress human rights for disabled people.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the ambition for Scotland to be a world leader in both the legislation for, and realisation of, human rights; recognises the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis continue to have on disabled people's human rights and equality; welcomes the action being taken across the Scottish Government, including reopening the Independent Living Fund in Scotland, with an initial investment of £9 million, and a commitment to develop and implement an Immediate Priorities Plan for Disabled People; notes the recent consultation on a Human Rights Bill to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights and rights for disabled people into Scots law, which, if effectively implemented, will help secure a life of dignity for all, including the most marginalised and disadvantaged; reaffirms the values of Scotland's National Performance Framework outcomes for disabled people, including protecting human rights, allowing people to live free from discrimination, and creating a fairer,

more inclusive Scotland, and commits to listening to the lived experience and expertise of disabled people and to sharing policy development and decision-making in a genuinely inclusive and participatory manner.

15:02

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I apologise for the delay in my attendance in the chamber.

I will open with the words of Natasha Hamilton, daughter of Anne Duke, who gave evidence last month to the Scottish Covid inquiry. Natasha told the inquiry that she did not have a chance to say a final goodbye to her mother because she had to “wait her turn” while her father and sister were in Anne’s room. Even though the family knew that Anne was hours away from passing, Natasha was not able to enter the care home until a certain point. Natasha told the inquiry:

“I had to take a PCR Covid test. I got to my mum’s room, I opened the door and my dad was frantic and I looked at my sister and my sister just nodded at me. I’d missed being with my mum by seconds because we had to stagger who was coming into the care home.”

As campaigners have said, the practices that were put in place during the pandemic were arguably far worse than the virus itself because they denied many elderly and vulnerable Scots the comfort of their loved ones in the final hours of their lives.

Throughout the pandemic and since, I have worked with and supported families who want to tell their own stories, and I take the opportunity to pay tribute to Anne’s husband, Campbell Duke, and her daughter, Natasha Hamilton, for the campaign that they have led to see Anne’s law put in place to ensure that people living in care homes have the legal right to visits from loved ones and that there will be shared decision making about care if any restrictions have to be put in place in future.

It has become common for ministers and officials to talk about taking a human rights-based approach. Members from across the chamber agree with that as we respond to questions and discuss future policy developments, but we must see what that means at the heart of policy. I want to look at some of the evidence that the Covid inquiry has heard about times when that was not the case. Care home residents were neglected and, in many cases, were left to starve because of the restrictions that were imposed during the Covid pandemic.

Today’s debate is not about the Scottish Government’s handling of the pandemic; it is about the lessons around human rights, which we should learn. This has not been mentioned, but six in 10 of the people who died with Covid-19 in Scotland were disabled people. I wish to return to the decisions that were taken during the

pandemic. Three years on from the restrictions being put in place, many of the people who were in care homes during the pandemic are not alive today. We should always bring our discussions around human rights policy back to the stories and experiences that their families and friends wish to ensure are never forgotten.

One example is the case of my constituent, Mr Rodger Laing, who, against the wishes of his family, had his power of attorney overruled. He was transferred from Midlothian community hospital to a care home. Mr Laing developed coronavirus and died from it. His daughter Gail has said that she

“will never be able to forgive them”

for her dad, and that

“someone needs to be held accountable.”

As part of the Covid-19 response by Scottish National Party ministers, 1,090 additional care home places were purchased, and in many cases patients were moved without the shared decision making of their families.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Please resume your seat for a second, Mr Briggs. I am finding your speech very interesting, but I am looking at the amendment that was selected—although it has not yet been moved—and I note that there are references in it pertaining to the title of the Government’s debate on disability and disabled people in particular. I was wondering if you were intending to address those points in your speech.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely am. The cases that I am referring to relate to individuals who had complex needs and care needs during the pandemic. Indeed, the first line of my amendment makes a point about the need for investigations into

“the failings of Scottish ministers during the pandemic”

around human rights. It is important that we consider that today.

Another constituent of mine who also raised concerns, specifically around human rights breaches, was Heather Goodare, who had a “Do not attempt cardio resuscitation” notice placed on her during her stay in hospital. She did not discover that until she had left hospital, when she found it buried within her notes. Her daughter Roseanne had refused to sign a “Do not resuscitate” order when she was first asked to, when her mother was admitted to hospital.

Campaigners are raising such concerns because they want our human rights legislation to ensure that vulnerable patients across Scotland do not face such practices in the future. I have raised those points with former and current First

Ministers, as we have not had a full investigation by Government into those practices that took place during the pandemic. There are many examples of cases in which ministers need to consider what were arguably breaches of human rights in Scotland during the pandemic.

We also need to consider people having their care packages suspended—in particular, young people with disabilities having their independent support packages removed or cut and having to move home with their elderly parents. The Government motion states:

“That the Parliament notes the ambition for Scotland to be a world leader in both the legislation for, and realisation of, human rights”.

I agree, but we need to take this opportunity to consider the consequences of a pandemic and human rights violations.

Last Sunday marked the United Nations international day of persons with disabilities, which aims

“to promote the rights and well-being of all persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and development”

and

“To increase awareness of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic, and cultural life”

across the world. The disability employment gap in Scotland remains too wide, as I think we all recognise. In 2022, it was 31.9 percentage points, with 82.5 per cent of non-disabled people in employment, compared with 50.7 per cent of disabled people.

The Government motion

“notes the recent consultation on a Human Rights Bill to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights ... into Scots law”.

I think that there is cross-party welcome for that opportunity. Many colleagues across the chamber have explored where they could introduce their own bills in this area. I note, in particular, the work that Pam Duncan-Glancy and Jeremy Balfour have done on members’ bills to do just that and to advocate and advance rights for disabled people in Scotland. Ministers do not necessarily seem to want to engage with bills from Opposition parties in this area, but I hope that today’s debate presents an opportunity for ministers to think again on that.

Members who are outside the Government SNP and Green parties want to make progress and are doing so themselves with members’ bills but have not had the necessary engagement from the Government. It perhaps does not need the numbers, but there are ideas from across the chamber that the Government is missing. As the

Scottish Human Rights Commission’s executive director, Jan Savage, stated:

“The Scottish Government has not done enough to ensure disabled people’s human rights are fully realised and we are pushing for protection of disabled people’s rights to employment, independent living and an adequate standard of living”.

I hope that the minister, who is in a relatively new role, will take on board the opportunity that other members present with their members’ bills.

In the previous session of Parliament, I proposed Frank’s law—a bill to extend free personal care to people under 65. Parliament united and helped to deliver that policy, but we still need many councils to follow through to deliver it in full. I hope that the Scottish Government will choose to work with Parliament to make progress on all human rights issues in this session, and that the Government will work to deliver in full Anne’s law, as I outlined earlier, and Calum’s law, which is about young people in disabled services—Daniel Johnson is working on a member’s bill on that.

Evidence and experience show that, when barriers to inclusion are removed for them, people with disabilities are empowered to fully participate in our society, and our entire community benefits. Barriers faced by persons with disabilities are, therefore, a detriment to society as a whole, and accessibility is necessary to achieve progress and development for all. I hope that the debate gives us an opportunity to consider many of the things that still need to change in Scotland.

I move amendment S6M-11537.1, to insert at end:

“; expresses concern over the number of families, children and disabled people in temporary accommodation; calls on the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry to investigate the failings of Scottish ministers during the pandemic such as instances of disabled people being moved out of hospital without family decision-making, and disabled people having their care and independent support packages cut or suspended, and further calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that all those in receipt of Adult Disability Payment and Personal Independence Payment are also entitled to claim Social Security Scotland’s Winter Heating Payment, to deliver the Coming Home Implementation recommendations for young people with learning disabilities and complex care needs being held inappropriately in hospital settings, to support and deliver Anne’s Law and Calum’s Law, and to fully implement and deliver Frank’s Law.”

15:11

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to participate in the debate and to speak about the experience of disabled people in Scotland so soon after the international day of persons with disabilities. It is important that we take time in the chamber to continue to highlight, engage with and support everyone who has a

disability in Scotland and to ensure that we continue to move towards a future in which we keep tearing down the barriers that disabled people face.

I add my thanks to parliamentary staff and all MSPs involved with the events in Parliament to mark that international day, particularly the organisation of the summit on 25 November. Bringing more disabled people into their Parliament keeps the spotlight firmly on the issues and compels all of us to refocus our efforts on the ambition for Scotland to be a world leader in human rights and disability equality.

There is a clear consensus on the first line of the Government's motion, which calls for ambition. However, I struggle a little to see in the rest of the motion the scale of action that is required to hear what disabled people are telling us and to act accordingly.

I refer colleagues to my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of Enable Scotland and a former member of its staff.

In September, prior to the announcement of the programme for government, disabled people's organisations wrote to the First Minister calling for clear action to support disabled people, lift them out of poverty and ensure that they are involved in the development of policy that has a huge impact on their everyday lives. The letter said:

"A lack of focus and attention, combined with no accountability or political leadership and a genuine gap in disability competence politically and in your Government, has resulted in disabled people and our DPOs feeling dehumanised and deprioritised."

The Scottish Human Rights Commission has starkly highlighted the scale of the challenges in saying that there is an

"implementation gap between intentions and good laws and policy".

The Scottish Independent Living Coalition has concluded:

"the situation for disabled people overall in Scotland has not got any better since the 2016 Inquiry"

by the UNCRPD into the impact of austerity.

Those are serious comments, and they are hardly ringing endorsements of action on disability rights. We must reflect on them and think about how we will act accordingly.

I recognise that, as the motion says, the Government has reopened the independent living fund—although in a phased way—but that action alone is not enough. Organisations have made it clear that they want that fund to be fully reopened and resourced in order to make the progress that they hope to see.

As we have heard, less than two weeks ago, the Government voted against the member's bill that my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy introduced to support disabled young people into adulthood. That bill was supported by many disability advocacy groups. We had a strong debate in the chamber about the landscape and what needs to change more broadly in Scotland. Indeed, the Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise said in her opening speech:

"we absolutely recognise that, at the moment, too many disabled young people are not getting the support that they need."

She went on to reaffirm that in her closing speech, saying:

"it is clear that the current situation in respect of disabled young people's experiences of their transitions needs to improve."—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2023; c 73, 97.]

As I said, members spoke in that debate about the cluttered landscape and the lack of policy interventions to improve access to support—particularly non-residential care support. Given what Ms Don said, we have to ask ourselves who has had the power to change those things over the past 16 years. The responsibility for that has been at the door of this Government. It has had the opportunity to deal with the cluttered landscape and to make the policy interventions that would have the most impact.

The Feeley report, which was published two years ago, contained a strong suite of recommendations, but they are yet to be implemented. The Government has not fulfilled its manifesto commitment to implement them. It promised an immediate priorities plan and said that that would be published in June, but it was not. We have repeatedly been promised a national transitions strategy since it was included in the SNP's 2016 manifesto, but that has now been pushed back to the end of next year. Those repeated delays and failures to act on promises to disabled people are hardly a strong demonstration of progress on the aspirations that are laid out in the Government's motion. Labour is clear that we want bolder and quicker action from the Government to deal with the issues that disabled people and the organisations that support them and advocate for their rights raise with us all.

We were pleased to see the references in the Conservative amendment to Frank's law, Calum's law and Anne's law. As we have heard, those legislative provisions or proposals draw support from members across the chamber. However, the challenge often lies in the implementation and delivery of such things, and in ensuring that progress is made that will have the impact on people's lives that we all want.

Very often, such proposals come to Parliament by way of disabled people and their relatives and friends campaigning for changes. A few months ago, I was outside the Parliament with members from across the chamber when a group of disabled people were calling for action on non-residential care charges, which was included in the Feeley recommendations. They were very clear that they cannot wait for that. They are frustrated by the lack of action from the Government to move that agenda forward. Crucially, those are the sorts of things that give people who have a disability independence and the freedom to choose what they want to do in their lives and when they want to do it.

It is a real shame that many of the things that I have mentioned are missing from the Government's motion and that we are still waiting for a large range of support and interventions in response to the proposals. Ultimately, we want to see ambition on human rights and disability equality. Scottish Labour will always work for the furthering of both wherever we can. Unfortunately, after 16 years of this Government, there has been a failure to show tangible action towards both ambitions.

I hope that we will hear more detail in the debate, including on people's experiences, and I hope that the minister will respond to what I have said when she sums up. This debate will continue.

I move amendment S6M-11537.2, to leave out from "recognises" to end and insert:

"acknowledges that the Scottish Human Rights Commission has warned that the Scottish Government has not done enough to ensure that disabled people's human rights are fully realised; is deeply concerned that disabled people's organisations believe that the gap in political leadership has led to disabled people feeling deprioritised and dehumanised; notes the Scottish Government's commitment to develop and implement an Immediate Priorities Plan for Disabled People, which was promised in June 2023; believes that the repeated delays in addressing the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have hampered the ability of disabled people to recover from the effects that they have suffered; notes that the Scottish Government has failed to implement the recommendations of the Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland in full, and urges the Scottish Government to belatedly provide its Immediate Priorities Plan with the political resource and leadership that it has, until now, lacked."

15:19

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the Government for bringing its motion to the chamber for debate. When I think back to my time as convener of the for Scotland's disabled children coalition, I can see that we have travelled a great distance. I recognise the good will in the minister's remarks and the Government's intent, but our legislation is only as good as its

implementation, and that is often where legislation falls down. I will come on to that later.

As I said in my intervention on the minister, this is a timely debate, not least as it comes during the week in which we will debate a legislative reconsideration of our attempts to incorporate into Scots law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The disabled people who watch our proceedings this afternoon will watch us take steps to incorporate the UNCRC into law with a hunger and a desire for us to follow that with the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I am therefore gratified by the minister's restated commitment to that end and her timeline for it.

Disabled people matter. Their rights matter. It therefore matters a great deal that we do all that we can to include them in our society in every possible way; to take steps in this place so that people with disabilities prosper and achieve their potential; and not by act of either omission or commission to make their lives harder than they already are.

Sadly, in many ways, we miss the mark. The Scottish Government's equality evidence finder reported that, in 2018, the employment rate for disabled people was 45 per cent, compared with 81 per cent for those without a disability. That represents a huge disparity in employment.

It comes then as no surprise that rates of poverty are far higher in households in which somebody lives with a disability, compared with those in which no one is disabled. In fact, half of those in poverty live in a household that has at least one disabled family member.

We must bear in mind that people with disabilities sometimes have additional strains on their budget. For example, due to reliance on assistive technologies, they might have higher fuel bills, higher electricity costs and other essential expenses. Often the poverty that people face, due to their having a disability, can mean that they are not able to meet their most basic needs. That is just not humane.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On that point, is the member aware of the stark statistic that three out of four users of the Trussell Trust's food banks are from a household with a disabled adult or child?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Something is fundamentally wrong in our provision—in the safety net that we in this place seek to provide for families affected by disability—if such a disproportionate number have to rely on food banks.

In August this year, the Scottish Human Rights Commission said that the Scottish Government

“has not done enough” to support the human rights of people with disabilities. In that report to the UN, the commission also raised concern about what it called a “crisis” for disabled people’s rights. Its executive director, Jan Savage, said:

“The Scottish Government has not done enough to ensure disabled people’s human rights are fully realised”.

He went on to say:

“the situation for disabled people overall in Scotland has not got better”.

That is a damning indictment. I recognise that progress is coming with the forthcoming bill to incorporate the UNCRPD, but we must go further.

Those remarks speak to a Scotland with a Mental Welfare Commission that is all too ready to appoint a curator to speak for a person deemed not to have the capacity to communicate, even though that person actually has such capacity. With a small amount of effort, their voice could be put at the centre of a process that could determine the rest of their lives. The remarks speak to a Scotland in which our built environment and even new developments that come on stream present unnecessary and ill-thought-out physical barriers to our constituents who have mobility difficulties, and they speak to a Scotland in which children who have an episode of behavioural flare-up as a result of a neurodivergent condition are still being restrained and subdued in ways that leave lasting trauma.

The Government, therefore, has real work to do in protecting disabled people’s rights and in our efforts to include them in employment and wider society. In part, it is still failing the test set for all of us—a test that we understand full well, because of debates, such as this one, that we have with regularity.

I welcome the reopening of the independent living fund, and I welcome the fact that we are having this debate, but we are still miles from where we need to be. For example, when it comes to social security—the minister referenced a lot of this in her remarks—we know that those who apply for adult disability payments face longer waits than they should. In fact, they are facing longer waits than people under the DWP system for personal independence payments. When somebody in receipt of PIP who lives in Scotland reports a change in circumstances, they are currently forced to wait for three months to be moved over; only then does Social Security Scotland start to work on that change in circumstances. If, during that time, their condition worsens and they are entitled to a higher rate, they miss out.

I welcome the minister’s clarification in that respect, but there is still a massive cash-flow issue for those families right now. Something that should

happen at the touch of a button is taking months and denying disabled people the support that they need when they need it. That lays bare the Scottish Government’s lack of foresight in removing the dedicated social security minister who could have properly overseen the transition at its most critical juncture.

The Government promised fairness, respect and dignity under the new arrangement, and we all signed up to it. Instead, people are still being left to wait in uncertainty for months while a decision is being made. That is just not good enough for families across Scotland.

The writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks once wrote:

“I wish for a world that views disability, mental or physical, not as a hindrance but as a unique attribute, that can be seen as powerful assets if given the right opportunity.”

That is something that we should all wish for. It is something that we as a society should strive for, and the realisation of the rights of people with disabilities is the only way to go about it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate to ensure that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

15:25

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The aim captured in the Government’s motion is that all disabled people should have freedom, dignity, choice and control over their lives. I hope that all of us can unite in agreeing that those are extremely laudable aims and objectives, and that they are essential. We can also use those objectives to test the reality for many disabled people in Scotland today.

I want to start by making a key point, which I think is the source of everything else that we might debate today. Human rights are based on the concept that everybody is equal, and true equality is rooted in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, irrespective of who they are, how they contribute, where they live or whether they conform to some sort of nonsensical, invented societal norm. Quite obviously, nobody in this chamber can speak fully for others, which is why it is so important that we hear directly from those who live with disabilities. They should be at the heart of policy making and of critiquing and feeding back on where we are falling short and where we are getting it right.

I am delighted to speak for those who cannot speak, including fellow citizens such as my uncle, who was born in the 1960s with Down’s syndrome and was not expected to live for very long. Despite

that, he will be celebrating his 58th birthday in February. His MSP is John Swinney, and the first time that I ever met the Conservative MSP, Alexander Stewart, was at my uncle's 50th birthday party, which was probably one of the most exciting birthday parties that I had ever been at.

My grandmother had to fight tooth and nail over decades to give my uncle the very objectives that this debate calls for. She wanted him to have freedom, which required education facilities to invest in teaching him, giving him skills and ensuring that his educational experience was of the same standard and offered him the same dignity as the experience of those who did not have a disability. Having been equipped with those skills, he would then go on to have greater freedom throughout life.

My grandmother also cared about my uncle having control over his life and being able to work in any job, do sports and pursue hobbies. He must be one of the biggest St Johnstone fans whom I have ever met—which was unfortunate, as all his family were required to join him for dinner at the St Johnstone stadium. We would meet various team members, and not really knowing terribly much about St Johnstone at the time—although I obviously have improved my knowledge since then—meant that we had to hide our ignorance.

My grandmother also wanted my uncle to have dignity, not just in how he saw himself but in how other people treated him. She wanted him to be treated as an equal, not patronised. So often, our discussions and debates about disabled people are full of patronising language, as though we must ensure that they are protected and so on; we do not realise that they have far more to teach us and to equip us with than the other way around.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I very much enjoyed listening to the story of Kate Forbes's uncle, but before she told us that story, she talked about giving people with disabilities a voice and then went on to describe the patronising assumptions that society makes about people with disabilities. Does she recognise that one of the criticisms that has been levelled at Scotland by the UN Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities is that, all too readily, mental welfare commissions rush to appoint a curator when it seems too difficult to hear the voice of the person at the heart of it, even when that is not impossible and even when, with just a bit more effort, we could hear their voice instead of giving that judgment over to somebody else?

Kate Forbes: That is absolutely fair and right. It is not just about listening to disabled people, but about having the courage to introduce policies that reflect the diversity of people's experience and not treating disabled people as a homogenous whole.

My final point was about choice over where to live, and my uncle has lived in various places such as sheltered accommodation in Perth as well as in residential care. When I look back on the narrative of my uncle's life, it is very clear that, in his particular example, the fighting and battling for basic rights got easier over time as Governments worked to ensure that policies reflected disabled people's human rights.

We have made progress but, a few weeks ago, I met some hearing impaired pupils in the Highlands who are being held back at school, because of a total lack of British Sign Language teachers. That reminded me of how essential it is that we provide that choice and that freedom by focusing on young people's education at the youngest of ages.

The point that I am making in my speech is that reaching those objectives requires more than sentiment and rhetoric once a year. It is about embedding that human rights approach in all of our work. We will have succeeded when nobody feels the need to fight against the system to get what we believe should be rightfully theirs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have quite a bit of time in hand, so interventions can easily be taken without any reduction in speaking time. With that, I call Annie Wells to be followed by Kevin Stewart.

15:32

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I welcome the chance today to talk about the challenges that disabled people face in Scotland. There is much in the motion that we can welcome. We agree that Scotland can and should be a world leader in protecting human rights. We recognise the incredible difficulties that many disabled people faced during the pandemic and the global cost of living crisis, and we believe that disabled people must be at the centre of the decisions that affect them. More attention must be paid to the disability employment gap and the disability payment gap. There should be no discrimination in our economy or society, and we must work harder to root it out.

However, many important human rights issues for disabled people have been left out of the motion entirely. It paints an overly positive picture of the Government's actions and glosses over many crucial aspects of the Administration's policies. It neglects to mention the terrible failings of the Government, focusing only on the limited amount of positive work, and paying no attention to the negatives. It ignores many of the issues that the Scottish ministers ought to focus on, and that is what my party's amendment seeks to address.

Given that the motion says that we should "secure a life of dignity for all, including the most marginalised and disadvantaged",

I fail to see how the Government cannot mention Scotland's drug deaths crisis. It is an issue that is close to home for me—literally. In Springburn and communities like it across Glasgow, Dundee and the rest of Scotland, drug deaths have caused devastation. On the SNP Government's watch, drug deaths spiralled to the worst level in Europe—several times worse than anywhere else in the UK—and we now lose more than 1,000 people each year to drugs in Scotland. Alcohol deaths, too, have hit record highs, and we also lose more than 1,000 people each year to alcohol in Scotland.

Those appalling statistics are not just for a year; they have been at or close to record levels for many years. For all that time, the Government has failed to act with enough urgency and enough resources. By Nicola Sturgeon's own admission, the SNP took its eye off the ball. The SNP has neglected people's human rights, including the rights of some of the most vulnerable. The lack of action from the Government has left whole families and communities in grief. Even now, years after the crisis began, the SNP is not doing anywhere near enough. It plays politics with drug and alcohol deaths. Instead of trying to save lives, it focuses on creating division with the UK.

Any discussion on human rights must include the SNP's horrendous failure to tackle the shameful number of lives lost to drug and alcohol addiction. The motion overlooks and ignores some of our most vulnerable communities.

Drug and alcohol deaths are not the only glaring omissions from the motion. It cites the impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis on disabled people, and it is right to do so. Disabled people have suffered far more than most from Covid and the global cost of living crisis, but where is the mention of the Government's human rights failings during the pandemic?

Kate Forbes: I appreciate the member's contribution. I am not sure that drug and alcohol deaths are specific to the discussion on disabled people that we are having right now. However, in all seriousness, if we are going to improve services for and the lives of disabled people, it takes all parties to come to the table and make suggestions. What have the Tories done for disabled people in the past few years?

Annie Wells: My colleague Jeremy Balfour has proposed a bill to introduce a disability commissioner. We support increasing the distance in the adult disability payment mobility descriptor to 50m. We believe that all people with disabilities should be entitled to the Scottish Government's winter heating payment. We are coming to the table with things but, when we are having a debate about human rights, it is important to raise something that is very close to my heart. We are

talking about the most marginalised and disadvantaged people, and I think that people with drug and alcohol addiction are part of that. We need to support them and show them human rights.

Where is the mention in the motion of people who had life-saving treatment stopped? Where is the mention of the many vulnerable disabled people who were moved out of hospitals without proper respect to their wishes or their families' wishes? Where is the mention of the impact on the transfer of Covid-positive patients to care homes?

As my colleagues have said, and as more of them will continue to outline in greater detail, the motion also neglects to mention the huge number of disabled people in Scotland's temporary accommodation. It does not bring up the need to deliver the "Coming Home Implementation" recommendations for people with complex care needs, and it does not mention the delays in and huge number of issues with Social Security Scotland. It does not focus on the Government's lack of action to tackle homelessness for disabled people. Those are all glaring omissions of key issues that are well within the Government's power. Too often, the SNP wants praise for the limited amounts that it has done while deflecting all criticism for all the things that it has failed to achieve.

Today's debate is welcome, but it is a missed opportunity to address key issues facing disabled people and vital elements of human rights law in Scotland. The Government has lodged a motion that neglects to mention the many instances of failings that disabled people have suffered at the hands of the Scottish Government. It ignores so many human rights issues in Scotland that deserve to be debated in this Parliament. Although we agree with much of the positives in the motion, we are disappointed that it merely seeks to congratulate the Government instead of taking a serious look at its actions and how it could improve.

15:39

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Worldwide, more than 1 billion people are disabled, and in Scotland, that figure is well over 1 million. That is a quarter of our population whose day-to-day activities are limited by disability or a long-term health problem. That is double the worldwide average, but it is actually something to be celebrated: it is hundreds of thousands of children who were born with disabilities and would not have made it a few generations ago, but have; hundreds of thousands of adults who have suffered injury or disease and would not have made it a few generations ago, but have; and hundreds of thousands of older adults who would

have died of heart disease, stroke or cancer a few generations ago, but are still here.

The increase in disability as time goes by is all too clear in the numbers. Eleven per cent of children are disabled, but that figure doubles to 23 per cent for working-age adults. By pension age, it doubles again to 46 per cent and, by the time we hit 80, it is more than 60 per cent.

Many people think that disability is a them-and-us issue, but it is not. Disability could happen to any of us. Disability is not an exclusive club; people can join it any day, and, eventually, most of us will. For many of us, it is more a question of how many years we will spend disabled and how many years we will spend able bodied.

During your disabled years, do you want to make a meaningful and productive contribution to society? Half of disabled people do not have employment, even though many want to work. During your disabled years, do you want to be treated with dignity and respect? The half of disabled people who are employed are twice as likely to face discrimination, harassment and bullying in the workplace. During your disabled years, do you want to be warm and well fed? Half of disabled people cannot afford their heating, and three quarters of households who use a food bank have a disabled family member.

We all know what we want for ourselves now and in our futures, but we should be looking at how to improve the lives of today's disabled people and getting it right for all in the future. The upcoming human rights bill, which will include disability rights and will seek to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into Scots law, is a good thing. That is a vital and urgent step, as shown by the comments of the UN's special rapporteur, who said that the UK is failing its international obligations on fundamental economic and social rights.

Although we are limited by the failing UK framework, we must do all that we can within the limits of devolution. Social security is a human right, and it should be here for all of us, should we need it. Disabled people should have access to the support that they need to lead full and independent lives. Although the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament cannot totally shield disabled people from the UK Government's plans to cut benefits by £4 billion, things such as the adult disability payment, the child disability payment and the carer support payment from Social Security Scotland make a real difference.

We also need to focus our effort on those who need it the most. Forty-one per cent of children who live in poverty come from a household with a

disabled family member. The Scottish child payment provides targeted help to those families. The independent living fund provides focused support for young adults who are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Since its opening, the fund has delivered £12 million via 6,500 transition fund grants to more than 5,000 young disabled people.

It is not just about funding. We need a joined-up system, and the Scottish Government will soon publish the first national transitions to adulthood strategy, which will make the transition journey smoother and more positive.

In the debate, we have heard about the need to listen to the voices of lived experience. We must all do that. As a minister, I did so. I spent a lot of time listening to disabled people and hearing about the difficulties that they faced and what they needed to make their lives better, and I am quite sure that Ms Roddick is doing exactly the same.

I want independence for my country, but I also want all Scots to be able to lead independent lives, and that includes all our disabled citizens. We must make their independence a reality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy, who joins us online.

15:45

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The Scottish Parliament—rightly—always recognises the international day of disabled people, and we should be very proud of that. However, this year sees a marked and significant change, for two reasons. First, for the first time, the day of recognition is celebrated with not just a members' business debate, but with a full Government debate. I put on record my thanks to the Government for bringing that debate to the chamber and ensuring that the Parliament has a full afternoon in which to address issues of key importance not just to disabled people, but to Scotland. The significance of doing so cannot be overstated.

Secondly, last weekend, we held the first-ever summit to celebrate the international day of disabled people here in the chamber. It was an absolute privilege to look out over the benches and see them full to the brim with disabled people and their organisations and allies, with many more joining in online. It was an incredibly special moment, and I cannot express enough my thanks to my colleague Jeremy Balfour, the Presiding Officers and their team, and the staff of the Parliament for making it happen and ensuring that the event was a warm, welcoming and celebratory one that everyone enjoyed.

I have always said that there should be nothing about us without us—indeed, we have heard that this afternoon—and I have, during my time in Parliament, fought to ensure that that is the case. The event made it clear to the disability movement that this place—our Parliament—belongs to it too. I hope that, in years to come, we will see more of that.

The international day of disabled people was first declared back in 1992, when I was just 11. Just over 30 years later, the world has changed—in some ways quite significantly. Structural barriers have been torn down by legislative change. I want to take a moment to recognise the work of my party in that context, specifically the work of the Labour Government of the early 2000s. It introduced working tax credits to support disabled people to get back to work; it passed the Equality Act 2010, which enshrined our rights to be treated equally in domestic legislation; and it signed us up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Scottish Government, too, has made progress by introducing the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, which gave us a right to direct our own care; reopening the independent living fund, although that has taken too long; and signing up to the definition of independent living, which recognises that living independently is not about living on your own or fending for yourself, but about having the right to practical assistance and support, and the right to lead an ordinary—or, indeed, an extraordinary—life.

Those changes have been life changing for disabled people. I say that from my own lived experience and from what I have heard from the movement. However, the job is not yet done. Too many barriers still exist, and there is much more work to do. There is never time to be complacent or self-congratulatory. Disabled people are still disproportionately more likely to be in poverty and to have lower incomes but higher living costs. The consequences of not being able to make ends meet can be life limiting, threatening not just our right to thrive, but our right to survive.

It is becoming increasingly harder for disabled people to pay for care that they rely on. In April this year, Glasgow city health and social care partnership hiked up charges for people who require non-residential social care. The Govan Law Centre estimated that some people could face a 65 per cent increase.

A woman from Glasgow said to researchers:

“I always feel like Damocles Sword is above my head as my Care Plan has not been re assessed since July 2022 and I have had many care changes. My care contribution has been increased by £42 a week. My increase with Working Tax Credit and PIP is £18.93 p/w. I already cut my

budget in half because of utility bills but now I am very stressed.”

That should not be happening, least of all in a Scotland in which the Government said, years ago, that it would end non-residential charges.

In addition, inaccessible transport means that we cannot move freely around. It means that we often have to rely on cars or taxis instead. That puts us significantly out of pocket. Even when we can afford them, using taxis and cars is becoming more of a struggle. Members will have heard me talk about concerns in Glasgow, where disabled people feel left behind in the journey to net zero. The subway is not accessible for wheelchair users, buses can take only one wheelchair or pram at a time, and train travel requires a lot of planning. Now, as a result of a hastily implemented low-emission zone in the city, the black cabs that we turn to instead are slowly disappearing from the streets.

It is not just our freedom of movement while travelling that is a problem; there is a lack of properly accessible affordable homes, too. The challenges that we face as a group have been called a “human catastrophe” by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Scottish Human Rights Commission has warned that the

“Scottish Government has not done enough”

to realise disabled people’s human rights. All of us in the chamber, and other chambers, should heed that today, tomorrow and every day thereafter.

Against that backdrop, we in the Labour Party are deeply concerned that disabled people’s organisations believe that the gap in political leadership has led to disabled people feeling deprioritised and dehumanised at a time when they should be a focus of our Government. That is why I do not think that the Government’s motion goes far enough to recognise the challenges that are faced. That backdrop is also why I make no apology for being disappointed that the Feeley report has not been implemented; frustrated at delays to the immediate priorities plan—the priorities are no longer immediate but overdue; and angry that the Government has not yet ended non-residential charges.

It does not have to be this way. With bold and swift action, we can make Scotland the land of opportunity for disabled people that I know it can be. That starts in school, yet we are failing large numbers of disabled pupils. More than a third of pupils in Scotland identify as having an additional support need, yet ASN support is in decline. We need to fix that and ensure that children have the support that they need to thrive and reach their full potential.

That also means that we have to help children properly prepare to leave education. We heard in the debate last month on my Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill how badly we are failing them. I cannot fully express my disappointment that the Government and others chose not to support that bill and give all young disabled people a right to a transitions plan, but I said then and reiterate now that I will not let the issue be forgotten. I will continue to hold the feet to the fire, and I will not stop fighting for change until we make a difference.

I will close on that note. Despite all the negative odds, disabled people and our allies have shifted the dial over the past 30 years. We have pushed doors open and changed laws when Governments have been bold enough to support that. Sometimes the fight can feel endless, but our achievements come despite the challenges, and the wins have come because we have refused to give up. We will keep pushing forward for our goal of human rights and transformation, and we in this place have to have the courage and ambition to stand beside disabled people.

I end with a message to disabled people across Scotland. Be proud and be vocal; you have rights—keep fighting. It might take time and it will take effort, and you can be sure that it will take a lot of hard graft, but I know that our movement is not scared of that, and I promise you that, as long as I am in this place, for me and my party, your fight will be our fight. There will be nothing about us without us.

15:52

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): It is a privilege to talk on this subject. It is no secret to the Parliament that campaigning for human rights is a deep passion of mine, mostly because of the experiences that I have had throughout my life and the experiences of those I love. To be honest, I have to pinch myself some days in the knowledge that I have the privilege of being a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, which is a role that I deeply appreciate having.

I whole-heartedly support the motion and, in particular, I recognise the importance of understanding the dire consequences that the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have had and continue to have on human rights for all of us. The impact is exceptionally significant on those who are living with disabilities.

The reopening of the independent living fund, along with the commitment to develop and implement an immediate priorities plan for disabled people, marks a significant step forward.

It is heartening to see the Scottish Government taking concrete actions to address the pressing issues, which reinforces our ambition to lead the world in human rights realisation.

People with disabilities face not just financial but societal challenges, which affect access to public services, general mobility and connectivity, community cohesion and—consequently—the basic human interactions that we need for our health and wellbeing. Without adequate support, dealing with that challenge can leave a person feeling isolated and abandoned in a world in which they should feel that they belong.

One aspect of the motion that resonates in particular with me is the acknowledgement of the need for social and cultural rights for people with disabilities. As members know, my father is deaf. That has shaped my understanding of what aspects are needed for a whole-person approach to disabilities. I was raised alongside deaf children and CODAs—children of deaf adults. I have to agree with the comments of my colleague Kate Forbes on dignity and having less patronising attitudes. Being an interpreter for my father over the years has been enlightening—but not in a good way, as we have been faced with ignorance from many parts of society.

I was surrounded by a visually vibrant and expressive community. I will paint a picture of the deaf club in Aberdeen. The incredible building in which it was held was a place of drama clubs and sports clubs, with shelves of trophies and pictures of successes adorning the walls. There was an integrated church and a large kitchen that was used regularly for events. There were snooker tables and bowling mats, and a stage in a hall where signing musical shows and comedy shows were held and performed by deaf people and hearing people alike. Deaf people from all over the UK would come to visit and participate in events. I particularly loved meeting deaf Santa there one year as a wee girl.

The club was a haven for deaf people where they were not just supported; they were given the tools to support themselves—and they ran with it. It was a thriving community with a beautiful language. Sadly, the club had to close its doors over a decade ago. I hope that we can realise the importance of such community spaces. Inclusion in the wider world is important, but ensuring that there are safe spaces in which communities can gather and organise is equally important.

The beautiful language that I speak of—British Sign Language—was one that my dad would be physically punished for using when he was a wee boy in the 1950s. He was forced to conform to the idealised version of an able-bodied person. His parents and peers supported him to learn BSL, and watched him thrive. He was often one of the

funniest actors in the comedy shows—according to me.

I often think of what it must have been like for my wee dad back in the 1950s. In my interactions with deaf charities and stakeholders, the conversation often revolves around the need for early and effective support for deaf children. Ensuring that those children have access to the necessary language and communication skills is crucial for their development and future success. That aligns with the broader goal of disability equality, whereby equal opportunities are provided to all children, regardless of their abilities.

Today's motion, with its emphasis on equality of opportunity and the inclusion of social and cultural rights, is a step towards bridging the gap between the disabled and the able bodied. By incorporating international human rights conventions into Scots law, particularly those recognising sign languages and deaf culture, we are making our society more inclusive and richer.

As we move forward, it is crucial that we continue to engage with and listen to the disabled community. Its insights and expertise are invaluable in shaping policies that truly address its needs and aspirations. That approach ensures that our efforts are not just top down but are informed by those who are directly impacted by our decisions.

Enshrining those rights will not only make our society and culture more accessible; the inclusion of deaf people and people with experiences that are different from our own and which we can learn from and appreciate will make our society and culture altogether richer. I am sure that all of us in the chamber have a keen desire to be part of the solutions for improving the lives of disabled folk in Scotland. That is certainly one of my core inspirations for being here.

I am proud to support the motion and the principles that it sets out. By celebrating disability equality and human rights, we are not just complying with international standards; we are working towards a society in which every individual is valued, respected and given the opportunity to thrive. The motion is a testament to our commitment to creating a Scotland that is inclusive, just and equitable for all. Most important of all, realising those rights will help to deliver dignity for all those who live with disabilities in Scotland. After all, my childhood was not impaired by having a deaf father; it was enriched. I hope that others across Scotland and beyond can feel that enrichment, too.

15:59

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow Karen Adam's very

powerful speech. Her ability to illustrate her childhood resulted in me almost being transported into that church hall, with the noise, enthusiasm and boundless energy and fun showing what can and should be achieved. Her comment about bridging the two communities is probably better emphasised by highlighting the need to fill in the gap between the two communities. Disabled communities as well as able-bodied communities will be the better for being together, for witnessing the fun, noise and exuberance in that church hall, for understanding the passions and the challenges that people face and, in particular, for seeing how we can all benefit by bringing together the strengths of all our small and divergent communities.

As we have heard, 3 December was the international day of persons with disabilities, which dates back to 1992, when the UN sought to mobilise support for the dignity, rights and wellbeing of persons with disabilities and, more importantly, to increase awareness of the gains that can be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life. On that point, Karen Adam spoke strongly about the community that she grew up in. It was not a community that sought to pass on its challenges to its young people but a community that wanted to show people what it was.

That brings me to the challenge that I have with the motion that is before us. It talks about an "ambition for Scotland" and developing and implementing an immediate priorities plan for disabled people. It includes the phrase "if effectively implemented" and talks about

"sharing policy development and decision-making in a genuinely inclusive and participatory manner."

There is nothing that can be complained about in that regard, except for the fact that we are still waiting to reach that ambition. We are still waiting for the development and effective implementation of the immediate priorities plan. We are still waiting for it to be constructed by and shared with people who rightly represent that community.

We have heard about the challenges that disabled people who live in Scotland face—those who are missing out, are living in poverty and are excluded from full and equal participation in our communities. I put that down to a certain amount of division and distraction within the Government. We should have done more by now. It is terrible that we are still waiting to see when we can bring together the strengths and benefits of those communities.

We have heard about the Scottish Human Rights Commission's warning that disabled people in Scotland are experiencing

“unrelenting attacks on their human rights”.

If the Government’s sole achievement is committing to developing an immediate priorities plan that was promised back in June, that does not even start to address the crisis that our disabled people face today. Consecutive cuts to the social care budget, the lengthy wait for adult disability payments, as we have heard, and skyrocketing non-residential care charges point to a dereliction of duty. This was an opportunity to plan out and announce what could be done.

In September, a group of disabled people’s organisations across Scotland sent a letter to the First Minister, and I do not think that I can put the challenge better than they did. I hope that the minister is able to address what was said:

“First Minister, it should shock and shame us that the position of disabled people has deteriorated since the UN described our lives as a ‘human catastrophe’ in 2017, highlighting ‘grave and systematic violations’ of our human rights as a consequence of welfare reform and cuts to public services. Six years later, the fate of disabled people is in greater peril. A lack of focus and attention, combined with no accountability or political leadership and a genuine gap in disability competence politically and in your Government, has resulted in disabled people and our DPOs feeling dehumanised and deprioritised.”

In this chamber, we speak so much about what we hope will be. We see in the motion what the potential is. From the very powerful contributions from my colleagues Pam Duncan-Glancy and Karen Adam, we understand what can be achieved if we bring communities together, so that people do not need to have a haven just in one place but can live in a society that is a haven for their needs. In that way, we can make this world a proper and better place.

The cry has gone out. The letter to the First Minister succinctly describes the challenge. The question is: after all these years, will the SNP Government meet it? That is the question that is being asked by our disabled communities.

16:05

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to today’s debate. The World Health Organization estimates that around 1.3 billion people worldwide—roughly one in six—have some form of disability. As we heard from my colleague Kevin Stewart, in Scotland, the figure is around one in four people. For too many disabled people, achieving their ambitions and dreams and fulfilling their promise are still denied to them, because of the barriers that society has put in their way. The barriers that disabled people face are not caused by disabled people or by their impairment; they are very often constructed by the prejudice, ignorance and thoughtlessness of others. Too often, unless we face those barriers

ourselves, we do not notice that they are there or understand the impact that they can have.

The disability movement has had to fight for disabled people’s human rights over the years. Although society has progressed significantly over the decades, many fights are yet to be won, and there is a real risk that progress in some regards can slip into reverse. My speech will focus on the disproportionate impact that the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis and the UK Government’s austerity have had and continue to have on disabled people’s human rights and equalities.

The inequalities that are experienced by disabled people are well documented. Disabled people are more likely to live in poverty. They have poorer ratings on personal wellbeing measures, are more susceptible to developing other health conditions and have less access to education and employment. The Department for Work and Pensions has estimated that, as of June, there were around 55,000 disabled people who are of working age in South Lanarkshire, which is the local authority for my Rutherglen constituency. Of that number, more than a third are not in employment, compared to a figure of 12 per cent among those without disabilities.

Scotland-wide, 81 per cent of working-age adults without disabilities had jobs in 2021, compared to just under 50 per cent of adults with disabilities. Scotland has a goal of reducing the disability employment gap by half between 2016 and 2038. Encouragingly, according to the Fraser of Allander Institute, the 2021 numbers show an improvement of 6 percentage points, but we can and must cut the gap further.

Members will be aware that, in the UK Government’s autumn statement last week, the chancellor unveiled deeply concerning changes to work capability assessments, which could mean that people receive less support based on a change of criteria rather than a change in their health. The Disability Benefits Consortium has called the plans a

“cynical attack on disability benefits”,

which will have

“a devastating impact on those on the lowest incomes”.

Instead of demonising unemployed disabled people, the UK Government should look at the real barriers that prevent disabled people from working.

Like many metrics, the disability employment gap widened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid shone a light on existing inequalities, exacerbated those inequalities for people with disabilities and exposed the vulnerability of some population groups to adverse shocks. Everyone was

impacted by Covid lockdowns and the public health restrictions, but that impact was not felt equally. Many disabled people were at increased clinical risk from Covid, and many had reduced access to healthcare. Particularly for those who were shielding, many experienced starker social isolation and loneliness compared to non-disabled people. The services that they might have relied on either stopped or were altered.

I know from my own case work experience that many local services that were interrupted during Covid have not restarted or are not operating to the levels that they were before the pandemic. I put on record my appreciation for the many local groups, both formal and informal, that supported disabled people throughout Covid. From the Blantyre official coronavirus support Facebook page to Healthy n Happy and LEAP, our communities came together. However, because society has in many ways moved forward and onwards from the pandemic, with many avenues of support being wound down or withdrawn, disabled people and the wider population face a new challenge: the cost of living crisis. We are in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis for decades, and disabled people are among those who are being hit hardest.

Members might be aware of a report that was published in August this year by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health and the Glasgow Disability Alliance. The report lays bare how soaring costs for basic commodities have disproportionately affected people with disabilities. Focus group participants highlighted the cost of buying essential assistive equipment such as powered wheelchairs or talking microwaves and the need to use more electricity for charging or using such equipment, and wheelchair users noted that the increase in taxi costs meant that accessing supermarkets has become much more expensive.

The report was highly critical of the UK Government's austerity policies, which the authors argued should be viewed alongside the impact of Covid and the cost of living crisis on disabled people. The report noted that, back in 2017, a UN committee reported that disabled people's rights across the UK had regressed to the point of a "human catastrophe" and had been eroded through "grave and systematic violations" originating from UK austerity policies.

It is clear that, as a society, we have much more to do to protect and further the rights of disabled people. Although we do not have all the powers and levers in our hands to address all the unfairness that has been created, we must do more with the resources and powers that we have, whether that is with regard to the disability employment gap, the pronounced challenges that

disabled people have experienced due to UK austerity, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, or the wider health inequalities that they face.

With the UN's international day of persons with disabilities taking place at the weekend, we should recommit ourselves to breaking down barriers, championing further disability equality and building a fairer Scotland for all.

16:12

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I give special thanks to the disabled people's organisations that provided briefings for the debate. Most of them included testimonies that give voice to the lived experience of those who are easy to ignore, for which I am very grateful. Kate Forbes and other members have eloquently and powerfully highlighted the importance of giving voice to the beautiful diversity of disabled people who live across Scotland.

Those and many other testimonies, such as those in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's recent study on destitution, bring home to us starkly and vividly the terrible experience of so many disabled people in the UK through current and recent crises. The Covid pandemic, the cost—or, rather, the greed—crisis and the extreme weather events that have been triggered by climate change have hit disabled people the hardest and have forced them to make heartbreaking decisions that threaten their health, their wellbeing and, very often, their lives.

Those extraordinary events are becoming the new normal, but the old normal is not working for disabled people, either, through practical exclusion from decisions about their own healthcare, from grass-roots political expression, from public transport and pavements, and from meeting the basic needs of everyday life.

Why are we still here, after decades of growing consciousness and awareness of disabled people's voices, and after the brilliant, brave and painstaking work of organisations and activists? Why is the UK not only neglecting disabled people's interests but, through Westminster's vicious social security policies, actively undermining and attacking them? Part of the answer is in the UK Government's macho idea of being there to protect people like them—the rich, the powerful and the so-called able-bodied.

In civilian as well as in military spheres, the most vulnerable people, including disabled people, are acceptable collateral damage. It is time to turn that completely on its head: it is time to acknowledge that vulnerability and interdependence are the natural state of the human condition. Rational economic man,

independent and self-reliant, is not the norm, but is a fictional aberration. Starting from an understanding that we all need help, support and one another leads us to an ethic of care in place of domination.

What does that mean for policy in practice and for the important initiatives that the motion highlights, such as the independent living fund, the immediate priorities that are planned for disabled people and the proposed human rights bill? What does it mean for the way in which we achieve the outcomes of Scotland's national performance framework?

I believe that we must, led by that ethic of care, prioritise four principles: human rights, equality, participation and redistribution. Human rights are just that—the rights of all humans, regardless of identity or status. They are the soil in which our lives can flourish and grow.

There are two ways in which states commonly act to deny us realisation of our rights. One is by paying lip service to them and hiding them in plain sight, pretending that human rights have already been achieved and that we need not worry about them. I am proud and grateful that, here in Scotland, we have a civil society, not least in disabled people's organisations themselves, that will not let us do that.

The second way to deny rights is to try to eradicate them altogether by attacking the very concept and legitimacy of human rights and by promoting the narrative that they are not for all of us but are merely a means for the unscrupulous to obtain, by legal manipulation, what they do not deserve. That is a dangerous lie, but one that is increasingly espoused by those on the right of the Tory party who want to drag the UK out of its honoured place in the European convention on human rights.

I am, I say again, proud and grateful to be in Scotland, where our political and social traditions stand for solidarity and care. Having human rights as a nice luxury and something to enjoy only when the going is good is not how we want to function here.

Equality is about overcoming the many obstacles to taking part in social, economic, cultural and political life that are faced by all marginalised groups, and especially by disabled people. We must consider equality not as something that is the subject of a one-off assessment, but as something that is assessed at all stages of development and in relation to all policy areas. We should do that with consciousness that—as Peter Beresford has pointed out—inequality itself can diminish our awareness of power differences, because those who are excluded do not realise how much they

are excluded from, and those who have easy access take that for granted.

Genuine participation is also key. I again recognise and honour the disabled people's organisations that have, in many ways, pioneered the work on participation. Disabled people have been and, shamefully, often still are shut out of the decisions about policy and practice that are central to their own lives. Undeterred, the movement boldly challenged the accepted ideology, revealed the threadbare nature of medical and individualistic models, and developed the social model of disability and the philosophy of independent living. Neither of those ideas has been fully accepted in mainstream political thinking, although they are often hastily put in there when doing so is politically convenient, but are shrugged off again when no one is looking. We can do better, here.

Finally, an ethic of care requires redistribution. Policies and plans, when they are sensitively and wisely developed, can take us a long way, but practical change also requires resources. We must be brave and honest in speaking about and acting on the scale that is required.

The Social Care Future movement talks of “the place we call home”

and of

“communities where we look out for one another”.

My vision, and hope, is for a Scotland where both of those are true for disabled people and for all of us. When we achieve that, our ambitions to have human rights not only enshrined in our laws, but realised by all our people, will be met.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Emma Harper is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:18

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak today and have enjoyed hearing members' contributions. I add my support for the UN's international day of persons with disabilities, which is an opportunity to reflect on how we can ensure that disabled people have freedom, dignity, choice and control over their lives.

I will focus my contribution on hidden disabilities and on the progress that Scotland continues to make to support those who are living with a disability.

The impact of living with a non-visible disability can be very slight, or it can have a huge effect on one's life. I note that I have an invisible disability: I have type 1 diabetes, which is included in the Equality Act 2010. I know that there are people who have type 1 diabetes who do not consider

themselves to have a disability, but it means that they have, at work or at school, protection from discrimination that is based on their diabetes. It is hard, and it can be challenging, to manage blood glucose wherever your work takes you, and it is worth raising that.

It is estimated that 70 to 80 per cent of disabilities are invisible, and there are a wide range of impairments and conditions that are not visible to others. Those include mental health conditions; autism and other neurodivergencies; cognitive impairments; hearing, vision and speech impairments; and energy-limiting conditions such as fibromyalgia and, since the pandemic, long Covid.

I will pick up on something that Oliver Mundell mentioned in his intervention on the minister about the Usual Place in Dumfries, which provides people with different abilities, including hidden disabilities, with education and training for employment. I again highlight the work of the Usual Place, and I re-emphasise calls for the Scottish Government to provide it with any support that it can give.

Because an invisible disability is not outwardly observable, people who are living with one often face disregard or disbelief about their disability. One of my councillor colleagues, who has multiple sclerosis, told me about a member of the public who had a right good go at her. He was harrumphing right in her face because, from just looking at her, he did not believe her to be disabled when she parked in a disabled space outside a grocery store. She was having a good day with her mobility that day and had used a disabled space so that she did not overexert herself.

Many people with invisible disabilities report unequal opportunities and difficulties accessing the services and support that they need. Removing societal barriers for people with invisible disabilities enables them to participate fully in day-to-day life, including work and education.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Emma Harper for giving way.

Regarding invisible disabilities, Grace Warnock launched, here in the Scottish Parliament, her sign for putting outside changing rooms. We have come so far over many years, but there is still so far to go in terms of people recognising the importance and significance of invisible disabilities, and for them to have a heart for people who they feel are using facilities for others that they might not need to use.

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

Emma Harper: I thank Martin Whitfield for that intervention. We recently had a debate that mentioned having, in toilets, facilities for people like me, so that I can put my insulin pump down when I need to change it, or for people with a colostomy, for instance. We need to be cognisant of what our public services and hospitals have in the way of facilities for people with hidden disabilities.

We need to improve awareness and understanding of invisible disabilities, to reduce stigma and exclusionary practices and to support self-identification and disclosure of hidden disabilities. Disability charities including Inclusion Scotland have stated:

“Accessibility standards that address barriers in built and online environments may improve access and inclusion.”

That covers public awareness raising, such as by extending the “Not Every Disability is Visible” campaign and persistent work to combat the stigma that surrounds hidden disability. I ask the minister for assurances that people with hidden disabilities will be on an equal footing, as the Government progresses legislation to enshrine the human rights agenda in Scots law.

Social security is a human right. Being disabled or having a long-term health condition can come with a wide range of extra costs, as other members have mentioned. The costs can include paying more for accessible transport, equipment or therapies. The Scottish Government, through interventions including the adult disability payment, the child disability payment and the carer support payment, wants to ensure that people with a disability and their carers get all the extra financial support that they are entitled to.

A nationwide campaign was launched in the spring to raise awareness of available social security and to help to remove stigma around applying for the support that people are entitled to. It is welcome that this is the first time in the UK that disability benefits have been proactively promoted on television and social media as part of a national advertising campaign. Like disability stakeholders, I would welcome an update from the minister, in time, on the success of those advertisements.

As the motion indicates, if Scotland is to be a modern and inclusive nation, as we aspire to be, we must respect, protect and fulfil all internationally recognised human rights. The upcoming human rights bill seeks to do that. The Scottish Government has ambitious proposals that will protect and promote those rights in every aspect of life in Scotland, and will ensure that they apply equally across society. I welcome that happening, as we move forward.

I support the motion and I look forward to hearing the minister's response.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches. I call Carol Mochan. You have a generous six minutes, Ms Mochan.

16:25

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will do my best.

I am pleased to close the debate for Scottish Labour. As the minister set out at the beginning, the debate is about rights for all. It gives us an opportunity to raise the voices of disabled people, who, as we have heard, are often ignored, marginalised and stigmatised in our communities.

I really enjoyed the speeches made by Kate Forbes and Karen Adam. They showed how bringing subjects alive and giving examples of where people have felt the issues can help us to move forward. It helps us to understand the barriers and to push ourselves, and it forces us to think about how to embed the approach that we have been talking about.

However, I must make it clear, as Clare Haughey and Maggie Chapman did, that I cannot ignore the actions of the Tory Government at Westminster when we talk about rights. Its economic and social security vandalism has led to working families having to make impossible choices due to their finances being stretched. The Tory Government's actions have led to disabled people feeling disproportionate impacts on their human rights. The consequences of the cost of living emergency are felt acutely by disabled people.

Clare Haughey: I thank Carol Mochan for acknowledging, as I and Maggie Chapman did, the economic damage that the UK Tory Government is doing. Will she tell me what a Labour Government would do at Westminster that would repair the damage that the Tories have caused?

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

Carol Mochan: Clare Haughey and I are in the same space on the issue. She will know that great change is coming if we can get a Labour Government in place. We will make fundamental reform to social security across the UK. *[Interruption.]* If members would like to intervene, I am happy for them to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we please give the member who is on their feet the courtesy of listening to them?

Clare Haughey: Will Carol Mochan take an intervention?

Carol Mochan: I will make progress, thank you.

In the statistics that are released by key stakeholders, we see that disabled people are being affected every day. Martin Whitfield and Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned the issue that the Trussell Trust raised. As we have heard, three out of four Trussell Trust food bank users in Scotland come from households that contain a disabled person, and 51 per cent of people who live in poverty live in a household with at least one disabled member. Kevin Stewart rightly raised the situation with heating costs.

Those figures spell out the need to move towards a safety net. They are devastating and represent families and individuals across Scotland who are struggling badly.

Kevin Stewart: Those issues affect families across Scotland, particularly families with disabled members. Ms Haughey asked what change will come if there is a Labour Government. Keir Starmer said this week that Labour will not

“turn on the spending taps”.

How are we going to get this right? How will there be change under Labour if there is no increased spending to help the folks we are talking about?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan, again, I can give you the time back.

Carol Mochan: I am really pleased that members are interested in the reform that the Labour Government in the UK will make. I hope that, when we are campaigning, they will come on board to ensure that we get a change of Government at Westminster.

Martin Whitfield: The evidence that members seek is in what happened with the previous Labour Government. Support and human rights were enshrined to lift our young and old disabled people into work. That shows what can be achieved by a Government that, instead of hiding behind headlines, gets on with the work.

Carol Mochan: I thank Martin Whitfield for his intervention. I am going to try to make progress if I can. Much as I would like to continue discussing what a change will come in Scotland and across the UK next year, in 2024, it is my job in this place to hold this Scottish Government to account.

I have no doubt about the Scottish people's ambition for Scotland to be a world leader in both legislation on, and the realisation of, human rights, and I have no doubt about the Scottish Government's ambition. In that regard, I want to mention the minister. I have a great deal of respect for her and I believe that there is a lot of intention there. Where we disagree is on whether the Government has stepped up in 16 years to

actually achieve the things that we should have achieved. As I have often said in the chamber, acknowledging when we have not done something is really important if we are to move intention into action. As my colleagues have mentioned, however, there is no real acknowledgement of that in the motion, which is partly why we have to debate it.

I am running out of time because we had some excellent discussion about what a Labour Government will bring in 2024.

Has the Government asked itself what it has done? Has any of the inaction been because it has not done things that it should have done? Has it listened to the disabled people we are keen to represent? Has it created change?

I will finish with a quote. The Scottish Human Rights Commission said of the Scottish Government:

“we believe that the evidence on the progress assessments demonstrates starkly the implementation gap between intentions and good laws and policy and the implementation that could change lives on the ground.”

I believe that members across the chamber want to change lives on the ground.

I hope that I will have more time in the future to go through some of the other points that I wanted to make.

16:31

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): It has been a very interesting debate. I will put aside the discussion about what a next Labour Government might bring. Notwithstanding that, I enjoyed a number of the speeches from members across the parties, and particularly the speech by Kevin Stewart, who said that we could all face disability at any time. I am not normally one to talk about philosophy in the chamber, but that reminded me of listening in my student days to discussions about John Rawls’s theory of a just society and the importance of looking behind the veil of ignorance and imagining what life might be like if we found ourselves in a different position.

That brings me to my experience as a young person growing up. I have dyspraxia and dyslexia. I do not consider them to be major barriers to me. I got relatively modest support at school, which I was very grateful for, and it made a difference to my educational outcomes. I was lucky to have a family to fight for me and ensure that I got that resource and help. It makes me very sad, as a constituency MSP who represents a part of rural Scotland, when things are actually worse for young people than they were when I was at school. It seems that many children, at the first point in their lives when they are desperately

looking for help and support that could be life changing to them, are told that it is too difficult to find them the support that they need.

I would add the Morgan report to the list that we heard from Paul O’Kane. It is another report that points to the gap between the rhetoric and the reality on the ground. It is very frustrating that, on something that is within this Parliament’s direct control and that it has now had control over for almost a quarter of a century, we are still not able to get it right for every child. We have bold ambitions but, for many families and young people, the help that they need—help that could transform their lives—is not there for them when they most need it, and that moves on with them into early adulthood.

The other week, we had a big debate in the Parliament about a member’s bill, and it frustrates me deeply that such an issue is left to a member’s bill. That bill has challenges around it, as it has to fit what it looks to do within the tight criteria that the Parliament has set. After 16 years of this Government, given that the issue repeatedly comes up, there should have been more proactive action on it.

As I mentioned in my intervention earlier, and as Emma Harper touched on in her contribution, community-level organisations in Dumfries and Galloway—for example, the Usual Place, which I would put in Karen Adam’s category of a haven—bring together people from all walks of life and of all abilities. Everyone who walks in that door interacts on the same level. They are treated with absolute dignity and are given an opportunity to thrive and to access skills and employment.

In the minister’s opening statement, there were remarks about employment. I am not ashamed to say that the number 1 ask of many people with disabilities is for support and help to get into work. We should not feel afraid to champion that or suggest that that is not good. To go back to the previous Labour Government, I consider myself to be a Gordon Brown Conservative in that I think that work is good for people, that work should pay, and that work is a source of dignity that helps many people out of poverty.

Emma Roddick: I absolutely appreciate the points about work. As I said in my opening remarks, we are committed to supporting disabled people who are able to work and who want to work to do exactly that. However, does Oliver Mundell accept that there is a difference between supporting that principle and sanctioning disabled people who are unable to work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Oliver Mundell, I will give you the time back.

Oliver Mundell: Sanctioning is one of the very difficult issues about the welfare system—I do not

hide from that for a second. However, we must have a system that is fair and that encourages people to interact with it within the rules that everyone is asked to follow. That presents challenges, but I am concerned that we are too keen to look to welfare as the first solution for many people who face difficulties in getting into work. Things can be done now to make a real difference for people.

That is why I am talking about the Usual Place—a model that operates in Dumfries and Galloway that works and is genuinely life saving. Some young people who have accessed it would not be here today if it had not been for that opportunity. They are moving into long-term, sustainable employment and getting one-to-one personalised support. Some of those young people have gone on to set up their own businesses. Something really powerful is happening.

However, we have the DWP on one side and Social Security Scotland on the other, as well as a myriad of Government schemes, and we are told that something that is very precious to people in Dumfries and Galloway does not fit into the silos that we have created for funding and support. I suspect that it is just one of hundreds of similar organisations across Scotland that could do something about the disability employment gap, particularly in rural communities such as the Highlands and Islands and Dumfries and Galloway, in which a significantly higher number of disabled people struggle to find employment.

We can get too focused on some of the political differences that exist in relation to the welfare system and not tackle some of the obvious, immediate and solvable challenges in our education system and in the support that comes after. We can all have bold ambitions, but, if those are not meaningful to the people whom we serve and represent, can we really be happy? Twenty-five years in, has the Scottish Parliament lived up to the promises that we have repeatedly made and that we make again today? Are we going to start delivering for people on the ground?

It is not good enough for things to stagnate or to move backwards. We all need to fight a bit harder to make sure that life gets better for our constituents.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up and respond to the debate.

16:39

Emma Roddick: I have welcomed the tone of the debate. We have had a good balance between recognising what has been achieved so far and pointing out where we are falling short and what is

needed to realise the rights of disabled people in Scotland.

Kevin Stewart's point about the number of disabled people living in Scotland is one to hold on to. He pointed out that a greater and greater proportion of disabled people living in Scotland means that more disabled people's lives are being saved and more disabled people are having their safety ensured. That is something for us to celebrate and to build on. He was also right that disability justice is everyone's business, because disability could happen to anyone.

It is also the case that improvements for disabled people benefit us all. When we implement fair working practices to help disabled employees, we also become more family friendly and more carer positive. We help neurodivergent people and others with long-term health conditions or energy-limiting illnesses who do not consider themselves disabled. We open up that workplace to older people and anyone who needs any kind of adjustment and wants to stay in work. When we make a place accessible to wheelchairs, we also make it accessible to prams and give people with sensory issues more space to breathe.

We also make it easier for people such as those who Emma Harper spoke of: people with invisible disabilities who, due to stigma, may find it more difficult to justify their asks on their own. I reassure her that the Scottish Government absolutely aligns itself to the social and not medical model of disability. We do not believe that somebody needs to be visibly disabled or have particular diagnoses over others in order to access basic support and rights. Diversity in the workplace and society challenges, engages and benefits us all.

Kevin Stewart also talked about how he, when a minister, valued and listened to lived experience, which is fantastic. I remember well the importance that he placed on lived experience in the mental health and social care spaces of policy. I can reassure Carol Mochan that disabled people are regularly engaged with not just by me in my portfolio but across Government, because we are absolutely committed to continuous improvement. However, that engagement cannot be optional. It is my job in this role to ensure that—no matter whether Kevin Stewart is in a particular role—lived experience is always listened to.

Miles Briggs: Perhaps one of the greatest changes that will affect disabled people and their ability to realise their right to independent living is the establishment of the national care service. In its briefing for the debate, Inclusion Scotland outlined a number of concerns, specifically saying that the Government's approach to shaping the governance of the national care service is not

"in the spirit of co-design".

Where is that concern being taken into account by ministers?

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

Emma Roddick: On the national care service, I feel that we cannot do right for doing wrong. On the one hand, we are being constantly criticised for not putting the detail in ourselves and then we are criticised for not having the detail created by other people. I personally think that the balance is right at the moment, when we consider that what we are creating is a framework.

I have complete sympathy for those in the stories that Miles Briggs shared earlier. He will be aware that I have a similar one, and he will appreciate that I cannot get into the details of the Covid inquiries, as they rightly must be able to carry out their work without pressure or prejudice. Those stories are prime examples of why the inquiries are important. Many of us have lost loved ones, and I am sure that there will be many lessons to learn, particularly around human rights and equality in times when budgets are tight and we have to react to emergency situations. Those are often the times when people forget about equalities assessments or forget to consider the impact on disabled people, but that is exactly when those things are most important, particularly when we are talking about Government decisions.

What we are doing with the human rights bill, the strengthening of the public sector equality duty and the support for disabled people is creating that structure to bake human rights into all our processes. That will be necessary for learning those lessons and ensuring that human rights considerations are there all the time and every time.

I congratulate Kate Forbes's uncle on his many exciting birthdays, and I hope that the one coming up is just as exciting as the previous one. She and Karen Adam described the important enrichment of their lives and of society as a result of their disabled family members being supported. What struck me was that Kate Forbes talked about her uncle's life and how her grandmother fought tooth and nail for him to have the life that she knew he deserved and that his peers simply expected. Oliver Mundell credits similar support for being able to get through school, and I know that parents of disabled people are out there still fighting tooth and nail for that same goal.

I also remember that, when I was a child caring for my mother, I emailed a generic NHS inbox, begging for her to get more professional help because we were not coping. There are still young carers across Scotland who are fighting the system for their parents. That is exactly what we want to put an end to. People should not have to

fight tooth and nail for their disabled family members. Indeed, there are disabled people out there who do not have family to fight tooth and nail for them, and they also deserve support. It is our job to do that on their behalf and to make sure that everyone in Scotland gets their rights. That is why we remain committed to removing non-residential care charges during the current parliamentary session, to incorporating Anne's law within our national care service and to delivering our immediate priorities plan for disabled people.

Jan Savage's words telling us that more must be done have been quoted often today, and I think that that is right. I hope that disabled people who are watching can hear that the Government and the Opposition want to do more and that we are and will. I welcome the scrutiny and the pressure to move faster where we can.

Kevin Stewart: We all agree that more needs to be done, but it is not just Government that needs to take action. Yesterday, I was speaking to the National Autistic Society about neurodiverse folk getting into employment. The minister mentioned carers earlier, and we have a good scheme in the carer positive scheme and carer positive employers. Should we be rolling out disabled friendly employers, disabled aware employers and neurodiverse aware employers, and making sure that it is not just the Government that is taking action but the whole of society?

Emma Roddick: Yes, I think that that is a fair point. The carer positive scheme is a real example of success in making it as easy as possible for employers to do the right thing. Overall, I encourage anyone—people in the chamber who are employers, and businesses or organisations outside the Parliament—to treat people fairly and to give them the adaptations and adjustments that they need so that they can do their job. That should not take a plan or a strategy, but if there are specific pitfalls, I would be more than happy to support action. I will also meet the NAS quite soon to discuss the same thing.

However, we need to be clear about the limits that are placed on us as a Government. Members from across the chamber have talked about the UNCRPD. We cannot go as far as we would like in incorporating those rights, which were ratified by the UK Government many decades ago, because the UK Government will not carry out that same work. It could incorporate those rights fully into UK law and make our job much easier. The situation has become even more challenging as we know that the UK Government is increasingly litigious about what it sees as us overstepping, even challenging the rights of the child in court.

I hear Paul O'Kane's points and his call to recognise the scale of the issue and the action that is required to tackle it; he is absolutely right. I

hope that the action that he has seen since that letter from the First Minister and from ministers across Government, in our work on human rights, the reopening of the independent living fund and the constant work that is being done to get the immediate priorities plan ready to publish, has gone some way towards reassuring him and the DPOs that that work continues.

Paul O’Kane: The minister will have heard me say that I welcome the reopening of the independent living fund, but I am keen to see it go further, and I think that disabled people’s organisations are keen to see it go further. She has also mentioned a number of policy priorities that I brought up in my speech, particularly the ending of non-residential care charges, to which the Government has made a commitment. Can the minister give a clear timescale for when that will happen? People have been waiting for years since the Feeley recommendations for that to happen.

Emma Roddick: As I mentioned earlier, we remain committed to ending those non-residential care charges within the current parliamentary session. We are now well over halfway through it, so that is the timescale.

Martin Whitfield also challenged me on the immediate priorities plan. I hope that I can reassure him that we have been moving on some actions, such as the independent living fund, which disabled people’s organisations communicated to us as a key priority, in advance of the plan being published. We are not waiting for the plan in order to start moving on that, on disability competence and on mainstreaming—the big asks from DPOs on that work. The work is progressing as we speak. I am excited for the immediate priorities plan to be published, but I hope that I can reassure the member that the work continues regardless.

We have to be very clear about the context in which we work. Carol Mochan, Clare Haughey and Maggie Chapman were all right to raise the actions of the current UK Government—from welfare changes to contributing to inflation and economic uncertainty. It feels as though we are fighting against the tide, and support that could be life changing ends up being a mitigation measure against UK cuts.

Annie Wells talked about wanting to change the criteria for adult disability payment. She will be aware that a great deal of consideration was given to whether we should implement changes to the eligibility criteria for ADP when it was rolled out, including changes to the mobility descriptors. However, it was firmly concluded that deviating from personal independence payment eligibility criteria would risk the safe and secure transition of individuals moving from one benefit to the other, which no responsible Government would do. That

approach is supported by the Scottish Commission on Social Security.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please bear with me; there are too many conversations happening around the chamber. Can we do the minister the courtesy of listening to her as she begins to conclude?

Emma Roddick: Our priority is always to ensure that people are able to benefit from the significant improvements that we have made. The DWP could, of course, make that change to the criteria at source and remove those concerns now so that we could reflect that in ADP.

I agree with those who said that we need to do more, and I look forward to continued work with DPOs and others, including members across the chamber, to ensure that the human rights bill, the immediate priorities plan and all future work are as impactful as they can be in ensuring the human rights of disabled people across Scotland.

Motion without Notice

16:51

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.52 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:52

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-11537.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11537, in the name of Emma Roddick, on championing disability equality and human rights, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:52

Meeting suspended.

16:54

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-11537.1, in the name of Miles Briggs. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11537.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 52, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11537.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11537, in the name of Emma Roddick, on championing disability equality and human rights, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11537.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 50, Against 64, Abstentions 3.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11537, in the name of Emma Roddick, on championing disability equality and human rights, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-11537, in the name of Emma Roddick, on championing disability equality and human rights, is: For 68, Against 50, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the ambition for Scotland to be a world leader in both the legislation for, and realisation of, human rights; recognises the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis continue to have on disabled people's human rights and equality; welcomes the action being taken across the Scottish Government, including reopening the Independent Living Fund in Scotland, with an initial investment of £9 million, and a commitment to develop and implement an Immediate Priorities Plan for Disabled People; notes the recent consultation on a Human Rights Bill to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights and rights for disabled people into Scots law, which, if effectively implemented, will help secure a life of dignity for all, including the most marginalised and disadvantaged; reaffirms the values of Scotland's National Performance Framework outcomes for disabled people, including protecting human rights, allowing people to live free from discrimination, and creating a fairer, more inclusive Scotland, and commits to listening to the lived experience and expertise of disabled people and to sharing policy development and decision-making in a genuinely inclusive and participatory manner.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Future Island and Rural Transport Infrastructure

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11367, in the name of Beatrice Wishart, on future island and rural transport infrastructure. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the importance of connectivity in Scotland's rural and island areas; recognises Scotland's net zero targets, which were voted for by the Parliament; notes the reportedly high output of carbon emissions from ferries serving Scotland's islands; believes that reliable transport infrastructure is essential for local communities, providing social and cultural benefits, as well as underpinning local economies and tourism; notes the recommendation of the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) to investigate potential fixed link connections, such as tunnels, along ferry routes on the Sound of Harris, the Sound of Barra, and between Mull and the Scottish mainland; further notes comments made by the then Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, on 20 January 2022, that fixed links on these routes "could improve communities' access to goods and services and make those islands more attractive for people to live and work in and visit" understands that tunnels to connect communities on the Shetland Islands were deemed out of scope of STPR2 by Transport Scotland; acknowledges the creation of Shetland's grassroots tunnel action groups, made up of community members advocating the potential advantages of tunnels to connect the isles, and notes that some of these groups are crowdfunding for technical surveys; understands that there is support among stakeholders for opportunities to explore the benefits of short subsea tunnels in Shetland, and notes the calls for a fixed link to replace the ferry on the Corran Narrows.

17:02

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank those members who supported the motion to allow the debate to take place.

The debate is about future proofing transport connectivity for rural and island areas. We already know about the impacts of poor connectivity on women, fixed-income households and both older and younger people. Today, I call on the Scottish Government to listen to communities that feel that they would be better served by bridges or tunnels.

Members will not be surprised to hear that, in my contribution, I will focus on moving away from carbon-intensive, interisland ferries, in particular in Shetland. The tunnels debate is not new. In Shetland, however, it is currently set against the backdrop of an ageing ferry fleet with high carbon emissions, and a situation in which the recruitment and retention of ferry crews is difficult. All those issues are having an ever-increasing impact on the reliability of services.

There is proof of concept. More than a century ago, the short bridge between Muckle Roe and the Shetland mainland was seen as a means of reversing depopulation. The islands of Burra and Trondra were connected by bridges in the 1970s, and their populations have grown; Trondra's population has increased eightfold from its lowest point, at just 17.

The issues of depopulation, the economy and social links are driving the campaign's calls for short subsea tunnels. The economies of the islands are being stifled, and that, in turn, impacts on Shetland's wider economic contribution to the national economy. Two ferries are needed to get to Unst, which is home to the new SaxaVord spaceport, in the most northerly location in the United Kingdom. The debate is of national strategic importance. The former First Minister agreed with that in December 2021, when she said:

"A development like that would be of strategic importance, as well as being important to the local community and economy."—[*Official Report*, 23 December 2021; c 27.]

In Yell, a local haulier transports significant quantities of fish that are landed at Cullivoe pier, and salmon from the local processing factory. However, because of ferry delays out of Yell, there is a risk that they miss the onward ferry connection from Lerwick to Aberdeen, and the markets. Delays cost money for the haulier and for those exporting seafood.

With tunnel infrastructure, it is anticipated that social and cultural links would be enhanced, including better public transport, increased tourism opportunities and improved health and public services, not least emergency services provision.

However, there is a danger that some view discussions about interisland fixed-link connections purely through the lens of their benefiting only those people who live on those islands, rather than looking holistically at the benefits to Shetland, and ultimately to Scotland. If island communities are valued, they must be supported to reach their full potential. There is no shortage of potential in Shetland, from space, fishing and aquaculture to offshore and onshore energy in various forms.

In February 2022, my MP colleague Alistair Carmichael and I hosted an online public discussion about the prospect of short subsea tunnels in Shetland. We followed up that with our first "Tunnel Vision" event in summer 2022, with an islands tour, hosting discussions in community halls, to gauge the views from each island about the opportunities and challenges of tunnel connections. Community-led, grass-roots Unst and Yell tunnel action groups, known as UTAG and YTAG, were developed.

A further round of community engagement events this past summer saw the creation of a tunnel action group in Whalsay, which is the home of Shetland's pelagic fleet, and where yesterday, one of its island ferries, the 41-year-old Hendra, broke down yet again.

UTAG and YTAG have been busy this last summer, crowdfunding for geotechnical investigations to complement the work that has already been done on the concept of tunnels.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I congratulate Beatrice Wishart on the work that she and Alistair Carmichael have been taking forward. The point that she makes about the community-led aspect of the campaign is vitally important. The message that I pick up from speaking to my constituents in Orkney, certainly among the younger population, is very much that the drive for those fixed links is coming, and that that is absolutely integral for retaining the population in our island communities in the future.

Beatrice Wishart: Liam McArthur makes some very good points, especially about the new generation.

A recent visit to the Faroe Islands from representatives of the TAGs culminated in a report, a copy of which was sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition. I, too, was able to visit the Faroe Islands earlier this summer. I met the Minister of Fisheries and Infrastructure, while Landsverk, the agency in the Faroe Islands that is responsible for the transportation network, took me through the newest tunnel network, which was then under construction.

When the network opens later this month, almost 90 per cent of the Faroese population will be connected by tunnels. I also saw the world's first subsea roundabout, which was very impressive. A recent report relating to the potential construction of a further subsea tunnel in Faroe concluded that it was significantly more environmentally sustainable than ferries.

From our online meeting in February 2022 and the development of TAGs and their work for geophysical surveys, to Shetland Islands Council funding the development of the business case, Shetland PLC is working together to investigate whether tunnels can become a reality. That co-operation extends to Shetland's engagement with both the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments.

Tunnels have an initial price tag, but they will pay off in the long term in comparison with several cycles of ferry replacements. However, it is not only Shetland that could benefit from fixed links.

My Highland councillor colleague Angus MacDonald has called for communities that are served by the Corran vehicle ferry to be connected with a fixed link. Earlier in the year, the ferry's withdrawal for maintenance meant that those in the community faced a 42-mile road detour.

More than 100 years ago, the bridge to Muckle Roe was built to address depopulation. I urge Scotland's Governments to emulate that foresight today. Investment now in sustainable transport infrastructure such as tunnels or bridges would serve communities for many decades to come, and would avoid providing replacement ferries with shorter lifespans. Vessels such as the 41-year old Hendra often continue in service well beyond their intended lifespan for the purposes of savings. Too often, those savings are short term and are wiped out by the eventual need to replace the asset.

There are some island communities that will, because of their geography, continue to need ferries. In replacing those vessels, we must avoid the Scottish Government's west coast ferry fiasco from ever arising again or being replicated elsewhere in the country. Where communities make the case for tunnels, we should look beyond the next 20 years and invest in the future.

I agree with the sentiment that

"fixed links ... could improve communities' access to goods and services and make ... islands more attractive for people to live and work in and visit."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2022; c 57.]

That is a sentiment that the former Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport expressed in the chamber in January 2022. However, political will and investment are crucial to ensure progress.

17:10

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): First, I thank Beatrice Wishart and congratulate her on bringing the debate to the chamber. I know that she has a deep commitment to serving her island constituents.

I am grateful to speak on a matter of vital importance to Scotland, in particular for rural and coastal communities such as those that I represent in Banffshire and Buchan Coast. Although—I admit—we are not an island, there are threads of the same theme of connectivity running through. The coastal aspect of rural living adds an extra dimension, which raises issues that must receive proportional attention in Parliament.

Although we are here to acknowledge the significance of connectivity in Scotland's rural and island areas, I also acknowledge the Parliament's commitment to Scotland's net zero targets, as it is

essential that our actions align with those environmental aspirations.

The essence of my address today is the importance of local decision-making in infrastructure projects. Our rural and coastal communities, each with a unique set of needs and challenges, must have a say in the projects that directly impact their lives. Whether that involves implementing fixed links such as tunnels or enhancing other transport services, the voice of the local community is paramount. When local communities are at the forefront of such decisions, it not only ensures that the solutions are tailored to their needs, but instils a sense of ownership and commitment to the success of the projects.

Safety and economic vitality are at the heart of our concerns. Connectivity is not just a matter of convenience—it is a lifeline that supports local economies and tourism and ensures the safety of our residents.

In that context, I highlight the exemplary work—which I take any chance to plug—of the Campaign for North East Rail. As an ardent supporter of CNER, I have raised its work in the chamber previously, and I met the former Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth, to discuss the transformative impact of re-railing the north-east.

The Scottish Government's allocation of funds from the just transition fund for CNER's feasibility study marks a significant step forward. It awarded CNER £0.25 million pounds from the fund, and the feasibility study has made great leaps forward in the past few months, with the appointment of world-leading consultancy firms AECOM and Stantec to explore the possibility of passenger and freight services running north of Dyce and onwards to Peterhead and Fraserburgh for the first time in more than half a century.

My office's recent conversation with Jordan Jack, the general secretary of CNER, highlighted the campaign's focus on collaboration with local interest groups. That approach, which aligns with the former transport secretary's advice, ensures that our efforts in improving transport infrastructure are inclusive and community driven.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Would the member also like to see the dualling of the A90 north of Ellon, up to places such as Peterhead and Fraserburgh?

Karen Adam: That needs to come under part of another feasibility study. We need to start thinking outside the box and looking more towards rail. If the member meets CNER—I hope that he has done—and talks to the group about its future plans, he will know that we are talking about getting cars off the road and decarbonising. If we look towards electric rail for the future, that would be the best investment to make.

I am looking forward to the feasibility study that is due in spring 2024. It is eagerly anticipated, and I hope that it will play a crucial role in shaping our transport landscape.

The need for an integrated approach in transport that involves all modes, from ferries to rail, and that deeply engages with local communities cannot be overstated. The motion before us is about not just building tunnels or enhancing ferry services, but building a more connected, sustainable and inclusive Scotland. I know that our current Minister for Transport is dedicated to creating that Scotland, and I thank her for her communications and outreach with local projects in my constituency that I have raised with her.

As we consider the recommendations of the strategic transport projects review 2 as well as the aspirations of Shetland's grass-roots tunnel action groups and initiatives such as the Campaign for North East Rail, we should remember that at the heart of those projects are the people whom they serve. Let us commit to a future in which every decision that is made is a step towards a safer, more prosperous and more connected Scotland for all.

17:14

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Beatrice Wishart for securing today's debate, which acknowledges the importance of connectivity in Scotland's rural areas.

We all agree that reliable transport infrastructure is essential for local communities, economies and tourism. Karen Adam was right to mention Scotland's net zero targets, because achieving those will depend on better transport services across the country.

The stark reality is that various aspects of Scottish life, particularly our economy, receive less attention in more rural areas. In Ayrshire, there is a pressing need for a much better transport network. Let us take the example of the A77, which serves as the main artery connecting the central belt to Northern Ireland, through the port at Cairnryan.

It is a vital route for businesses, haulage companies, commuters and farmers; it also brings tourists to the beautiful south-west corner of Scotland. That is why it is unbelievable that the average speed on such an important road is just 37.7 mph. The Government's own "South West Scotland Transport Study" identified the A77 as the slowest A road in the country. It takes an average of 69 minutes to travel a 43-mile stretch.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given that the United Kingdom

Government is providing £8 million for a business plan to build up the case for bypassing Crocketford and Springholm on the A75, does she agree that the Scottish Government should step up to the mark and at least match fund the UK Government in its investment in the A77?

Sharon Dowey: I absolutely agree with that, and I think that local communities would welcome any extra investment in their infrastructure.

Because the road is so slow, it is not safe; people take unnecessary risks. The number of accidents on the A77 is unacceptable. For years, we have been asking for the A77 to be fully dualled, which would stop many of those dangerous incidents and save lives. I have been speaking about this road since my maiden speech.

Small towns and rural areas are disadvantaged by the out-of-date infrastructure. The lack of investment limits job creation and holds back local businesses and the local economy. What incentive is there to start a business near the slowest A road in the country? What incentive is there for people to move to the area when it takes so long to get to work? Although we all aspire to meet net zero targets, the necessary actions, such as investing in our public transport services, are lagging behind.

Numerous towns in my area, such as Mauchline or Cumnock, could benefit from having a train station but there are currently no trains going south from Ayr, following a devastating fire next to Ayr station.

It has been almost three weeks since the First Minister assured me that I would be provided with a written update on the actions that the Scottish Government has taken on Ayr station, along with full details of its interactions with the local authority. I am still waiting for a response. This might not be an urgent situation for the SNP Government, but it is for the people of Ayrshire.

The closure of the station is having a detrimental impact on local businesses and the local economy. We need to get the trains up and running, which will have the added benefit of helping us to reach net zero. To help people to ditch their cars, we need to provide them with reliable alternative transport options.

Improving rural connectivity is a matter of urgent necessity for the wellbeing of our communities and the prosperity of our local businesses. The SNP Government must make that its priority. Otherwise, it will let down our rural communities and risk missing our net zero targets.

17:18

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Beatrice Wishart on bringing this matter to the chamber.

As the constituency MSP for Arran, Cumbrae and Holy Isle, I am all too aware of the specific challenges that are related to island connectivity. In the context of my Cunninghame North constituency, it has been a disappointing month in relation to connectivity: partners in the Ardrossan harbour project have further work to do after the plan to go out to tender was paused this summer due to the scope of the necessary works being expanded.

There are genuine concerns locally about delays to that project, which are due to increased costs and the refreshed business case. Arranachs and Ardrossanites wonder why the need for the extension of Winton pier and the Irish berth, which ferries need in winter weather to manoeuvre out of the harbour, was not initially anticipated.

On a visit to Arran on 23 August, the First Minister gave assurances that Ardrossan will remain the main port for Arran once the improvements are complete. That was welcomed by people in Arran and Ardrossan, who had previously expressed concerns that the Arran ferry might move to Troon permanently.

The MV Glen Sannox is now scheduled for spring next year, with a view to its commencing service in the summer, to be followed soon after by the MV Glen Rosa. The motion refers to the

“high output of carbon emissions from ferries serving Scotland’s islands”.

Both Glens will eventually have dual-fuel propulsion systems, using traditional marine diesel and liquefied natural gas, with the latter producing a smaller amount of exhaust pollutants and potentially 25 per cent less by way of greenhouse gases. However, we must ensure that the supply chain of LNG is resilient and is as environmentally friendly as possible.

The recommendation of STPR2 to

“investigate potential fixed link connections, such as tunnels, along ferry routes on the Sound of Harris, the Sound of Barra, and between Mull and the Scottish mainland”

is one that I whole-heartedly support. Having visited the Faroe Islands in 2018, I am a big fan of the Faroese undersea tunnel network. The Faroese used to cut passages through their mountains before building 21 undersea tunnels from the early 1960s until now, which has revolutionised live and travel in the Faroe Islands. For example, the travel time between the capital Tórshavn and Runavík has fallen from an hour and 14 minutes to just 16 minutes. Such tunnels

are good value for money, fully connecting communities throughout the Faroe archipelago and enabling them to thrive and grow. A planned tunnel from the southernmost island of Suðuroy to the island of Sandoy of around 13 to 15 miles is estimated to cost around £390 million. Considering the price tag of the Queensferry crossing, which was a 10th of that length, or of new ferries, which have to be crewed and are impacted by the weather, tunnels can be cost effective. Of course, all UK procurement projects are much more expensive than those elsewhere in Europe, and that matter requires investigation.

Shipping is often a polluting form of transport, so subsea tunnels could contribute to reaching our net zero goals, although not all cars using the tunnels would be electric, and they would produce emissions. That is a matter that has to be assessed. Although it is less appropriate for the Clyde and the routes to Arran or the Cumbrae islands, I share the motion's sentiment that subsea tunnels in Scotland should be explored for the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, where talks are reported to be at an advanced stage. I was pleased that a delegation of Scottish MPs, including Inverclyde MP Ronnie Cowan, travelled to the Faroe Islands on Friday to engage with the nation that has led the world in undersea tunnelling. Of course, a Dunoon to Gourock tunnel could be a future possibility—and that is no doubt why Ronnie was there.

It is clear that our island constituents deserve transport infrastructure that is reliable and as resilient as possible. While that has not always been the case, I hope that the future looks brighter with the delivery of low-emission ferries as well as potential fixed-link connections, ushering in a new era of prosperity for our island communities.

I again thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing this interesting motion to the chamber.

17:22

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I, too, congratulate Beatrice Wishart on securing the debate, which highlights the importance of connectivity, especially in our island communities.

Much has been said about the ferry fiasco in the Western Isles, but there are issues with an ageing fleet in Shetland, too. The council owns the ferry fleet, which is ageing and unreliable, and it needs to be renewed. However, because of funding commitments, that is not something that councils are able to do. Shetland Islands Council has been in talks with the Scottish Government, looking for assistance to renew its ferry fleet. Every time a ferry is renewed, however, there is a need to consider replacing it in the future. Is it better value for money to build tunnels and fixed links? That

argument for tunnels and bridges instead of ferries to link communities has been coming from Shetland for decades. It is sad that communities are now crowdfunding to try to make that a reality, at a time when the Government should be listening.

Beatrice Wishart spoke about the Corran ferry and the length of time that it was off in the summer, which created a huge detour for communities, preventing people from crossing what is a very narrow strait and getting to Fort William much quicker. I totally agree that a fixed link should be considered there. Beatrice Wishart also talked about the benefits to communities of fixed links. We should consider how the Western Isles used European funding to build bridges and causeways: Harris and Scalpay were joined together; so were Berneray and North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist, South Uist and Eriskay, and Barra and Vatersay.

We saw an economic benefit as a result of that, and there was also a social benefit because people had much easier access to services. The links between Eriskay and Barra and between Berneray and Harris obviously need to be looked at for the future. Those islands are still served by ageing ferries but it would benefit them to have fixed links as well.

More controversial is having fixed links from island groups to the mainland. People are perhaps not so keen on that because they lose the benefits of island life. We look to Skye very often and we can see the huge economic benefit to Skye of having a bridge. However, people now see that its economy is overheating, with a lack of houses for young people and the like.

Therefore, we have to be careful and plan with local communities, listening to what they want and how we can fulfil their ambitions. Government must listen to those communities and make a strategic plan that fulfils their wishes and ambitions. Everyone knows that that cannot be done overnight but it will never be done if we do not start making a plan. Therefore, I urge the Government to look at the issue and start on a strategic plan immediately.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Halcro Johnston, who is joining us remotely.

17:26

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Beatrice Wishart on lodging the motion and securing the debate. I apologise that I did not formally support the motion. It was merely an oversight and I put on record my support for the sentiments in it, because it is an important issue not just in Shetland but in

island and other rural communities right across my Highlands and Islands region.

I also apologise that I am not able to be in the chamber to take part in the debate. I am having to take part remotely because my ferry yesterday was cancelled at the last minute due to technical issues. That was the ferry that was brought back into service to allow the MV Alfred to cover gaps in the CalMac Ferries fleet on the west coast. I have repeatedly warned of Orkney being impacted by the growing ferries crisis on the west coast and that kind of proves my point.

I will start by talking briefly about Shetland. During the summer I met the people who are campaigning for tunnels for their communities and with Shetland Island Council about its efforts. I have had countless approaches from local residents, businesses and other groups in Shetland making the case for fixed links. It is quite clear that tunnels or bridges should be considered when linking islands and other rural communities, as is the case in countries right across the world—yet they have not been given enough consideration by the Scottish National Party-led Government.

Although, as the motion states, fixed links have now been included in STPR2 in the Western Isles, Scotland continues to focus on replacement ferries where ferries are currently operating. That is despite there being examples of successful fixed links projects right across Scotland already. Yesterday, in my abortive attempt to cross the Pentland Firth by ferry, I headed across the Churchill barriers that link Orkney's south isles. They were originally built to defend Scapa Flow against attacks during the war but they now provide a vital road link for the communities that they connect. There is also the Skye bridge, as previously mentioned, built under the Conservatives, which links Skye with the mainland of Scotland and has transformed connectivity for that island.

However, it is not just island communities that could benefit from fixed links. I have repeatedly raised the issue faced by local residents and businesses that rely on the Corran Narrows ferry link, which was mentioned earlier, and the damage that is being done to their communities with both the main ferry and the replacement boat being out of action for long periods, including at peak times over the summer. The Corran Narrows is a vital crossing, yet local people have suffered a year of disrupted services that has put real pressure on their communities. For some, it has put into question the very sustainability of the local area for the future—some people are already talking of packing up and moving elsewhere.

In the Chancellor's autumn statement, the UK Government announced that £20 million-worth of

funding could be made available for infrastructure improvements. Although that is welcome, it will not help with the immediate challenges being faced by local people. Local surveys have highlighted that many people within the local community want a fixed link, whether that is a bridge or a tunnel, and I would support that ambition. Looking longer term, a fixed link should be part of any consideration of how to deliver a Corran Narrows crossing for the future.

However, in the shorter term those local residents and businesses need a ferry service that they can rely on, and they need it now. Most people whom I spoke to in those communities when I was there in the summer do not care whether it is an electric ferry or another diesel ferry; they just need it to run when it is supposed to. Will the transport minister, either now or in her closing speech, advise what consideration, if any, the Scottish Government, in consultation with Highland Council, which operates the route, is giving to procuring or securing a diesel replacement vessel to strengthen resilience across the Corran Narrows?

I could speak for longer and in more detail about some of the other areas which could be included in such considerations, but this is a short, albeit welcome, debate. I hope, however, that it has highlighted to the transport minister and to her SNP and Green colleagues just how important those links are and just how devastating their loss can be to our local communities. Although she has only recently rejoined the Scottish Government, I hope that she will accept that her party's record on supporting existing and delivering new lifeline links to our island and remote communities simply has not been anywhere near good enough.

17:30

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands (Green)): I, too, thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the debate on island connectivity and fixed links to the chamber and framing it in the context of our climate ambitions. I also thank the Shetland grassroots tunnel action group for spurring on Beatrice Wishart to lodge the motion, because without them, I do not think that we would be here this evening. I am grateful to be able to speak on behalf of the communities that I represent in the Highlands and Islands.

Members have talked tonight about how Shetland has been making a noise about fixed links for some time, and as I was preparing for the debate, I remembered a Shetland newspaper article that revealed ambitious plans for a six-line, isles-wide underground rail network, with a fantastic image of the London underground imposed on Shetland. That was published on 1 April 2011. It was an April fool, but it was a

tremendous provocation to having conversations about the importance of fixed links. Fixed links are transformative, as has already been described this evening. They bring economic and social benefits and, if they are part of a multimodal shift of transport, they can also bring environmental benefits.

As we heard from Kenneth Gibson, the story of the Faroe Islands is tremendous; I remember hearing about it and seeing it with my own eyes. One of the things that struck me about it was that the Faroese said that it was a democratic act and that they wanted to provide fixed links so that everyone could have access to the capital city. I was struck by that aspect of what they were trying to do there.

Kenneth Gibson: It is not just that people can access the city, but that the links allow far-flung communities in the Faroe Islands to survive and thrive. Instead of all the young people moving to the capital, Tórshavn, they can stay in the communities that they grew up in and thrive, because everyone is so close to the capital if they need to get there.

Ariane Burgess: I thank the member for that intervention and for bringing that balance. He is absolutely right.

As we have heard, we already have fixed links in Scotland. The Churchill barriers, which were built in 1945, have been mentioned and they were transformative. It would, of course, be remiss of me not to mention the question of who looks after them. They were built a long time ago, and that seems to be a missing link in relation to those fixed links.

We have the Skye bridge. Rhoda Grant talked about the need for balance and whether we want to open up an island to that access. I think that it has brought a tremendous amount of benefit, but I would want to listen to the communities there.

The Eriskay causeway, which was opened in 2001, is smaller, but it has had no less of an impact. Again, it brings tremendous benefit to the communities there.

We have a duty to address rural and island population loss and rural and island connectivity is a big part of that. We must listen to islanders and rural communities.

Douglas Lumsden: The member is talking about listening to rural communities. Does she not think that we should listen to those who are demanding that the A9 be fully dualled?

Ariane Burgess: We need to address the safety issues of the A9 right away. That is being tackled. Those are the things that we can do right now. I would also like much more work to be done

on dualling the rail line between Inverness and Perth.

As I was saying, we have a duty to rural and island communities, and they must be listened to. That is reflected in the work of Transport Scotland. The second transport project review points out:

“The current ferry routes on the Sound of Harris, Sound of Barra and between Mull and the Scottish mainland face a number of issues and challenges. Replacing ferry services with fixed links (bridges, causeways and/ or tunnels) can improve reliability, connectivity, capacity and travel times and allow for the wider reconfiguration of ferry services.

STPR2 recommends that further work is undertaken on business cases to better understand the benefits, costs and challenges associated with these options.”

I align my thoughts with those of Beatrice Wishart and others who want the Shetland fixed links to be part of that process, along with the Corran Narrows link, as Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned.

We must consider the context for all of that. We are in a cost of living crisis and are impacted by inflation. On both the committees that I sit on, I hear about the rising cost of construction and the lack of skilled workers that is often caused by Brexit. We will also have the next budget in a few weeks' time. How are we to afford such initiatives? I wonder whether we could invite businesses—including those in the space, energy and salmon farming sectors—which will certainly benefit from those fixed links, to consider investing in them.

We all need to support fixed links. However, we must ensure that we are listening to the communities who are taking the lead, so that we get the right fixed links in the right places.

17:36

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and I congratulate Beatrice Wishart on securing it.

We have heard a range of positive speeches from around the country, particularly, and rightly, from the Highlands and Islands region that I am proud to represent.

This issue is critically important to our communities. We have heard about and know about the on-going issues in the Western Isles and the failure to build the ferries that were promised to those communities. Jamie Halcro Johnston spoke about the difficulties of living and working in our island communities. Ferry failures, whether they are due to weather or to maintenance and mechanical issues, have a direct impact on the daily lives of people who live and work in our island communities.

I was in Shetland earlier this year. At my surgeries on Mainland and out on the other islands, the issue came up time and again. I met the Unst and Yell tunnel action groups during one surgery and was proud to support the campaign and the work that they have done. They should be given credit in Parliament for everything that they have done and for the growing momentum. Just last year, the groups rightly criticised Transport Scotland for looking at fixed links elsewhere in Scotland but largely ignoring calls for work in Shetland. I was encouraged by the comments that were made by the new transport minister back in September, during her discussions in Shetland, when she said that there will now be more discussion of the subject. Rhoda Grant commented on that.

I commend the groups for the current online auction of 80 lots that have been donated by local businesses and supporters. That is commendable, and I wish the action groups every success, but it is disappointing that campaigners have to fundraise in that way for work that I believe should be done by the Scottish Government. The funds that are raised will help with work on geotechnical investigations and on social, economic and environmental impacts. That work is vital, but surely it should be done by the Scottish Government on behalf of our constituents in Shetland and the islands.

Kenny Gibson, Beatrice Wishart, Rhoda Grant and many others have spoken about the fact that, although building tunnels comes at a big initial cost, it will save taxpayers money in the long run. It will be a better way of moving people to, from and between islands. I believe that, in the long run, it will be a spend-to-save measure that the Scottish Government should take forward. We all need to get behind that work, so I have been encouraged by what I have heard so far.

We should also look at the impact that fixed links would have on encouraging people to move to our islands. It is difficult to get young people and families to move to our islands, and there is no doubt that the often, for various reasons, unreliable service from the ferries puts people off. Fixed links could revitalise some communities, which have so much to offer.

We should recognise the work that is done not just in Parliament but in the local council. When I was up in Shetland earlier this year, I found that the chief executive, the leader and the convener of Shetland Islands Council and the representatives on the transport committee are united on the matter. I hope that they are encouraged by what they hear in Parliament this evening.

As the debate is about connectivity in rural and island communities, I will speak for a moment about rural issues that do not relate to an island

community. I come from Moray, which is a rural constituency in a rural part of Scotland. Connectivity issues are significant in Moray, in other parts of the Highlands and Islands and—as we have heard from Sharon Dowey and Finlay Carson—in other parts of Scotland. We rightly have a lot of debates in the Parliament about the A9, so it would be interesting if the minister would take the opportunity tonight to say when the A9 will be fully dualled. We have also had a commitment and promises made to fully dual the A96, which goes through Moray. Fergus Ewing rightly calls for a Nairn bypass, but what about bypasses for Elgin and Keith?

We need those vital infrastructure upgrades. Constituents and business in Moray have been calling for them for many years, and we need that connectivity to open up further opportunities in Moray. The pledge was made by the SNP many years ago, and I do not want to see it backsliding on it just because the Greens are in government. The SNP made that promise and must deliver it, as the people and businesses of Moray expect it to do.

17:41

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I, too, thank Beatrice Wishart for securing this debate on the role that transport plays in connecting and sustaining all our island and rural communities across Scotland. Ms Wishart has regularly raised the potential for fixed links to play a part in future thinking and in future-proofing connectivity for the isles that she represents. As she knows, Shetland Islands Council leads on interisland connectivity in its area, but I hope that she and other members will be pleased to hear that I recently met the council, which relayed its plans for its interisland transport connectivity programme. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the council's preliminary business case work on short sea crossings. We have consistently offered the assistance and advice of my officials at Transport Scotland in that process.

Of course, that is connected to the drive of the Unst and Yell tunnel action groups to get that research on the table. I had the pleasure of meeting those groups last summer in Lerwick. As I said at the time, I am interested in that aspect of connectivity. Much is being drawn from the Faroese experience. Interestingly and importantly, the developments there are privately financed and underwritten by the state Government of Denmark. Given the need for reliable access for workers travelling across islands, particularly in developing the space and energy sectors, there is clearly a common interest with business.

We have heard from members about the challenges and concerns that are faced by

communities in different parts of Scotland. That reflects my discussions and observations while visiting Shetland, Orkney, Fort William and Mull over the summer and, more recently, Stornoway, and in the many virtual meetings that I have held with community groups, from Arran and Islay, among others.

The islands connectivity plan, which is due to be published, will recognise much of what has been articulated this evening. It will set out a wider understanding and recognition of future needs and a strategic vision for the future, as well as setting out the long-term vessel and port plans and plans for consultation of our island communities to establish an agreed way forward.

Supporting that are the 45 recommendations that were set out in the second strategic transport projects review, which was published last December. That represents a repositioning of our transport investment priorities, with a focus firmly on how transport can help us to protect our climate and improve the quality of people's lives. STPR2 recommends that we continue our significant investment in port and vessel infrastructure to improve our ferry network. By 2026, there will be six new major vessels serving Scotland's network, which will help to improve reliability and resilience across our networks.

That will be followed by the small vessel replacement programme, which is on track and will deliver vessels between 2026 and 2028. As the motion notes, STPR2 further recommends investigation of potential fixed links at the Sound of Harris and the Sound of Barra and between Mull and the Scottish mainland, which could improve communities' access to goods and services, thereby making those islands more attractive for people to visit and to live and work in.

At the convention of the Highlands and Islands meeting that I attended last week, it was set out that the initial community sense of desirability for fixed links should now be explored. My officials and I understand the critical need to listen to communities in order to arrive at solutions that work for them, and that opinions on the issue differ among communities. Rhoda Grant made that point very well. While we explore solutions to the transport needs of our island communities, we know that ferry networks will continue to be needed until a suitable fixed link is developed and is operational.

We recognise the challenge for local authorities that have responsibility for ferries. Since 2018, the Government has provided those councils with more than £178 million in revenue to support the running of services. The Scottish Government continues to work closely with Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council through the ferry replacement task force, the latest meeting of

which was on 23 November, when the Deputy First Minister and I met Shetland Islands Council to talk about progressing the work of the Shetland task force.

On the replacement for the Corran ferry, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd is engaging with Highland Council, which is responsible for the Corran ferry's future design. That is allowing CMAL to benefit from work on the small vessel replacement programme, which, if implemented, can provide the local ferry network with the additional resilience that a standard roll-on, roll-off ferry design offers. However, it remains the case that decisions on the future of local ferry services, including decisions relating to replacement by a fixed link, are for the respective local councils to make.

The issues that we are addressing today must be put in the context of the fiscal environment that we face. Clearly, we are operating in an extremely challenging fiscal environment, so the Government faces some stark decisions. The situation was set out clearly in the Deputy First Minister's letter to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 23 November. The choices are even starker because we no longer have access to European funding. An independent Scotland would offer greater flexibility in respect of the funding levers that could be applied and would allow us, once again, to access European Union funds. Independence would also provide us with the power and opportunity to potentially make different strategic investment decisions from those that are made by the Westminster Government.

Douglas Ross: Until the minister moved on to independence, there was, largely, cross-party consensus on what we, as a Parliament, are looking to achieve on fixed links. Karen Adam, Douglas Lumsden and I all mentioned road upgrades—in particular, to the A9 and the A96. In her final few moments, will the minister tell us when the A9 will be fully dualled and what her plans are for dualling the A96?

Fiona Hyslop: As Douglas Ross will be aware—because it has been stated a number of times in the chamber—the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition will make a statement on the A9 in which she will set out those plans.

In relation to the motion, I am not sure that road aspects were central to Beatrice Wishart's approach. I want to reflect on and respect the motion that has been signed by a number of members.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you resume your seat for a second? For the sake of clarification, I note that how members respond to issues that are raised is obviously entirely a

matter for them, but I took the trouble to reread the motion at the start of the debate, given the number of issues that were being raised, and I satisfied myself that reference to the importance of, for example, “reliable transport infrastructure” allowed for a wider focus.

Fiona Hyslop: I absolutely accept that point. I think that I would need more than seven minutes to cover the range of issues that have been raised in the debate, which is why I have focused particularly on the points that were made in the opening speech by the member who lodged the motion.

The importance of resilient, reliable and affordable transport for rural and island communities needs to be addressed with intent and purpose. In close consultation with communities and local action groups, the Government continues to work on what that looks like and how it can best serve those communities.

Financial uncertainties, inflation and 10 per cent reductions in our capital budget are the realities that we face. Funds that have been received through the levelling up fund fall short of the funding that our island communities received from the European Union, which the levelling up fund was meant to replace.

Although fixed links could be a solution for some communities at some point in the future, they must be considered at the same time as we consider short-term and medium-term needs. The challenge is in marrying the two issues. I assure members that fixed links are an important consideration as we deliver future transport solutions for our island communities.

Meeting closed at 17:50.

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