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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 13 December 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time.

The first portfolio is wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. I remind members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters RTS in the chat function online during the relevant question.

City Centre Recovery Task Force

1. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how the work of the city centre recovery task force is helping to increase footfall in shops. (S6O-02862)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): I send my best wishes to Jeremy Balfour for his on-going recovery.

Delivery of the actions in the task force's report is led by the Scottish Cities Alliance, of which the Scottish Government is a member. Last month, the First Minister and I met city leaders to hear about their ambitions.

We allocated £6 million from the city centre recovery fund to task force priorities. For example, part of Edinburgh's award facilitated the opening of the St James Quarter, including support for a retail and hospitality academy, while Glasgow used some of its allocation to support the golden Z regeneration project, which focuses on the city centre's traditional shopping streets.

Jeremy Balfour: Will the cabinet secretary follow the example of the United Kingdom Government and support 75 per cent business rates relief?

Neil Gray: Decisions about business rates are for the budget, and we are taking all aspects into consideration. However, part of that consideration is the fact that only £10.8 million came as Barnett consequential for the health service—and therefore for public services—from the autumn statement. We want to ensure that we reflect the

needs of public services as well as supporting businesses at a challenging time.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Reinvigorating high streets is a Scotland-wide challenge. Our Union Street, in Aberdeen, has harnessed the ideas of Aberdonians to help transform the city centre for the better. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the Scottish Government's support, worth £400,000, to fund the campaign and give the iconic Union Street a fresh lease of life?

Neil Gray: We have spoken with the council and Our Union Street to get more detail on those plans, because we want our investment to support the campaign to revitalise Union Street to be used to its best effect. Indeed, the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning visited Our Union Street in November to find out more about the initiative. A lot can be learned from the partnership, which involves business and the community, and I will provide further updates as we have them.

Trade Unions

2. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what value it places on the role of trade unions in delivering and sustaining a wellbeing economy. (S6O-02863)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The Government places a critically high value on that. Trade unions are key social partners in realising our fair work ambitions as we successfully transition to a net zero economy. That work will form the foundation of a wellbeing economy, one that creates better communities and which capitalises on the opportunities of net zero to establish a fair, green and growing economy.

Our strategic relationship with the Scottish Trades Union Congress is underpinned by a memorandum of understanding, which demonstrates the value of trade union input to the Scottish Government. Through it, we have commitments to including the STUC in relevant policy development and for the First Minister to meet with the STUC biannually to discuss current issues.

Carol Mochan: Trade unions have campaigned for the immediate implementation of safe staffing legislation in the national health service; they have fought against funding cuts to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; and they have fought to rid our schools of violence. However, on each of those points, the Government has let them down. If the cabinet secretary truly values the contribution of trade unions and considers fair work to be a key principle of a wellbeing economy, why is the Government overseeing a falling

employment rate, a widening gender pay gap, a declining employee voice and a reduction in secure contracts?

Neil Gray: I would challenge that. Progress has been made on all the elements that Carol Mochan has referenced. For instance, we have, contrary to what Carol Mochan has set out, seen the gender pay gap reduce in Scotland, particularly for full-time workers. We also have a much narrower gender pay gap than the rest of the UK. That is because of the good work that has been done, in collaboration with the trade union movement, to apply fair work conditionality and to raise the standards of working conditions across the public and private sectors. We will continue to collaborate in that manner.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I declare an interest as a member of Unison.

With draconian legislation such as the anti-strike bill that was passed in the United Kingdom Parliament, it is clear that protecting workers' rights is more important than ever. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 is another appalling piece of legislation from Westminster that will harm, not improve, industrial relations. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to stop Westminster attacks of that sort on Scottish workers and to help deliver fair work in a wellbeing economy?

Neil Gray: I agree with Kevin Stewart. The Scottish Government views that legislation as unnecessary and expects it to be completely ineffective and, as Kevin Stewart says, counterproductive. I and my colleagues have written to UK ministers, expressing our strong opposition to the introduction of minimum service levels and associated codes of practice. We will continue to do all that we can to resist this anti-worker, anti-trade union legislation.

That attack on workers' rights underlines why the devolution of employment law, at the very minimum, is imperative. That viewpoint is championed by the STUC and other organisations; I think that the Scottish Labour Party is on side with it, although I do not think that the UK Labour Party is. That underlines that, short of the devolution of employment law, we need independence to ensure that we have an employment system that meets the needs of workers and employers.

City and Regional Growth Deals (Infrastructure Investments)

3. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it is planning any new infrastructure investments in the next financial year in connection with city and regional growth deals. (S6O-02864)

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

We are investing £1.9 billion in the city and regional growth deals, which are part of an ongoing programme of investment across Scotland. The Argyll and Bute and Falkirk deals will mark a significant milestone in 2024-25, and they will move into delivery in the next financial year, meaning that all 12 deals will be in delivery. As of quarter 2 of 2023-24, deals in delivery have drawn from £991.71 million of the total investment by the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments, which has been used to increase growth across Scotland.

Sue Webber: The Scottish Government has committed £300 million to the Edinburgh and South East Scotland city region deal, but economic development has stagnated as communities remain isolated due to poor transport links. Does the cabinet secretary accept that investment in projects such as Winchburgh station will be critical to economic growth in the region?

Neil Gray: Obviously, it is for local deal partners to take forward their priorities and business cases in drawing down on the funds that are coming forward. I appreciate the need for good public transport connectivity, and I will continue to work with local partners on the areas that Sue Webber has set out to take forward those projects as quickly as possible.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

With regard to the UK Government's proposals for investment zones, what consideration has the Scottish Government given to proposing the Fife energy park as a cluster area? That would level the playing field so that it could compete for work in the renewables sector, alongside green freeports. As the cabinet secretary knows, the energy park is not in the Forth green freeport area, which risks leaving it at a disadvantage while it is trying to expand its business and increase local employment opportunities.

Neil Gray: We are working with colleagues in regional economic partnerships on city and regional growth deals, investment zones and innovation zones, ensuring that the needs and desires of local communities are at the forefront of the decisions that are taken on what incentives come through the processes. I am happy to take any further representations that Claire Baker or other local representatives might make regarding the idea that she has set out.

Small Businesses (Use of Alternative Fuels)

4. **Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with its enterprise agencies regarding how to support innovation by small businesses, including in relation to the use of

alternative fuels such as hydrotreated vegetable oil. (S6O-02865)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government and its enterprise agencies are committed to working with small businesses, supporting them to innovate and adopt new technologies and processes to increase their resilience and capacity for growth. Scotland's enterprise agencies have co-designed, co-invested in and delivered the advancing manufacturing challenge fund and the low carbon manufacturing challenge fund, supporting Scotland's small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises in sustainable innovation. We envision using bioenergy only in cases in which the finite supply of sustainable bioresources can best achieve net zero. Officials are engaging with enterprise agencies on a bioenergy policy statement, which will be published in due course.

Rhoda Grant: HVO can be sustainably sourced and stocked in Scotland, and its use allows companies such as Highland Fuels to provide renewable and sustainable replacements for fossil fuels to businesses and homes in the Highlands and Islands that are off gas grid and poorly insulated. As part of the policy statement, what steps are the Government and its enterprise agencies taking to widen its availability through local production and distribution?

Richard Lochhead: The member has raised an important issue, and I would be happy to learn more about the concerns and asks that Highland Fuels has on the overall policy. As I have said, a policy statement has been developed on bioenergy, so, if there are any specific elements that it feels should be in that statement, I would be grateful to hear from it directly.

Biofuels such as bio liquefied petroleum gas—biopropane—or hydrotreated vegetable oil, known as HVO, might be able to provide a low-carbon solution to heating off-gas-grid homes and businesses, but further evidence is required on the sustainability and costs of those fuels. It is important that we speak to local companies such as Highland Fuels that are interested in taking that forward, and I would be grateful to hear from interested businesses directly.

Small Businesses (Support)

5. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will support small businesses over the coming months. (S6O-02866)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): Businesses in Scotland can access advice, guidance and financial support from a wide range

of organisations across the public sector, most of which is available to any business, anywhere in Scotland, whatever stage of growth it is at. We are delivering a competitive non-domestic rates package worth an estimated £749 million this year, and our small business bonus scheme relief ensures that around half of properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors in the country will pay no rates. Decisions on non-domestic rates for 2024-25 will be announced in the context of the Scottish budget.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: As the minister will be aware, businesses across the Highlands and Islands already face challenges and costs additional to those faced by businesses in other parts of Scotland. However, as was raised by my colleague Jeremy Balfour, as well as the new burdens that are being placed on the sector—short-term lets licensing and the calamitous deposit return scheme being just two of those—the Scottish ministers still refuse to introduce the 75 per cent rates relief for the Scottish hospitality and tourism sector that the United Kingdom Government provides south of the border and that the Scottish Government has been given the funding to deliver. Will the Scottish National Party-Green coalition finally listen to businesses in my region, the Scottish Conservatives, and even members on its own benches who back the move, and use the funding that the UK Government has provided to give a much needed boost to Scottish hospitality and tourism?

Richard Lochhead: I thank the member for the question, which gives me an opportunity to remind him that I speak regularly to hospitality businesses the length and breadth of Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands and in my constituency. They say that a number of issues are affecting their bottom line at the moment and that they are facing a very tough trading environment and high costs. They tell me, for instance, that the biggest issue affecting them is rocketing energy costs, which are an issue that is reserved to the UK Government. There is a shortage of labour, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, as a result of Brexit, which is an issue that is reserved to the UK Government. There is the impact of inflation on goods and services, which the UK Government has influenced and has made some serious mistakes with. There is also the campaign to reduce VAT for tourism, which would bring a big boost to businesses in the Highlands and Islands. As the member highlighted, the Scottish Government has responsibility for a number of important issues, which we will consider in the forthcoming budget. Of course, we will have to await what the budget says.

The member referred to money that is provided by the UK Government. Clearly, he has been asleep for the past couple of weeks, because the

autumn statement delivered paltry consequential for the Scottish Government, which means that we face a very difficult situation with the Scottish budget. That is another example of how the UK Government has let down the hospitality sector, but we will do what we can—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister, but I need to take supplementary questions. I have received two. We have some time, so I will be able to take them both.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): One of the biggest challenges that small businesses face is being paid on time. That absorbs significant amounts of founders' time, as well as the obvious cash-flow challenges that late payments create. Often, unfortunately, larger businesses will extend payment terms to use their supply chain in effect as a source of free working capital. My understanding is that legislation in this area is devolved rather than reserved. Will the minister confirm his understanding of devolved competence in the area and say whether the Scottish Government has given any thought to legislating to require businesses to pay their suppliers on time?

Richard Lochhead: I thank Ivan McKee for raising an important issue for Scotland's small businesses and all businesses, and I confirm that it is within devolved competence. I agree with him that small businesses, in particular, should be paid for their services or products on time. That is one reason why we recently updated our public procurement prompt payment guidance. Under one of the actions that are set out in the new deal for business implementation plan, the Government will be working with small businesses to identify proactive regulations to support them in that and other regards. Prompt payment will form part of those discussions.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Brexit and the resultant economic turmoil have made life hard for businesses in Scotland. Given the limited financial levers that are available to Scotland, which the minister has mentioned, will he outline the impact of the UK's recent disappointing autumn statement on the Government's scope to respond to the real challenges facing small businesses?

Richard Lochhead: Alasdair Allan again raises the pretty devastating impact of UK policy on many of Scotland's businesses, including in his constituency. In my previous answer, I cited issues regarding energy, VAT, the impact of Brexit on labour shortages, inflation and a host of others, and they have largely been the responsibility of UK Government policy over the past few years in particular. That has had a big impact on the bottom line of many businesses in Scotland. The autumn statement was the most recent

disappointment. The paltry consequential coming to this Government limit our ability to repair some of that damage to Scotland's businesses.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 comes from Neil Bibby, who is joining us remotely.

Ferguson Marine

6. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with GMB to discuss the future of the Ferguson Marine yard. (S6O-02867)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): I last met GMB officials to exclusively discuss Ferguson's on 10 November.

Neil Bibby: The GMB and I are keen to understand what the Scottish Government is going to do to secure a future pipeline of work for the yard. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the BAE Systems Ministry of Defence work is a vote of confidence in the yard's workforce? Does he acknowledge that the yard has a positive track record on delivering smaller, simpler and standardised ferries under budget and under time? Does he believe that that puts the yard in a strong place to deliver the small vessel replacement programme?

Neil Gray: I thank Neil Bibby for his question and his continued interest, alongside that of others, including Stuart McMillan, in the future of the yard. I know that there has been much local collaboration on that. I continue to be committed to securing a sustainable future for the shipyard, and the Government is doing everything that it can to secure that. Decisions on which vessel opportunities to pursue are for Ferguson Marine's management and its board of directors. We know that the shipyard is actively pursuing many streams of future work and we will continue to support it in any way we can to secure new contracts and a sustainable future.

On small vessel replacement, whether on direct award or otherwise, it would be inappropriate for me to comment directly, except to say that Mr Bibby has set out the heritage and outstanding workforce that Ferguson's has and that direct awards are legal only in strictly limited circumstances under public procurement rules.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): When the cabinet secretary met the GMB, did he discuss the possible privatisation of the yard and whether that will be a factor in any future direct award of ferry contracts to Ferguson's?

Neil Gray: We have previously discussed the Government's strategy to return Ferguson's to the private sector at a time when that is right. We continue to engage with the trade unions that are

involved, including the GMB, and with the management and the board at Ferguson's on the future and—as has been raised by Mr Rennie and Mr Bibby—the potential for future work. We will continue to support Ferguson's on the business plans that are needed for some elements of our support.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It was reported that plans to procure the seven small vessels have been delayed for nearly two years. Does the minister accept that islanders cannot wait that long, and what is being done to ensure that those vessels are built on the Clyde?

Neil Gray: I have already set out in my answers to Mr Bibby and Mr Rennie the decision-making process that has to be gone through on where the small vessel replacement programme can be sited. The decisions on when that procurement takes place are for ministerial colleagues, and it is right that that is respected, but we obviously want to make sure that, whether the ships are being built at Ferguson's or elsewhere, we have a resilient ferry fleet for Scotland's island communities. As an islander, I understand the importance of that and the need for it to be done as quickly as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Oliver Mundell joins us remotely.

Renewable Energy (Dumfriesshire)

7. Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider carrying out an analysis of the potential impact of renewable energy and the associated infrastructure on farmland and food production in Dumfriesshire. (S6O-02868)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Where a new proposal for renewable energy development is brought forward, policy 5 of national planning framework 4—“Soils”—is clear that

“proposals on prime agricultural land, or land of lesser quality that is culturally or locally important for primary use, as identified by the LDP, will only be supported”

in limited circumstances. All applications are considered on a case-by-case basis, and a careful balance must be struck between potential impacts and benefits.

Oliver Mundell: On top of wind farm applications, solar farm applications and power lines, constituents in my Dumfriesshire constituency are aware of a deluge of applications for battery storage, many of which appear to be on good agricultural ground and do not seem to be subject to the same level of scrutiny. Will the minister commit to looking further into and reviewing that issue?

Gillian Martin: There is a great deal of scrutiny of applications of the type that Mr Mundell outlines. We need to rapidly accelerate our deployment of renewables and electricity infrastructure in order to support decarbonisation of the Great Britain grid by 2035. Significant investment in our grid infrastructure is required to ensure that clean, low-cost renewable electricity can flow to where it is needed. That is an imperative national mission for the United Kingdom Government as well as for the Scottish Government and all Governments across Europe, because we need sustainable and secure green energy. Plans for the infrastructure that is required need to be scrutinised, and the potential impacts on community, nature and other receptors, including cumulative impacts, are very important considerations in that decision-making process.

Gaelic (Economic and Social Opportunities)

8. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it has taken to support the recommendations of the short-life working group on economic and social opportunities for Gaelic. (S6O-02869)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government welcomes the report of the short-life working group on economic and social opportunities for Gaelic and has set up an internal Scottish Government steering group to consider the wide-ranging recommendations. The Scottish Government expects to issue a response to the group in the early months of 2024.

Alasdair Allan: The recent publication of the Scottish Languages Bill was very welcome. Can the cabinet secretary indicate which of the report's recommendations may intersect with the provisions in the new bill—for example, the potential for the creation of Gaelic economic zones or additional support for entrepreneurs in designated areas of linguistic significance?

Neil Gray: There is a welcome overlap between the Gaelic economy report and the recently introduced Scottish Languages Bill. Dr Allan, Arthur Cormack and I explored that in the recent meeting that we held on the subject. As Dr Allan is aware, the Gaelic economy report contains a wide range of recommendations that impact on a number of areas, including population, infrastructure, the public sector, Gaelic plans, communities and education. The report also lists key sectors that are important for the social and economic progress of Gaelic.

The provisions in the bill, including the drafting of a Gaelic strategy and Gaelic standards, the designation of areas of linguistic significance and improved Gaelic language plans all have the

potential to make progress on the recommendations on the key sectors that are identified in the Gaelic economy report and are the basis from which Kate Forbes introduced the review in the first place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. I will allow a brief pause before we move on to the next portfolio questions, to allow front-bench teams to change positions should they wish to do so.

Finance and Parliamentary Business

A9 Dualling

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to propose the scheduling of time for a ministerial statement on the dualling of the A9. (S6O-02870)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): The Scottish Government remains firmly committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness. Work to determine the most suitable procurement options for the remaining sections of the A9 dualling is now well advanced, and procurement of the Tomatin to Moy project is continuing. We expect to update Parliament on a renewed programme in the coming days.

Edward Mountain: I have to push on that point, because the Government has form on this. In 2007, it promised to dual the A9 by 2025. In 2023, it was forced to admit that it would not do that. In 2023, the Minister for Transport promised to deliver a statement to the Parliament, with a backstop of autumn, on what she had found out on the A9 and what was going to happen. She has clearly broken that promise.

Surely the Government would be much better off being honest and coming to the chamber without being forced to, to tell us when we will find out when it will deliver on the promises that it has so far failed to keep.

George Adam: I will stick with the actual detail here. As the Minister for Parliamentary Business, I can explain the process for making the statement.

As the member knows, proposals for business in Parliament are subject to consideration by the Parliamentary Bureau and, in turn, approval by Parliament. The Scottish Government remains firmly committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, and we expect to update the Parliament on a renewed programme in the coming days.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Does the minister not understand the irritation that is felt

throughout the Highlands and, in fact, the whole of Scotland by the Government's prevarication? The minister cannot give us vague answers. Is he proposing a statement before Christmas or is he not?

George Adam: I do not think that I can be any clearer than saying that, in the coming days, there will be details about the statement. It is pretty obvious what everyone should take from that.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): When the transport minister makes her A9 statement, it must include putting all eight remaining single carriageway sections into procurement. If it is believed that private finance is to be used, does the Scottish Government understand that it is essential that the Inverness to Nairn and Nairn bypass sections of the A96 should also be placed into procurement at the same time, and all within the next three months?

George Adam: As the Minister for Parliamentary Business, I cannot comment on that. However, I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition to write to Mr Ewing on the issue.

Public Sector Procurement (Conditionality)

2. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any impact on communities, including in the north-east, of conditionality in public sector procurement. (S6O-02871)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): We use conditionality and other carefully crafted approaches as part of our procurement policies and processes to drive social, economic and environmental outcomes, and we publish evidence of impact annually. The £14.5 billion of procurement spending covering the 2020-21 financial year supported around £12.5 billion of economic activity and around 120,000 full-time equivalent jobs, and contributed around £6.9 billion to Scottish gross domestic product, which benefited communities across Scotland.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the minister for that response and the detail contained therein.

The Scottish Government rightly expects companies that are awarded public contracts to maintain high standards of business and professional conduct, including by following international law and taking environmental protections and human rights seriously. Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government is implementing those principles and values with respect to any business dealings with companies and others involved in illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories?

Joe FitzPatrick: The Scottish Government strongly discourages trade and investment from illegal settlements anywhere in the world, and it is absolutely right that it should expect companies that are awarded public contracts to maintain the highest standards of business and professional conduct.

The Scottish Government has taken a number of steps following the publication in 2020 of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights database of companies' active enlisted activity in the occupied Palestinian territories. We wrote to public bodies in Scotland and asked that they consider the database as part of their human rights due diligence process. We also contacted companies that are listed on the database and have a relationship with a Scottish public body to ask what they are doing to cease the activities that led to their inclusion.

As the First Minister confirmed to Parliament in November, we are currently considering next steps following the publication of the revised database in June 2023.

“Raising taxes to deliver for Scotland”

3. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recommendations outlined in the STUC's report “Raising taxes to deliver for Scotland”. (S6O-02872)

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): We are very grateful for the contribution made by the Scottish Trades Union Congress through the publication of its work. We will, of course, reflect carefully on its proposals and those that other organisations have brought forward.

Our tax policy and spending plans for 2024-25 will be announced in the budget on 19 December. Our budget will deliver against our three central missions of equality, opportunity and community.

Katy Clark: In November 2022, I asked whether any work was going on in the Scottish Government to look at a land value tax, and I was told that there was not. Since then, has any work been carried out to consider the feasibility of any version of a land value tax or, indeed, any form of land-based taxation to raise additional revenue, given that those forms of taxation are fully devolved?

Tom Arthur: I remind Katy Clark that we are, as per our existing commitments, engaged in a joint working group with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to look at sources of funding for local government, including reform of the council tax. As part of that process, we are open to considering a wide range of measures and, indeed, we have introduced regulations on, for

example, council tax and the treatment of second homes as a result of work that has been undertaken to date.

We are committed to progressing the work further in the new year. I am more than happy to engage directly with members on any specific proposals that they may have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have received requests to ask three supplementary questions. I will be able to take all three.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Not a single Labour MSP saw enough merit in the STUC's recommendations to sign Monica Lennon's motion in support of them, despite many of them being funded by trade unions. Does the minister agree that that reflects how unrealistic the proposals are, given that they appear to take no account whatsoever of the impact on taxpayer behaviour and revenue that would accrue? Perhaps they have not signed the motion because of the United Kingdom Labour Party policy not to

“turn on the spending taps”

if it comes to office.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please respond on matters within your jurisdiction.

Tom Arthur: Certainly, Deputy Presiding Officer.

As I said in my original answer, we are very grateful to all organisations, including the STUC, which has submitted proposals, and the range of business organisations and other think tanks that have brought forward proposals for consideration. However, the reality is that we are limited in what measures we can take under the existing devolution settlement. For example, for this Parliament to be able to legislate for new national taxes, the UK Government's agreement is required, as referred to in section 80B of the Scotland Act 1998.

I note that, although there are members of the Labour group in the Parliament who advocate new forms of taxation, that is in sharp contradiction to the lack of proposals that the UK Labour Party has put forward. Indeed, the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, has been clear in her opposition to wealth taxes, for example.

To be honest, I am not quite sure where the Labour Party stands. I think that there is division in the group in the Parliament, and I certainly think that there is division between that group and the Westminster parliamentary group.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Of course, the Confederation of Business Industry in Scotland takes a view on tax that is very different from that of the STUC—it asks the Scottish

Government to abandon any uncompetitive tax policies. Will that issue be addressed in the forthcoming budget?

Tom Arthur: As Liz Smith will be aware, we assess all tax proposals against our framework for tax, and we are committed to updating our tax strategy at the time of the medium-term financial strategy publication in the spring. We take into account a range of factors, including the need to support public finances, which is particularly important given the horrendous settlement that we are receiving as a consequence of the autumn statement, and ensuring that we can support a competitive and dynamic economy in Scotland.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Does the minister accept that the very reason why we are having these conversations about tax is that the UK Government has completely slashed the consequential funding that comes to Scotland? Evidence that was given by the Office of Budget Responsibility to the Finance and Public Administration Committee yesterday suggested that £19 billion is being cut from English departments in real terms, which results in far less consequential funding to Scotland in the first place.

Tom Arthur: Kate Forbes sets out the evidence very clearly. There is a further point that I want to add to that, which is very important. There is a lack—almost a complete absence—of headroom that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has left himself, and there is the risk that the horrendous cuts that we face might not be the end of it, but only the start of it.

The UK Government has shown a reckless approach to the economy through its decision to pursue the hardest of hard Brexits and the calamitous mini-budget under Liz Truss, to which the Conservative Party in the Scottish Parliament gave its full-throated support. That underlines the reason why the people of Scotland would be far better served if the Scottish Parliament had the full powers of an independent nation.

Wealth Tax

4. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to develop a wealth tax. (S6O-02873)

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): Any approach to wealth taxes must either consider the limits of tax powers that are currently devolved to the Scottish Parliament or seek agreement between the Scottish and United Kingdom Parliaments to devolve further tax powers to create a new tax.

We believe that powers should be devolved to this Parliament, so that the taxation of wealth can

be redesigned to work fairly and effectively in a modern, Scotland-specific context. We consider all tax proposals that are in line with our framework for tax, as well as our commitment to progressivity and fairness, to ensure that those with the broadest shoulders contribute the most.

Mercedes Villalba: In September, the First Minister said that he would consider a wealth tax, but his Government has already had 16 years in power and wealth remains concentrated in the hands of a few. Can the minister confirm what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the Scottish Trades Union Congress about its wealth tax proposals and when the First Minister's consideration will turn into real action on a wealth tax? [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the minister to respond, can we not have conversations across front benches, please? It is disrespectful to the person who is asking the question.

Tom Arthur: We are committed to considering carefully all the proposals that the STUC has put forward.

The specific STUC proposal, as I understand it, is for a local wealth tax that would be administered locally and at the discretion of local authorities. We have, per our commitments to local government, embarked on a programme of work on fiscal empowerment. I have made reference to the regulations that have been introduced regarding the council tax treatment of second homes; we also have the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill progressing through Parliament. That bill would create a discretionary power, and any further powers for local government would, by their nature, have to be discretionary, recognising our commitments in that area.

The introduction of a national wealth tax, which is perhaps what the member and others would like to see, would require the agreement of the UK Government and the UK Parliament. I do not want to be presumptuous, but I do not think that the Conservatives subscribe to that idea. I know that the Labour Party does not subscribe to it, because Rachel Reeves has said as much.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): The biggest part of wealth is held in property assets, and everyone recognises that council tax is hugely regressive. Given the Scottish Government's commitment to progressive taxation, what work has it done on evaluating the percentage of property value that a proportionate property tax would need to be set at in order to be revenue neutral? What percentage of council taxpayers would pay less than they currently do as a consequence of such a tax?

Tom Arthur: I am not in a position to provide specific details of what those hypothetical costings would entail. However, we are committed, as I mentioned in my earlier answers, to working constructively with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, through the joint working group, to look at options for reform of the council tax. I am more than happy to engage with any member who wants to bring forward constructive proposals on which we, in partnership with local government, can work together to seek to deliver.

Scottish Budget (European Comparators)

5. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to setting its budget and fiscal policy for 2024-25, whether it has undertaken any quantifiable financial analysis of the relative performance of European countries comparable in size to Scotland. (S6O-02874)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The first paper in our “Building a New Scotland” series, which was published last year, compared the United Kingdom’s performance across a range of economic and social indicators with that of countries in Europe that are comparable to Scotland. It found that those countries are wealthier, with gross domestic product per capita in every comparator country being higher; that they are fairer, as income inequality and poverty rates are lower; and that they have higher productivity. As the series is setting out, with the powers of independence, we would have all the levers that we needed to create a more prosperous and fairer Scotland.

Bill Kidd: Destructive Brexit agendas mean that Scotland is missing out on so many opportunities, such as the European Union’s NextGenerationEU economic recovery programme. What benefits are comparatively sized EU countries receiving from that transformative European stimulus package, and what could it mean for an independent Scotland in the EU?

Shona Robison: Bill Kidd has set out one of a number of consequences of Brexit. The centrepiece of NextGenerationEU is a recovery and resilience facility, which is an instrument offering grants and loans to support reforms and investments in the EU member states to a total of €723.8 billion in current prices. An independent Scotland in the EU would, of course, benefit enormously from such an initiative. I offer a comparison to a similarly sized neighbour by noting that the Republic of Ireland is set to receive more than €900 million in recovery and resilience facility grants.

Cost of Living Support (Engagement with United Kingdom Government)

6. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its latest engagement has been with the UK Government regarding the funding available to support households with the cost of living during the Christmas season. (S6O-02875)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): As I outlined to Parliament on 22 November, I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer ahead of the autumn statement setting out the Scottish Government’s priorities for action. I also spoke to the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 22 November and again emphasised the need for investment in public services, net zero and supporting people with the cost of living. That followed a number of letters that ministers have sent to the UK Government over the past few months, calling on it to do more for households that are struggling financially, including the introduction of an essentials guarantee to ensure that benefits are sufficient to allow people to afford food and fuel.

It is very disappointing that the UK Government continues to fail to provide the funding that devolved Governments need. That increases the challenges for our budget next year and the difficulties facing households right across the country.

Audrey Nicoll: Recent financial research undertaken by PwC indicates that Christmas spending in the UK will drop by 11 per cent this year compared with 2022 to an average of around £440 per consumer, with 18 per cent of people in Scotland anticipating spending less due to having less money, the damaging cost of living and having less confidence in their future finances. The measures in the recent autumn statement will not touch the sides of the issues for most households, who have seen their monthly costs go through the roof.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, even with promotional events such as black Friday, Christmas will be out of reach for many households this year and that the UK Government must change course from wreaking economic havoc to delivering fiscal policy that will make a tangible difference to people living in Scotland?

Shona Robison: Audrey Nicoll is absolutely right that the continuing cost of living crisis will have a damaging impact on many people this Christmas. We are doing all that we can with the resources that are available to us, but Scotland is being badly let down by the UK Government’s economic mismanagement and misguided priorities. Its autumn statement prioritised a tax cut

over public spending and failed to provide support for people with the cost of living or the funding that our public services need.

The UK Government's decision to starve public services in England hits our budget in Scotland, and all the devolved Governments are feeling the impact. I called on the chancellor to prioritise public services and support people with the cost of living in the autumn statement, but instead we got an austerity budget. However, it is not too late to change course, and I urge him to do so.

Free School Meal Provision (Local Authorities Budget Allocation)

7. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to allocate funding to local authorities in its 2024-25 budget to facilitate the cancellation of any school meal debt and expand universal free school meal provision to those age groups that are not currently entitled. (S6O-02876)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): That is a really important question, because we know that school meal debt can have a significant impact on the mental wellbeing of families. If a family is experiencing difficulties, I expect local authorities, in the first instance, to use the powers available to them to provide any necessary support.

Although school meal debt is a specific matter for local authorities, the Scottish Government is determined to do everything that we can to support people through the cost of living crisis, and we will consider all available options to ensure that families do not find themselves punished for struggling through tough financial times.

Ash Regan: The families of 30,000 children across Scotland are in debt over the cost of school meals, which might have something to do with income thresholds for free school meal eligibility having barely risen in the past 20 years. In 2002, low-income working families with an income of less than £13,230 were eligible; today, the income threshold has risen to just under £19,000. However, if the figure had been adjusted in line with inflation, the income threshold would now, two decades later, be just under £28,000. Will the Scottish Government consider maximising eligibility for free school meals for low-income working families in order to reduce the financial hardship that the minister spoke about, to help end school meal debt and to tackle the cost of living crisis?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important that children and young people have access to healthy and nutritious meals as part of their learning. The Scottish Government recognises that, which is

why Scotland has the most comprehensive free school meal offer in the United Kingdom. Families who take up the offer save, on average, £400 per eligible child per year, and we are committed to expanding the offer further. As I said in my initial response, the Scottish Government is looking at all options to support families who are struggling through the cost of living crisis.

Non-domestic Rates (Reform)

8. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress in implementing the recommendations made by the new deal for business group on reforming non-domestic rates. (S6O-02877)

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): We have already made progress in extending the deadline for lodging non-domestic rates proposals, providing businesses with an extra month to submit their 2023 revaluation proposals.

The "New Deal for Business Group Implementation Plan", which was published on 19 October this year, details how all the recommendations, including those from the consultative sub-group on non-domestic rates, will be taken forward over the next 18 months. The sub-group continues to meet regularly, and it has established a number of short-life task teams that will report back to it.

Daniel Johnson: Although the fiscal circumstances might mean that the Government has had to rule out passing on the 75 per cent rates reduction in general, the tourism and hospitality sector faces specific invidious circumstances, such as the increasing costs of utility bills and wages at a time when transaction volumes are down. Has the Scottish Government considered taking specific measures and providing extensions for that particular sector? Has it carried out any modelling on the impact of holding business rates level and, indeed, on the cost of business failures if business rates are held at their current level?

Tom Arthur: As Daniel Johnson will appreciate, the budget will be published next week, so I am limited in what I can say.

That said, I am extremely grateful to those operating across various sectors, including the hospitality and tourism sector, for their constructive engagement as part of the pre-budget engagement process and for their valuable contribution to the work of the non-domestic rates sub-group. I am committed to continuing to work with businesses on the sub-group's work as we

take it forward in the new year. We will consider what meaningful and constructive changes we can make to the non-domestic rates system to ensure that it supports investment and creates opportunities for all businesses in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Murdo Fraser, who joins us online, has a supplementary question.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am sorry that Daniel Johnson and the Labour Party seem to have given up the fight for 75 per cent rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. In the past few minutes, I have seen the Scottish Chambers of Commerce's top asks for the coming budget. Number 1 is that the 75 per cent rates relief should be passed on, and number 2 is that there should be no widening of the income tax differential between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Is the Scottish Government listening?

Tom Arthur: I am very grateful to the Chambers of Commerce for its engagement throughout the process involving the work of the sub-group on non-domestic rates and, in particular, to Liz Cameron for her work as the group's business lead. I am very grateful for all the submissions and the ideas that have been put forward; we will set out our policies for all areas of taxation and spend in the budget next week.

However, what is inescapable is that we are facing the most challenging budget situation since devolution. That flows directly from the decisions of Murdo Fraser's colleagues in the UK Government in the autumn statement, as a result of which we are seeing a paltry £10.8 million of consequential coming from the health service. Is that really the position of the Conservatives in this group? Is that the position of Conservatives here? Is that the position of the Scottish Conservative health spokesman—that the uplift for the health service next year should be £10.8 million, out of a budget of £19 billion? If so, it is an utterly shameful position.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes portfolio questions on finance and parliamentary business. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business to allow the front bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Education

14:50

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11635, in the name of Liam Kerr, on improving the performance of the Scottish education system. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I call Liam Kerr to speak to and move the motion. You have around 11 minutes, Mr Kerr.

14:51

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Last week saw the publication of the programme for international student assessment, or PISA, statistics. They are a four-yearly analysis of almost 700,000 15-year-old pupils, across 81 countries, who are studying maths, science and reading. The PISA statistics are generally seen as the gold standard. The results held some deeply uncomfortable truths for Scotland, with scores in those subjects being at an all-time low.

Indeed, the scores have fallen since the last report in 2018 and are lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average scores in maths and science. The drop from 2018 was 18 points in maths, 11 points in reading and seven points in science. As Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh put it,

"A change of 20 points is approximately equivalent to one year of mid-secondary schooling. So these falls correspond to nearly a year in mathematics, over six months in reading, and a term in science."

However, crucially, that is not simply a reflection of some of the particular circumstances of the past four years, because they also show that Scotland's science score was down 14 points from that of 2015 and is significantly lower than that of the United Kingdom as a whole. In maths, the score has dropped by 20 points since 2015 and is significantly lower than that of the rest of the UK. Our reading score was 33 points shy of where it stood in 2000 and is at its lowest-ever level. I will quote Alex Massie. He said:

"Fifteen-year-olds are producing the kinds of scores that would have been expected from 13-year-olds a generation ago."

Of course, some people suggest that PISA is only one study. It is, but we must remember that it is virtually all we have. Rather than address what appeared to be the early signs of falling education standards, the Scottish Government decided to withdraw from the trends in international mathematics and science study and the progress

in international reading literacy study more than a decade ago. The scrapping of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy in 2016 led this Parliament's Education and Skills Committee to conclude, in 2019, that

"The lack of baseline data means no meaningful conclusions on upward or downward trends can be reached, at a time of reform within Scottish education."

Although I welcome the re-entry of Scotland to PIRLS and TIMSS, the data will not be available until 2026—20 years on from the previous measurements, which is a problem because, although it is trite to say it, what gets measured gets fixed. Even absent those measurements, surely we, as a Parliament, have a duty to try to come up with solutions. I look forward to colleagues across the chamber setting out what they feel are the underlying issues and their solutions.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I agree with Liam Kerr that what is measured matters. Does he therefore accept that statistics such as those from PISA, although they are important, make very limited provision in terms of helping us to understand the Scottish education system?

Liam Kerr: No, I simply cannot accept that, because we are measuring maths, science and reading. We can measure the trends over a very long time and there are, in fact, extremely worrying trends that we all have a duty to address.

Let us be absolutely clear that this is not the fault of our young people, who, like young people everywhere, have had to deal with unprecedented challenges in the past few years. Nor is it a failure of our teachers and their staff, who continue to do absolutely everything to deliver in a context that is far from ideal.

As *The Courier* put it,

"The report is ... a damning indictment of the failure of successive education secretaries to get to grips with their most important task—ensuring every Scottish child gets the best possible education".

They are education secretaries including John Swinney—who apparently dare not even come to the chamber today—and Fiona Hyslop, Angela Constance and Shirley-Anne Somerville, who succeeded him. He told Parliament—without evidence—in 2021, that he had "cautious optimism" that standards were improving, shortly before he abandoned an education bill. The situation culminates most egregiously in the Scottish Government's press release last week in response to the PISA figures—which showed Scotland's worst-ever performance in science, reading and maths—that

"Scottish education maintains international standing".

I listened very carefully to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills' statement yesterday. I was, in fact, encouraged by much of the tone and by the acknowledgement of previous failures. It sounded as though we finally had a Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills who would take responsibility. That is why I was rather surprised and disappointed by—and will not vote for—the amendment in her name. Rather than acknowledging and dealing with PISA, as she seemed ready to do yesterday, her amendment suggests that yesterday's figures trump PISA—a stance that Professor Lindsay Paterson claims is

"either disingenuous or evidence of dismaying statistical ignorance."

This starts with acknowledging the issues, with not seeking to slopey shoulder the blame, and with taking responsibility for the solutions. The solution is about addressing issues including the epidemic of violence, ill-discipline and poor behaviour that was also revealed by the PISA results, which show that Scotland has more frequently bullied students and that our young people are two times more likely than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average to witness a fight at school.

In that context, the "Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023" last month was clear that perceived lack of consequences for pupils who frequently engage in disruptive behaviour leaves educators unsupported. By failing to teach those who are perpetrating such behaviour that life has consequences, and by suggesting that abuse and violence will not lead to sanctions, we fail them as much as we fail the victims, whether they are teachers who are going off sick or pupils who are absenting themselves from school after being disrespected or verbally or physically assaulted.

We need boundaries and genuine consequences for perpetrators. Perhaps, as some commentators suggest, there should be immediate removal of perpetrators from the classroom. There should be proper resource put towards educational psychologists and the like to work with perpetrators to see whether they can be returned and helped to learn, and to ensure that teachers can teach and other children can learn. There should not be an extraordinary policy such as that which Fife Council seems to have adopted just last month, part of which states that school bullies should not experience negative consequences or punishment due to their behaviour.

The situation means that we need to look again at what is happening with the curriculum for excellence and to address the question why—as the University of Stirling has found—since its introduction in 2013 there has been a decrease in the number of subjects that are being entered into

and studied by fourth-year pupils. It also means that we must look at genuine vocational studies so that those whose skills and talents lie somewhere other than the academic route are properly catered for. None of that is news.

In 2021, Shirley-Anne Somerville said:

“10 years on from CfE being introduced, it is right and proper that we review how it is being implemented. We accept in full all 12 recommendations from the OECD.”

However, how many recommendations have been achieved remains somewhat questionable. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will assist with that later.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does Liam Kerr agree with the conclusion that the OECD reached in 2021, that curriculum for excellence was the right approach and the failing has been in implementation for those who are at the chalkface by those who are at the top of the pyramid?

Liam Kerr: Yes, I do. The chamber is on board with the principle of curriculum for excellence, but implementation, particularly under the current Government, has all too often been found wanting.

We also need to examine teacher numbers. There are more than 1,500 fewer secondary school teachers now than there were when the Scottish National Party came to power, and there are now 350 fewer primary school teachers than there were last year. Statistics that were released yesterday show that the number of teachers who are still teaching after their teacher induction scheme is lower this year than it was in every other year since 2017, and that almost 5,000 of those who have gone on to teach are on temporary contracts, which fuels job insecurity and lowers morale. That is in the context of the preference waiver payment failing, with fewer than 7 per cent of probationer teachers agreeing that they can be sent anywhere in Scotland, which leads to the teacher shortages in places such as the north-east that I constantly hear about. Meanwhile, in the midst of rocketing numbers of pupils reporting having additional support needs, there has been a decline of 700 support for learning teachers.

All of that has happened in the context of the average class size remaining at just over 23 on average, as we learned yesterday, despite a promise to cut class sizes in primary 1 to P3 to 18 pupils or fewer. That is why it is disappointing that the Liberal Democrat amendment was not accepted for debate.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I hear from teachers that the incidence of classroom violence is driving them out of the education system. That is why we

are losing so many valued high-quality teachers. The Government is just not supporting them.

Liam Kerr: That is right. It is certainly what I hear, and I am sure that it is what all members hear.

Perhaps the cabinet secretary will elaborate on why reform of Education Scotland—an agency that, according to a recent annual report, costs more than £30 million a year to run—remains outstanding. That cannot wait, given that, last summer, Scottish Conservative Party research found that more than 1,000 schools in Scotland—44 per cent of schools—had not been inspected in the past 10 years.

I want to hear the cabinet secretary's thoughts on what to do about matters such as those and on our proposals to give headteachers more powers and budgetary autonomy; to deliver a new deal for teachers by cutting red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy; and to ensure that we have a curriculum that is focused on the development of digital skills, subject-specific knowledge and adult education and apprenticeships in the workplace.

Sixteen years of SNP decline shall not be undone in the two and a half years that we have left to endure the Government. The matter is bigger than party politics, and we all, Opposition and Government, have a responsibility to acknowledge what the data shows us, to take ownership of uncomfortable truths, not to seek scapegoats among our young people, teachers and local authorities for lack of action at Government level, and to confront difficult realities. Ultimately, the future of Scotland's economy, national health service and justice system and, above all, our kids' futures depend on the actions that we take now.

That is why I move,

That the Parliament recognises the significance of the challenges facing the Scottish education system, as highlighted by the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report; notes that, despite the efforts of teachers and school staff, Scotland's positions in mathematics and science have dropped below the OECD average to an all-time low, while standards in reading are at a their joint lowest level since PISA reporting began; acknowledges that the OECD report also found that bullying in Scottish schools is more frequent than the OECD average, and that one in three of Scotland's pupils don't feel like they belong at their school, with pupils in Scotland twice as likely to observe violence in school as the OECD average; notes that Scotland was removed from a number of international statistical studies; recognises that education was devolved in the Scotland Act 1998; demands that the Scottish Government use its powers to address the many wide-ranging problems facing Scotland's pupils, teachers, school staff and parents, beginning in and including early years; recognises that the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has failed; calls for a fundamental rethink about schooling to raise standards, and considers that solutions should be explored, such as re-entering all statistical comparisons and benchmarks,

addressing issues surrounding class sizes, teacher and support staff numbers, as well as the use of probationers and temporary contracts and urgently tackling the violence and discipline problems in Scotland's schools.

15:03

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am grateful to the Conservatives for bringing this debate on Scottish education to the chamber. There have been a number of updates to Parliament in recent weeks. When we return following recess, there will be, subject to parliamentary approval, fuller time to debate proposals on qualifications reform.

As I stated yesterday, post-pandemic Scottish education is at a juncture. There is much to be positive about in Scottish education, but I recognise the need for improvement. In that spirit, I will engage with the debate and listen to any tangible solutions from the Opposition—or, indeed, my own party—to that end. As Mr Kerr said, this is bigger than party politics.

I spoke yesterday about this year's impressive set of achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data, which is also known as ACEL. That is the most comprehensive and up-to-date national picture that we have of young people's attainment in literacy and numeracy. The ACEL data shows that the proportions of primary school children achieving the expected CFE levels for literacy and numeracy are at record highs for children from both the most and the least disadvantaged areas of Scotland. The attainment gap in literacy in primary schools is the smallest on record, and the gap is also reducing in secondary schools. I again pay tribute to our young people and their teachers for achieving those results. It has been a difficult time for all of them since the pandemic, which makes the data all the more impressive.

Although I hope that everyone in the chamber can welcome that progress, I have seen some commentary questioning the ACEL data because it is predicated on teachers' professional judgment. I whole-heartedly reject that view. I think that it is an insult to the teaching profession. Scotland's teachers are skilled and trained professionals. The judgments that they make should be trusted, much in the same way that, every year, we trust our teachers to set, mark and agree the national standard in our final examination system.

Martin Whitfield: The cabinet secretary is right to trust our teachers. They are graduate professionals who know their job and, more importantly, know the children they teach. Can the cabinet secretary explain why she was unable to mention the PISA results in her amendment, which might have made it easier to come to a consensus across the chamber?

Jenny Gilruth: I will come to the PISA results, which I spoke to yesterday in my update to Parliament. The PISA results are important in giving the whole picture of progress in the education system. What I am doing at the current time is putting on record the results that were published yesterday, which show a welcome trajectory.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): What is the reason for the considerable gap between the PISA results and the ACEL results?

Jenny Gilruth: They are two different data sets. The ACEL results are predicated on teacher judgment and the PISA results are predicated on survey data. That means that, if we engage with the OECD, as I have done, it is very difficult to draw comparisons across countries in terms of the way in which we might use the ACEL data. They are different data sets, and I do not think that it is possible for us to look at each and draw comparisons.

However, in the totality, it is important that we have a wider data set. That is why the Government has committed to rejoining TIMSS and PIRLS. It was good to hear Liam Kerr welcome that news in his contribution. It is also worth saying that the ACEL data are official statistics. The data set has been produced in accordance with the professional standards that are set out in the code of practice for statistics.

One of the key findings from the recent PISA data that the member alluded to is the increase in the number of pupils with an identified additional support need. As I mentioned in the chamber yesterday, although that figure is now nearly 40 per cent nationally, in some of our schools, such as the one that I visited on Monday, it is nearer 50 per cent. The PISA data gives the Government an opportunity to recast how we support that cohort of young people.

However, it goes without saying that the achievements of pupils with additional support needs should be recognised. Indeed, 75 per cent of pupils in the 2021-22 cohort with an additional support need left school with one pass or more at SCQF level 5 or better.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress, if the member does not mind.

In the same cohort, 93 per cent left school with one or more qualifications at SCQF level 4. Additionally, the latest figures from 2021-22 show that spend on additional support for learning by authorities has reached a record high.

We have also invested an additional £15 million since 2019-20 to increase the provision of support

staff in Scotland. I heard the member's challenge in relation to additional support needs teachers, but it is worth saying that that investment has led to more than 1,000 additional support staff across Scotland, bringing the total number to 16,606—a record high. That investment is reflected in young people's outcomes, and I have mentioned some of the progress that we have seen in relation to young people with additional support needs and their outcomes.

The Conservative motion notes that the PISA report highlights challenges that the education system faces. The First Minister and I have both accepted that the PISA results are not good enough, but there is an assertion in the motion that Scotland's positions in mathematics and science have dropped below the OECD average. That is not accurate. Scotland's PISA results, based on the 2022 survey results, remained similar to the OECD average for both maths and science. For reading, Scotland performs above the OECD average. I accept that, since the last round of PISA, Scotland has seen a reduction in PISA scores, and we need to see improvements. However, let us be accurate about what PISA is telling us and what it is not telling us.

We also need to take a holistic view of educational performance in the round.

Liam Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to do so. Presiding Officer, can I check whether there is time in hand?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a little bit of time back.

Liam Kerr: Surely what PISA is telling us is not that, in the past few years, Scotland has somehow flatlined. It is saying that, over a considerable period, there has been a significant long-term decline under this SNP Government.

Jenny Gilruth: I am reiterating—I have stated this previously—that, based on the 2022 survey results, our results in maths and science remain similar to the OECD average. [*Interruption.*] Liam Kerr's hand gestures suggest that he believes that Scotland is unique in respect of its results. We are not unique, by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, the independent OECD called this edition of the results the Covid edition. Covid has impacted on the outcomes for our young people. I hope that Liam Kerr understands that that is not unique to the Scottish system.

Liam Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress, and I believe that I have no time in hand.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gave you nine minutes; I can probably give you 10 minutes.

Jenny Gilruth: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

On Monday, the Cabinet visited Haddington for a public meeting. As George Adam observed following the meeting, the best and most challenging questions that the Cabinet received came from the school pupils in the audience—whether on global warming or on asylum, they raised the big issues of the day.

I think that that speaks to a difference that we have already seen recorded by PISA as recently as 2018, in its assessment of global competence, in which Scotland was one of the top-performing countries. That important PISA study assessed young people's ability to examine local, global and intercultural issues, including sustainability, and to interact effectively with people from different cultures.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to touch briefly on some of the progress that we have been able to make since the pandemic. The previously mentioned ACEL data is supplemented by our examination system, in which the overall pass rates at national 5, higher and advanced higher were higher this year than the 2019 pre-pandemic levels. Since the pandemic, the attainment gap has narrowed.

However, of course I accept that not everything is perfect, which is why we must commit to redoubling our efforts to secure better improvements in the Scottish education system to deliver better outcomes for our children and young people. We are already responding to PISA in a robust and comprehensive way. In doing so, we are focusing on maths and curriculum improvement, on which we are taking a range of steps, which I set out in detail in the chamber yesterday. I have also committed to expanding the range of objective data that we have available to us—an issue that Liam Kerr alluded to—by rejoining a number of international surveys.

Part of Scotland's improvement journey must be about our education reform programme, which I think will help to drive the measures that need to be taken to improve outcomes. As part of that, reform of our national education bodies will deliver change in practice and in culture. Liam Kerr mentioned the role of the inspectorate. The recently appointed interim chief inspector will play a pivotal role in providing the critical leadership that is required to deliver the change that is needed.

I am also ensuring that the voices of teachers and people with a stake in the education system are heard at every opportunity. That is why there has been on-going consultation and engagement on the new qualifications body and how to maximise the positive impact that I think that reform can deliver, and it is why I am committed to

designing—along with teachers, professional associations and other stakeholders—a new centre for teaching excellence. I am grateful to the Scottish Council of Deans of Education, which I met earlier today to talk about some of its work to support that venture.

There is a lot to be positive about in Scottish education, although I accept that there is work to be done to secure improvements. For my part, I am focused on those improvements, some of which I set out in the chamber yesterday. I do not shy away from the challenge, and the implicit opportunity must not be missed.

However, in the same spirit, the Opposition cannot shy away from the fact that there are real positives in Scottish education. At primary level, we have record attainment levels and a record low attainment gap in literacy. Exam pass rates are above the pre-pandemic level, and we have the highest investment per pupil and the lowest pupil teacher ratio in the UK.

In the rush to attack the Government, which I accept is part and parcel of the approach to politics, the Opposition is also dismissive of some of the achievements of our pupils, teachers and support staff. Today, I ask members of the Opposition to engage with the substance of the data rather than the politics. If they do so, in me they will have a willing partner. It is in that spirit that I move my amendment, which sets out the facts and accepts that there is a need for improvement. I hope that members across the chamber will be able to support it.

I move amendment S5M-11635.3, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“welcomes the publication of Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels 2022-23 (ACEL), which shows that the proportion of primary school pupils achieving expected levels of literacy and numeracy has reached record highs, that the poverty-related attainment gap in literacy in primary school has reached the lowest level on record, and that attainment at secondary level has increased and the poverty-related attainment gap decreased; understands that ACEL represents the most up-to-date and comprehensive statistics on attainment in Scotland, and that the findings are testament to the hard work of teachers, support staff and pupils; notes that PISA found that pupils in Scotland were less likely to witness issues with a number of aspects of behaviour in school than in other parts of the UK; welcomes the Scottish Government’s decision to rejoin Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); notes that Curriculum for Excellence was endorsed by the OECD in its 2021 report as the right approach for Scottish education, and agrees that the process of education reform, working in partnership with local authorities, and including the reorganisation of national bodies and reform of qualifications and assessments, offers the opportunity to raise standards, ensure that all children and young people can meet their full potential, and deliver excellence and equity across Scotland’s schools.”

15:14

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome this debate because it comes at a time when there is a consensus in education that enough is enough. In the past week, a range of statistics have laid bare this Government’s 16 years of inaction and broken promises in education and the fact that, ultimately, it has let children down, left teachers exhausted and allowed too many pupils to fall through the cracks. The PISA data showed that Scotland’s once world-leading education system has declined in the international rankings and that the attainment gap has grown. Summary data on Scottish schools revealed concerns around teacher numbers and pupil attendance and behaviour. The ACEL data showed that pupils with additional support needs continue to be more likely to miss important milestones at every stage of their school career.

The situation should not have had to get that bad and it should not have taken so long for the Government to acknowledge the scale of the problem. Teachers, parents, pupils and queues of experts have been sounding alarm bells for years but, instead of listening, the Government has long-grassed concerns by setting up groups and reviews, and it has removed us from international studies that could have given us vital signs of the path that we were on. Ultimately, it has camouflaged the decline.

I was pleased to detect a bit of a change in the cabinet secretary during the statement that she gave yesterday. She finally appeared to grasp the gravity of the situation, and I look forward to hearing more detail of the proposals. That change was welcome, but it could be too little, too late for the thousands of children who started school as the SNP took office. The failure to address the long-standing, systemic problems in the education system that have got us to where we are means that the problems that we face are numerous, so the solutions must be numerous, too. I hope that the recognition that we saw yesterday develops beyond vague statements, because it is vital that we reverse the decline. Much of that process will include addressing some of the issues that are outlined in the motion.

Class sizes are getting bigger, support staff numbers are dropping and attendance rates are plummeting. Teachers are being crushed under the weight of a policy that was developed on high without their involvement. They are drowning in paperwork, are struggling to find the time for lesson planning and are facing an exodus of their colleagues, who cannot bear the pressure any more. In some areas, we have probationer teachers filling vacancies, such is the scale of the recruitment and retention challenge.

The SNP has recognised what some of the solutions could be, and it has even committed to implementing some of them. However, so many teachers have been left waiting—in some cases, for more than 15 years. Not only have they been met with a lack of delivery, but things have actually got worse. Despite the Government committing in 2007 to reduce class sizes to 18 pupils or fewer, many teachers still have more than 30 pupils in their classes, and there are more classes with more than 18 pupils than there were back then. The pupil teacher ratio is flatlining rather than improving, which means that teachers are being stretched even more. A chronic shortage of non-contact time for teachers is compounding the problem. That is another promise that the SNP has failed to deliver on. The cabinet secretary knows that I have raised that issue with her on a number of occasions, and she knows that I remain disappointed that the Government has still not given a timescale for delivery.

I say to the Government, not only in relation to that policy, but in relation to every commitment that it announces, that, when it makes a promise, it should already have done the work to ensure that it can deliver. People understand that such issues are tricky and that time is needed to sort them, and they understand that the Government will want to talk to people about them. However, they do not understand why they are presented with things that they assume have been thought through only to realise that they have not or, ultimately, why they are let down when the commitments are never met. It is not fair that the Government is leading teachers and pupils up the hill and leaving them there, waiting for action that never comes.

According to the Scottish Government's survey, more than two thirds of teachers have had enough and are considering leaving the profession due to the overwhelming workload and lack of support. At the same time, we are seeing a fall in teacher numbers, which is driven by a decline in initial teacher education for the second year in a row. There are also fewer support staff to help the teachers who are there.

The cabinet secretary will know that, earlier this year, the national discussion on education report stated that more than a third of children—as the PISA data points out, the figure is sometimes 40 per cent, and in some classrooms it is 50 per cent—are identified as having additional support needs. Those needs cannot be considered to be additional any more, and the cabinet secretary has accepted that. They are a fundamental feature of our education system, so I cannot understand why there was no mention of them in yesterday's statement. The ACEL data makes it clear that those children are less likely to reach the expected levels in reading, writing, numeracy, listening and

talking at every stage. They are five times more likely to be excluded and they have lower attendance rates, especially in secondary school. To leave them out of the statement and rely on proposals that are more than three years old is not good enough.

We need up-to-date, targeted, ambitious action for pupils with additional support needs, and we need progress on the Angela Morgan review. Right now, despite the best efforts of teachers and school staff, educational inequalities are being exacerbated because the system is under so much strain that it is struggling to meet everyone's needs, never mind pupils' additional support needs.

Curriculum for excellence was intended and designed to deliver personalised learning, but I am afraid to say that the SNP has failed to give teachers the time, the space and the resources that they need to make it happen. It gives me no joy to say that the Government's management of our education system is characterised by a lack of coherence, years of underinvestment, a failure to prioritise children's needs, schools being starved of resources, overcrowded classrooms, outdated facilities and a lack of qualified teachers. That cannot go on any more.

If the cabinet secretary and ministers detect exasperation in my tone, it is because I really am exasperated and angry about the situation on behalf of pupils and teachers across Scotland, who have been let down. Scottish Labour believes that we must now take the necessary steps to support teachers and invest in our schools and that, if we do that, we can create a system that empowers young people to reach their potential.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do I have time, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member is just concluding.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am sorry. I have only half a minute left.

The situation cannot go on. We need to create a system that empowers young people to reach their potential. That means taking the promised action to reduce class sizes, increase non-contact time, prioritise support for children with additional support needs and reverse the trend of cuts to local authorities. We have to hold the Government to account for leaving children struggling and teachers overwhelmed, and I will not apologise for saying that.

When the Government comes to the chamber with specific actions that will make a big difference to education in Scotland, we will of course support

it. With a fair, equitable and ambitious system, education can unlock the potential in every young person in Scotland. That is the sort of education system that Scottish Labour believes in, and we will fight for it.

I move amendment S6M-11635.1, to insert at end:

“; considers that there is an urgent need for action to reverse the widening inequalities as highlighted by Scotland’s performance in the 2022 PISA results, and recognises the excellence of Scotland’s teachers against a backdrop of Scottish Government failures.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Unfortunately, we do not really have any time in hand this afternoon, due to the pressure of business at the back end of the afternoon, so I require members to stick broadly to their time limits. I call Willie Rennie. You have up to six minutes, Mr Rennie.

15:21

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Deputy Presiding Officer, I am grateful for your permission to leave the chamber early this afternoon. I apologise to colleagues, but I have an important appointment that I must attend.

We are not really debating whether the PISA results were bad. The First Minister has already admitted that they were. They were the worst ever. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is right to say that the performance of all countries has declined since the pandemic, but Scotland’s has declined more than most. This stings, but we are behind England on reading, maths and science, and we must remember the context that, back in 2016, we were promised a dramatic closure of the poverty-related attainment gap and a dramatic improvement in performance. In short, big improvements were promised, but instead we have had decline.

Yesterday’s ACEL figures do not really change that analysis. I am disappointed that the education secretary described those figures as being at a record high. They have only been in place since 2016, and it is not a great achievement to have a record high for results over such a short period.

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I am sorry, but I do not have enough time. I have a lot of constructive things to say.

Members: That is a shock.

Willie Rennie: It is not a shock.

I was disappointed yesterday to note the level of the Government’s ambition on the poverty-related attainment gap. It admitted that it will only be

reduced by a third by 2026, whereas it had promised to close the gap completely.

It is reasonable to say that the most recent set of reforms has not worked. They were always an incoherent mix with no central philosophy. The fundamental weakness was that the Government did not really know what was wrong with Scottish education before it embarked on those reforms. If ministers do not know what is wrong, I do not know how they can fix it.

At the Education, Children and Young People Committee last year, I asked Shirley-Anne Somerville, the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, what she thought was wrong with education. She told me that it was the weak middle, which would be strengthened by the creation of regional improvement collaboratives. They have now been ditched, and I am not sure what the Government now thinks is the problem with Scottish education. To be honest, I am not even sure that what we heard was an answer at the time, and I do not think that we have got an explanation today as to what the current education secretary thinks is wrong with Scottish education.

It is not just the most recent set of reforms that is the issue. We need to acknowledge that curriculum for excellence has not delivered on its promise. Everyone agrees with the principles, but the implementation has just not worked. I know that the decline in education performance stretches back some time before curriculum for excellence, but the decline has accelerated since its introduction, so it looks like there is a link.

Many have focused on the move from the two-plus-two-plus-two model to the broad general education and senior phase, as well as on the two-term dash to higher and the narrowing of subject choice in the senior phase. Although those are all issues, the problem must be about something more fundamental, and I think that that is the balance between knowledge and skills. It is not about one or the other—there must be a balance. That is where yesterday’s statement by the cabinet secretary on literacy and numeracy was interesting, given its specific reference to knowledge in the review of maths. Carole Ford, Keir Bloomer and Lindsay Paterson have been highlighting that for some time, and I know that the education secretary has been in discussion with them. Perhaps the dilution of knowledge, particularly in primary education, could be the reason why we have struggled with our international performance.

However, there is also an issue with implementation. Teachers feel as though they were cut adrift. They were left to reinvent the wheel class by class and to produce materials in some crude attempt to empower them. I would support classroom materials being co-produced by

teachers nationally, which teachers could then adopt for application in their classrooms. To assist with that, we need to reintroduce subject principal teachers so that we have subject specialist leaders across the country.

At all stages, standards should be set for teachers to assess the attainment of pupils. I am still not convinced about the Scottish national standardised assessments, as they bring all the negatives that come with league tables but none of the benefits of independent assessment. I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will extend to other subjects the change that she mentioned yesterday on the balance between knowledge and skills for maths, and that she will look at standards at every level, as well as the production of materials for the classroom.

As we consider the reform of the education inspectorate, we need to ask ourselves why its predecessor did not pick up on the falling standards in Scottish education. Why was that not identified and how can we make sure that that is not repeated in future?

I will turn to behaviour. Last week, teachers were insulted by the inference that they are the problem and that they require to be retrained. The only tangible announcement in the statement was that a paltry £900,000 is to be allocated for training. I do not accept the claim that training teachers is essential to solving the problem of violence.

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member give way on that point?

Willie Rennie: No. I am sorry.

We need to change the guidance on discipline so that there are clear boundaries and consequences. When I was at school, there was perhaps too much punishment. I think that it is right that we have moved away from that and that we have moved to understanding more. However, I worry that we now understand a little too much. We need to look at how the nurture agenda is working so that it does not act as an incentive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I am supportive of the nurture agenda, but we need to make sure that we get it right. We also need the resources and specialist back-up to make it work. We need an education secretary who is on it. We want to support her.

15:28

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The headlines tell a sorry tale, as the latest PISA study confirms that Scotland has fallen to record low levels in maths, reading and science internationally. As

Willie Rennie has said, the cabinet secretary should not be so proud of that dismal performance, with maths and science lower—and lower, indeed, than the OECD average. The PISA study also shows that attainment in maths, science and literacy has risen in countries such as Japan and Korea. In two of those categories, other countries, such as Singapore, Italy and Israel, have also experienced increases in attainment. We must remember that Covid was global and it cannot be used as an excuse for anything any longer.

As education expert Professor Lindsay Paterson has pointed out, the results show that the decline between 2012 and 2022 is the equivalent of losing 16 months of maths teaching and eight months of reading. The loss of 18 months in science schooling is truly shocking, as it is vital to our competitiveness in an increasingly digital world. We must wake up and smell the roses: we are falling behind.

Professor Paterson has also pointed out that, since 2010 and the introduction of curriculum for excellence, the attainment gap between those from the poorest backgrounds and those from the wealthiest has widened. Members should remember that the issue is, after all, one of priorities. Closing the gap was once claimed to be the priority of the SNP and the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon.

The Scottish Government's behaviour in Scottish schools report has found that levels of disruption have increased across all the surveyed categories. Low-level disruptive behaviour, disengagement and serious disruptive behaviours have all increased since 2016, and there has been a decline in most reported positive behaviours.

It will come as no surprise to anyone in the chamber that I want to focus on mobile phones, on which the Scottish Government's behaviour in Scottish schools report could not be clearer. In secondary schools, the behaviour that was most commonly reported as having the greatest negative impact was pupils using and looking at mobile phones or tablets when they should not have been. More than half of secondary school staff said that it was one of the three behaviours that had the greatest negative impact.

Of course, most pupils are well behaved, but all suffer from the consequences of disruption and are vulnerable to distraction. We know that mobile phones are not the only cause of growing school discipline problems; the report also cites rising incidences of drug and alcohol consumption. However, if mobile phones are a significant contributor, their removal must surely be part of the solution.

Gordonstoun school made headlines earlier this year when it banned phones, and the headteacher, Lisa Kerr, was spot on to argue:

“we don’t allow them unfettered access to other addictive substances, so why mobiles?”

She also claimed that it is

“lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous not to place controls on young people’s access to an online world which they, and we, simply don’t fully understand and can’t control.”

Frankly, I agree.

Quietly, other schools are following suit.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Sue Webber: I am afraid that I do not have the opportunity. I apologise for that.

Here in Edinburgh, the headteacher at the Royal high school has taken the opportunity to strengthen its mobile device policy. Devices are not permitted to be used during the school day, and that is being strictly enforced. As a result, there has been a marked improvement in pupil engagement, with pupils talking more and being less heightened about what they are missing on their devices. The headteacher, Pauline Walker, said:

“it took a couple of weeks for pupils to realise the school was serious. Now they are more engaged and less anxious about what they might be missing on their phones, but know they will be confiscated for the rest of the day if they are seen in use.”

One problem that was cited in the behaviour in Scottish schools report was the perceived lack of consequences for pupils who engage in serious disruptive behaviour. It is essential that they know that rule breaking means trouble. Banning mobile phones in schools will not solve deep-rooted problems, but it will help. A consistent and enforced mobile phone policy restricting their use is vital if we are serious about tackling behaviour issues in our schools.

It was heartening to learn yesterday that refreshed guidance will be forthcoming to reinforce the banning mobile phones in our classrooms as an option for headteachers. I thank the cabinet secretary for her commitment yesterday that she will write to me with further details on that.

The Scottish Conservatives will restore excellence in our education through learning in schools, giving teachers and school staff the support that they need and giving every young person the chance that they deserve.

15:33

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): No one in Scotland can be satisfied with the latest

PISA ratings data. However, given long-term trends, no one among the developed economies can be satisfied either. In this short speech, I will explain that more.

I have been impressed by some of the qualitative analysis in the PISA report and some of the external expert commentary, including from Andreas Schleicher, the highly regarded director for education and skills at the OECD. However, we should not ignore the fact that we must take care when interpreting some of the statistical data. Indeed, a recent article in the *Financial Times* put it this way with regard to data for English schools:

“critics argue that Pisa rankings give a misleading picture as the difference in performance between some countries is not statistically significant and methodological issues mean the headline scores can be over-interpreted.”

Liam Kerr: Andreas Schleicher made the further point that attainment in Scotland was declining long before Covid came along. Does the member recognise that, and does she agree with that?

Jenny Gilruth: That goes back to Labour’s point.

Michelle Thomson: It does. It goes back to the point made by the Labour front bench, with which I agree.

The failure of many advanced economies to meet sampling standards is a serious issue. The UK is among the worst, so we cannot rely too much on the broad statistical data and must look instead at the qualitative analysis of long-term trends. Any understanding of those wider trends and more of that in-depth analysis are missing from the Tory motion, which, frankly, just seeks superficial headlines.

There has been a long-term trend across advanced economies of a decline in educational performances measured by PISA. As Andreas Schleicher points out, Covid was not the only cause of the decline in standards in advanced western economies. He argues that one striking trend over the past decade has been the constant deterioration of average reading and science scores in the OECD and that the developed world no longer has a monopoly over good education. He says:

“The world is no longer divided between rich and well-educated countries and poor and badly educated countries.”

What can we learn from the decline in developed countries and the high performance of countries such as those in east Asia? Surely that is the point of this debate. Finland, which was once thought to have a particularly successful education system, is a case in point. Its learning loss since 2018 has been almost three times the OECD average in reading and four times higher in

science. Schleicher argues that that is because Finland has relaxed its academic expectations for students. It has also been argued that there has been a trend in wealthy countries towards commodifying education, with pupils and students becoming consumers and teachers becoming service providers—something that we have ferociously resisted in Scotland.

In contrast, successful Asian countries are geared towards high expectations and strong social relationships between teachers and students. In other words, the culture that surrounds and informs the education experience is a key issue. During a debate in my early days as a member of this Parliament, I argued that our college sector, following the Cumberford-Little report, should strive for excellence rather than competence. We need to assess whether we have a sufficient focus on excellence in the wider education sector. Andreas Schleicher argues that the lesson

“is that we have to achieve student wellbeing not at the expense of academic success, but through academic success”.

I acknowledge that Covid has had a significant effect. Truancy rates across the UK have increased, as is the case in many other countries coming out of Covid restrictions. Countries that imposed shorter lockdowns were more likely to have relatively higher attainment, and education systems were more resilient where children had the skills to learn autonomously and where pupils felt more supported by their teachers.

Finally, I want to raise a Covid-related issue, not from PISA, but as a result of observations from our own professional speech and language therapists in Scotland. Glenn Carter, the head of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Scotland, stated in an important report in January this year that

“We’re facing a spoken language crisis in Scotland. If no action is taken these issues will have a significant impact on children’s mental health, learning, and future life chances.”

There has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of young children needing communication support in Scotland. Starting school with weak language skills makes early years education extraordinarily difficult. If we do not act, it will increase the attainment gap. We need to find ways of better supporting pupils and teachers in tackling the language crisis, which has been caused partly by the pandemic, and I would welcome comments on that from the minister or the cabinet secretary.

I have only scratched the surface of the qualitative challenges that we face. I hope that the Education, Children and Young People Committee can play its part in contributing to learning lessons

for the future of Scottish education. I certainly intend to play mine.

15:39

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The PISA statistics that were published last week were a gut punch, and they have rightly generated anger across the country. They should serve as a wake-up call to the Government, but how many such wake-up calls do there need to be? The contributions so far have, in my view, reeked of complacency and denial. It is a listless torpor of a Government that is out on its feet, out of ideas and, increasingly, out of time.

The cabinet secretary is keen to emphasise that this is the special Covid edition of the PISA figures. She is less keen to observe that the outcome is due to a decline across the entirety of the 16 years of the Government, which the Government has done nothing to check and has only served to accelerate.

On the impact of Covid, the decline in Scottish performance post-pandemic has been worse than that in economically comparable countries across the OECD. That is little wonder, given the risible nature of the education recovery plan that was published in October 2021, which amounted to a series of reannouncements of previous projects and an aspiration to put back in place just some of the teachers whom the Government had already cut. There was no concerted action to help the groups that were most impacted by the pandemic. That shows in the figures. Frankly, the Government never even got round to cutting off the bottom of the doors.

Our nation is at an all-time low in maths and science and at our joint-lowest level in reading in the history of the figures. Urgent action is needed to arrest the long-term decline that the SNP Government has presided over.

Yesterday, I listened with some dismay when the cabinet secretary was cautioning that the data should not be read in isolation—we have heard that again, twice now, from back-bench SNP members. I certainly hope that PISA does not become the new “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland” figures for the SNP, with methodological quibbles, internet conspiracy theories and rampant whataboutery.

Last month, the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that Scotland had experienced the largest decline in maths of the UK nations. In 2006, it was the best performing of all the UK nations.

What are the other wake-up calls that I refer to? I will give a small selection.

In 2015, there was the report on the OECD perspective on the CFE. In 2018, research from

Professor Jim Scott was damning about the variation in the curriculum structure across Scotland. Also in 2018, there was research from Professor Priestley and Dr Shapira on the narrowing of the curriculum. Their further work in 2023 showed a dramatic reduction in subjects taken in secondary 4 under CFE across Scotland.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: Not at this moment.

In 2018, which was a key year, Professor Lindsay Paterson wrote for the London School of Economics and Political Science:

“no ... baseline data were ever collected that would allow us to trace the curriculum’s impact.”

In 2019, there was the Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee’s damning report on the implementation of CFE, the narrowing of the curriculum and the failures in transitions.

Michelle Thomson: I have listened with interest to the member’s highly selective quotes and statistics, and I am wondering whether, at any point in his speech, he will come up with positive measures to start to address some of the complexity in the situation or whether he is just going to moan.

Michael Marra: It is fair to say that the current situation is well worth a moan. We have brought a variety of issues to the chamber over recent years and talked about the necessary reforms in education that the Government has completely neglected to undertake.

Only in June this year, there was a report on the national discussion on Scottish education. It was brutal on the structure and operation of CFE.

In 2021, the OECD report—which was published after the Scottish Qualifications Authority scandal that the Government presided over, in which SNP ministers cut the grades of the poorest kids in Scotland—led directly to Professor Ken Muir being commissioned to report on the reform of the SQA and Education Scotland. We were happy to support those positive measures to reform education in Scotland. There were warm words from the education secretary at the time, but none of it ever happened. The SQA was never scrapped, and Education Scotland was never reformed.

Shirley-Anne Somerville asserted that she wanted to progress at pace—would you ever believe it?—and that the Government would have operating models for new bodies in place by the end of this year, but that year was 2022. We are at the end of 2023 with nothing done at all. Professor Muir must wonder why he ever bothered at all.

Professor Louise Hayward came forward with more of her recommendations from the work that she did, which were further delayed by this cabinet secretary. Why embark on serious, challenging work when we could have another working group, another consultation, another statement and another discussion? Perhaps the people of Scotland will not notice that their Government is not really doing anything at all.

I used to warn about the glacial pace of education reform. Frankly, it has slowed to an absolute standstill. The hard work of genuine transformative reform could set our education system back on track, but that is filed under “Too difficult” by a Government that is interested only in political stunts, easy wins and giveaways.

I am afraid that we are past the point at which this cabinet secretary can garner any sympathy for being the latest one in the door and for having to clean up the mess of her predecessors. She is getting on with the work of scrapping the regional improvement collaboratives, the establishment of which was the defining education achievement of John Swinney’s calamitous tenure as education secretary. Maybe she might look at Shirley-Anne Somerville’s decision to slash poverty attainment funding for the most impoverished communities in Scotland.

Let us remember that, eight years ago, Nicola Sturgeon said that she wanted to be judged on all that. She called it her “defining mission”. God forbid that anything else that the people of Scotland care about should be subject to the same missionary zeal when whatever matters most to them comes under the focus of this Government.

15:45

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): This is a very serious debate and, as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I am genuinely pleased to be taking part in it.

It is important to acknowledge that there is much to be positive about in relation to Scottish education. We have the lowest pupil teacher ratio, the highest spend per pupil and the best-paid teachers in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, our higher education and further education are more affordable for people, and this year’s exam results have shown continued progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

However, we must acknowledge that there are big challenges and that we must work to continually improve. As we move forward, we will better serve our constituents if we are constructive, work together and put our young people first.

As some colleagues know, I worked in a school office during the 2009-10 academic year. I often think about those times to help me, in this role, to put myself in the shoes of staff and pupils. I think of the context that we have been in since that time, in which curriculum for excellence has been implemented. I think of the consequences of the financial crash; the years of Conservative-Lib Dem austerity; the welfare reform that took place during that period; the negativity of Brexit and the disruption that that caused; and, of course, the pandemic.

During that period, society has been under severe challenge, and we have seen initiatives from the Scottish Government not only to intervene directly to improve our education system and help our young people but to improve equality and social justice, whether that be the Scottish child payment lifting around 90,000 children out of poverty or the pupil equity funding that I know makes a really significant and important difference in my constituency.

I say to Opposition members that, although they should, of course, hold the Scottish Government to account, they would better serve their constituents if they also put pressure on their colleagues at Westminster, which holds the power when it comes to so much of the social security system.

Ben Macpherson: All those challenges were, of course, exacerbated by the pandemic. It is right that we need to move beyond the pandemic and that we must not use it as an excuse, but the PISA results—although they are important and demonstrate the need for improvement—factually reflect the cohort of young people who experienced unprecedented disruption to their education because of school closures during the pandemic, and reflect the behavioural changes that are affecting schools throughout the UK and beyond, and across the majority of the countries participating in PISA. That is why all three countries in the UK saw reductions in their reading, maths and science scores.

I appreciate the particular challenge for Scotland, and we must take that seriously, but we have not seen a decline in the number of our young people in Scotland going on to further and higher education. We also need to keep in mind that there are positive destinations for the vast majority—around 94 per cent, as far as I can recall—of our young people.

The PISA report outlines that, for Scotland and many other comparable European countries, this is also a crucial time for reform. Colleagues have been right to raise that. To achieve the changes that we want to see, we must move on from political knockabout and the language of league tables and into a serious and collective sense of determination to reform our system, to recognise

the wide array of skills and achievements of our young people, and to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Reforms that I would like to see and that we have considered at committee include moving to a position in which we are not teaching to the tests in the same way but are still achieving consistency. That is really difficult. How do we improve our primary education system? Willie Rennie emphasised that. How do we improve the situation for those with additional support needs? Pam Duncan-Glancy was right to point out that issue. How do we embrace new technologies? Michelle Thomson emphasised that. How do we enhance our teacher training and continuing professional development?

Professor Kenneth Muir wisely said:

“As a system, we genuinely need to learn lessons from the introduction of curriculum for excellence. It is questionable how successful we were in doing that. Professional learning and the engagement of all staff in the philosophy of any reform or change is critical.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 20 September 2023, c 44.]

It is about learning lessons from where we did not get it quite right in introducing curriculum for excellence. It is about sharing the philosophy, developing the understanding and, critically, ensuring that teacher education programmes in Scotland and the continuing professional development that teachers require are provided up front as part of the reform process.

That also requires reform in how we discuss the issue in Parliament. In committee, Professor Walter Humes said:

“I want a much more hard-headed kind of political discourse in which things are described as they are and ideas are engaged with at a proper intellectual level. It is not all about promotion, advertising and getting the headline in tomorrow’s press.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 8 November 2023, c 28.]

That applies to all political parties in the chamber.

Education is important. It should be about real issues, real aspirations and realistic aspirations that are not overhyped or boasted about. Let us rise to that challenge in our political discourse and in how we reform our education system by listening to experts and working together.

15:52

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Deputy Presiding Officer,

“The only true advantage we can have is to learn faster than our competitors.”

That is a quote from a good friend of mine, Frank Dick, who was the director of coaching at British Athletics and is now one of the most revered

sports and business coaches in the world. It means that, in our increasingly competitive world, it is not enough to improve if those who we are in competition with improve faster. The net result will be that we still fall further behind.

That is what the PISA results starkly highlight. Yesterday I listened to the cabinet secretary's statement to Parliament, in which Covid reared its ugly head again—that catch-all for everything bad that is happening across Scottish Government portfolios. The inconvenient truth for the cabinet secretary and for the Scottish Government is that Covid was a pandemic that affected the whole world, and the Scottish Government managed to oversee a much faster drop in PISA figures than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Despite the cabinet secretary's claim that Scotland has a better teacher pupil ratio than the rest of the United Kingdom, outcomes are not this Government's strongest suit. In fact, it should be noted that the sharpest relative drop in PISA rankings in Scotland happened between 2012 and 2015—try linking that to Covid.

Education is the cornerstone of every portfolio, and solutions to just about every challenge that a country faces are rooted in a flourishing education system that gives pupils every opportunity to develop their talents and be all that they can be. Get education wrong and every portfolio suffers. Unfortunately, we have a Scottish Government that is only interested in headlines irrespective of outcomes. Look at health, in which education plays such a pivotal role. The Scottish Government will tell us that it—

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Brian Whittle for giving way, and I apologise for interrupting him in mid-sentence. He talks about education being the cornerstone of every portfolio, which I absolutely agree with. However, education is not the cause of failings in every portfolio, which seems to be a point made by some people.

Brian Whittle: The member is absolutely correct, but education is the solution—that is the point here.

In health, the Scottish Government tells us that there have been record levels of investment in our health service, with more nurses and doctors than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, yet the outcomes tell us that we are the unhealthiest nation in Europe. In the economy, which continues to underperform, our poor health record is the biggest drag. We have the highest levels of economically inactive people and of disability and unemployment.

Education is so much more than maths, English, physics and chemistry; it is about developing our youth to be confident and resilient and to be aspirational risk takers and innovators, for which

Scotland has such a world reputation. Where the current cabinet secretary and her predecessors seem to have a complete blind spot is on the solution that our schools desperately need. It is not more academic classes; it is a complete change in the learning environment. We need to tackle poor physical and mental health and poor behaviour, attainment and nutrition. We need to unshackle our teachers to allow them to do the job that they love and are trained to do.

By directly looking at those solutions, we could address the current performance slide. It is about creating an inclusive and active environment to feed the thirst for knowledge that youth should have, embedding the huge opportunities that the green economy brings and enthusing our pupils to think that Scotland is a place to stay where the brightest of futures is there for them to grasp.

The decline in the PISA results reflects a decline in physical activity, music, art and drama and much of the extracurricular activity that school pupils once enjoyed. Those activities draw in active minds and give an outlet for enthusiasm. They deliver aspiration, self-discipline and an appreciation of application. They help to create an environment where learning is varied and exciting.

The Scottish Government's response to the PISA results has been to try to persuade us that Scotland has maintained its international standing when, quite clearly, the Government is managing its sharp decline. Curriculum for excellence was voted in by parties from across the Parliament, but it is in the implementation that the Scottish Government once again fails. We should all get behind innovation but, in doing so, if it is not gaining the results that we plan for, we have to be prepared to listen and adapt. Not getting everything right the first time is not a crime, but not getting it right and continuing to plough the same furrow with our head in the sand is criminal. The Scottish Government is ignoring all the warnings from across agencies, teachers and the Parliament, with its usual massaging of figures and nothing-to-see-here attitude. That typifies a Government that places little stock in outcomes and more in headlines.

Education should bring the Parliament together. Failing to get education right has a profound impact across society, and Scottish society is having to live with the reality of an SNP failure to grasp the enormity of the problem that it has created. Nicola Sturgeon said, "Judge me on education." It is just a pity that Scotland has to wait more than two years to get rid of the current Government and start the process of rebuilding our once-envied education system.

15:58

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate. Education is a hugely important subject, so it is good that the Conservatives have brought the debate to the Parliament. One of my colleagues, who shall remain nameless but who sits on the front bench, was mocking me yesterday as I had mentioned something of what school was like in the 1960s and 1970s, when I was there. Perhaps, however, it is worth remembering some of the changes since then.

Class numbers were well over 30, which was not unusual. I and many others lived in fear of our teachers. We spent hours and hours on spelling correctly. Memorising times tables was an absolute key, and we got belted if we could not answer questions from the homework that we were meant to have done. I think that most of us would agree that there have been improvements in all those factors since then. When I go into schools in my constituency nowadays, there seems to be a much healthier relationship between pupils and staff, and I think that our schools are turning out much more rounded individuals than they did in the past.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Mr Mason was a pupil at Hutchesons' grammar school, as were Mr Sarwar and Mr Yousaf. Does he think that they are more rounded individuals as a consequence of their more modern education at that school than he is as a result of his time there, when he was bullied and bloated, as he has just outlined?

John Mason: Well, I do not think that my school days were the happiest days of my life, if that answers Jackson Carlaw's question.

I accept that levels of spelling and grammar have deteriorated. When I take on a younger member of staff, their spelling and grammar can sometimes be pretty grim, but, then again, that is the case in the newspapers that I read and on the BBC.

Last Christmas, I was given a book called "Bad Data" by Georgina Sturge from the House of Commons library. It is an excellent read. One of the messages is that we should not believe all that politicians tell us when they quote data or make comparisons with data, either between jurisdictions or over time. Therefore, when we look at the PISA figures or any other analysis, we always need to ask ourselves whether we are comparing like with like, whether we are sure that we are using an objective comparison and whether the figures are, to some extent, skewed by other factors.

Michael Marra: Does John Mason recognise that, over many years, many reports have

identified a litany of failures that are pointed out in such statistics, that we need to consider the matter in that context and that we need genuine reform, as has been recommended?

John Mason: We need to take all the factors into account, but we have to compare like with like. Comparing the Scottish curriculum, or the lack of it, with the very tight English curriculum is not a fair comparison.

Last week, there was a good article on the PISA results by James McEnaney in *The Herald*. He starts off by saying:

"a lot of the response"

to the PISA results

"has been characterised by panic, puffed-up rhetoric and a somewhat tenuous relationship with the concept of accuracy."

That is fair enough. He goes on to point out that Scotland's declining PISA performance

"was a feature prior to the first election of the SNP."

He notes that, at an international level, there has been

"widespread decline in the performance of 15-year-olds."

Specifically, he points to Germany, which improved dramatically between 2000 and 2012—up 24 points in reading and maths, and up 37 points in science—but whose performance is now four points lower than it was in 2000. He argues that the data itself is not a problem but that the application of it can be.

The Conservative motion is certainly wide ranging and covers a lot of ground. It says that "solutions should be explored", without being very specific about what those solutions should be, although it proposes

"re-entering all statistical comparisons and benchmarks".

However, as has been said by others, measuring a problem does not solve it. Weighing a pig or comparing it with other pigs does not fatten it. Some of the language in the Conservative motion is a bit over the top. It

"demands that the Scottish Government use its powers",

says that

"the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has failed"

and

"calls for a fundamental rethink".

That is all a bit black and white. Yes, I accept that there is room for improvement, but let us not throw out the baby with the bath water.

Class sizes and support staff numbers are, of course, important factors, but let us also

remember that we are in tight financial times and that, in next week's budget, we have to choose priorities among all that we would like to do. Is the priority the NHS, the hospitality sector or education? If it is education, is the priority schools or colleges? Are we going to support all those sectors? If that is the case, it will be to a limited extent.

One thing is certain: we cannot do all that we want to do within our budget. Especially with Westminster cutting national insurance contributions and giving companies corporation tax breaks, there is less money in the UK and in Scotland for public services.

We should remember that the percentage of young people going to positive destinations is really high, at 94.3 per cent. That seems to me to be a key measure. Of course, we want those destinations to improve over time—a higher level of training, a better job and so on—but, when we have debated the matter previously, I think that we have agreed that university is not the right destination for everyone. There is a right path for each individual young person.

Parental involvement is also key, and I know that some schools have been using PEF money to strengthen such relationships. I remember that a headteacher told me that it was like having two schools under the one roof—one set of pupils had parental encouragement and support, whereas another set of pupils did not. It is clear that some families from ethnic minority backgrounds—both parents and children—have a huge commitment to education and that those children are doing very well, even in poorer areas. I do not believe that schools, even with the best will in the world, can make up for all the issues that there might be in the home.

We need a bit of balance in all this. Yes, the PISA results are not great and we need to work on improving them, but let us not exaggerate the problems that our schools face. We all want Scotland to be one of the best places in the world for all types of education. Our universities are clearly world class, so let us work together to ensure that our schools are, too.

16:04

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Much of what I have to say today really does depress me, because it is three years since I first sat on the front bench, holding the education brief. It really depresses me because what we have heard discussed about the PISA rankings this week made for dire reading for those who really care about Scottish education—not those who dismissed the findings as simply not as bad as they could be or, even worse, those who

questioned the league tables themselves. I say to Mr Macpherson that league tables matter—they really do—and, whichever way you spin it, the rankings made for grim reading.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: Let me finish.

Every commentator worth their weight in academic salt has agreed with that. They made for utterly grim reading. The only rose-tinted glasses that I see in the whole debate are worn by those sitting in the middle benches of the chamber, as is evident from the speeches, the amendment and the reaction to the PISA results—a reaction that I have to say was as quick as it was desperate yesterday. Minister Gilruth took to the airwaves as quickly as she could to launch her counter-PISA defensive, which was seen to ward off all critique and criticism. In response, the academics said that the annual report is “next to useless”—a phrase that will surely haunt Ms Gilruth.

If the Government is keen to talk about results and reports, let us do that. Let us talk about the metrics that really matter. PISA matters because it compares Scotland not just to the rest of the UK but to the rest of the world. Here is what it tells us: the OECD average score for maths is 472, the UK-wide score is 489 and Scotland sits at 471, which is lower than the score in Poland, Switzerland and Ireland. PISA tells us that the OECD science average is 485 and that Scotland is at 483, way below the UK average of 500 and depressingly below comparator nations such as Denmark and Sweden. That is not a one-off trend; it is a long-term trend. That is what concerns me most.

It also matters because SNP members like to spend much of their time in the chamber lamenting and talking about a global, connected Scotland competing in Europe and on the international stage, and yet they are perfectly comfortable with the fact that we trail behind so many of those countries on the very skills that make us competitive in the first place.

The story with regard to reading is not much better, as we have heard. I wonder what the great figures of the Scottish enlightenment would make of today's dismal rhetoric from SNP ministers. Every SNP manifesto since 2007 has promised to close the attainment gap—not narrow it; close it. Therefore, the statistics that really matter are the academic results themselves—the Scottish Qualifications Authority results. They matter because they compare pass rates across our communities.

In 2023, one in four pupils from the most deprived areas achieved an A grade in their national 5 exams. That compares to one in two

pupils in neighbouring areas. Just think about that for a second—13 per cent of pupils in our most deprived communities got a no-grade award at national 5. That compares to 5.7 per cent among those in our least deprived communities. That is identical to the statistics that we read in 2019. We have made no progress on that whatsoever.

Five years ago, the gap between our least and most deprived pupils achieving a pass rate in their national 5s was 17 per cent. That was the established attainment gap. By this year, that gap had shrunk, to give credit to the Government, but it has shrunk to 15.6 per cent. If the Government thinks that a 1.4 per cent reduction in the attainment gap over five years is something to celebrate, it is clearly deluded. At the current rate, it will take 56 years to close the attainment gap. That is not a record to be proud of.

What are the reasons for all of that? The answer lies in a litany of broken pledges and ignored warnings and an educational ecosystem that has gaping fault lines. We all know that already. The class size promise has been broken. The teacher number promise has been broken. The flagship education bill has been ditched. The Scottish Qualifications Authority reform pledge has been ditched. The curriculum for excellence reform pledge has been broken. We have had report after review after task force—the Donaldson report and the Cameron, Bloomer and McCormac reviews. All were good reports and all contained answers. They are all sitting on the shelves of numerous education secretaries, the majority of whom were too embarrassed to show face today for the debate.

The improvements that we see in our schools today are happening not because of the actions of this Government but in spite of them. No amount of ministerial whataboutery can mask one simple truth: too many parents and teachers have simply lost trust in the system. The fault for that lies squarely at the feet of this Government—this Government and no one else.

16:09

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As we have heard, the recent PISA report comes on the back of the global Covid-19 pandemic [*Interruption.*] I am not finished yet, so haud oan. I saw unprecedented disruption across society, including to the provision of education. For context to today's debate, I hope that we would all agree that it has undoubtedly impacted on Scotland's PISA results. That is not to say that we do not agree with or recognise the challenges that we face, as set out in the Conservative motion; however, for context, I would have hoped for a recognition of the unique set of circumstances that we have all faced.

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention?

Bill Kidd: Maybe later on.

The OECD even described this edition of PISA as the Covid edition, saying that there had been an “unprecedented” drop in attainment globally, with mean performance in OECD countries down 11 points in reading and almost 16 in maths, which is equivalent to three quarters of a year's worth of learning.

Brian Whittle: Will Bill Kidd at least accept that Scottish performance in PISA during the Covid years dropped remarkably quicker than that of the rest of the United Kingdom, under the same circumstances? That has to be levelled at the Scottish Government.

Bill Kidd: Let us put it this way. As I said, the OECD described it as the Covid edition and said there had been an “unprecedented” drop in attainment globally. There are variations on that, but it is no as if everybody has been great and Scotland has been terrible.

For further context, this weekend's report by the centre-right think tank the Centre for Social Justice may be of interest to all colleagues. In its report, the CSJ states that the Covid lockdowns had a “catastrophic effect” on the UK's social fabric, especially for the least well-off, with the gap between the so-called haves and have-nots blown wide open. Its research shows that, during lockdown, calls to a domestic abuse helpline rose by 700 per cent; mental ill health in young people went from one in nine to one in six, and up by nearly a quarter among the oldest children; severe absence from school jumped by 134 per cent; and 1.2 million more people went on working-age benefits, with 86 per cent more people seeking help for addictions. Alarming, it also argues that, by 2030, if things remain on that route, more than one in four five to 15-year-olds, which may be as many as 2.3 million children, could have a mental disorder.

Andy Cook, the chief executive of the Centre for Social Justice, said:

“Lockdown policy poured petrol on the fire that had already been there in the most disadvantaged people's lives, and so far, no one has offered a plan to match the scale of the issues. What this report shows is that we need far more than discussions on finance redistribution, but a strategy to go after the root causes of poverty, education, work, debt, addiction and family.”

I highlight that report to stress the connection between inequality, poverty and the challenges that those factors create for our young people, educationally and in general life. It is, though, also important to acknowledge and recognise, as other members have done, achievements where they have been made. Scotland has record numbers of

young people going to positive destinations, with 94.3 per cent of 16 to 19-year-olds in Scotland in employment, education or training.

Liam Kerr: On the social inequality piece, does Bill Kidd, like me, bemoan the fact that the Scottish Government has failed appallingly on free school lunches implementation?

Bill Kidd: I do not like to have to say it, but if it wisnae for the fact that Westminster has cut our money so much, we would have been able to deliver everything. Besides that, it was this Government that, in fact, made that commitment.

Last year's achievement of curriculum for excellence levels results showed the biggest single-year reduction in the attainment gap in primary schools in numeracy and literacy. This summer, Scotland had the highest-ever number of national 5 passes in an exam year since the qualification was introduced, in 2014, and higher and advanced higher pass rates were above those seen pre-pandemic, in 2019.

That data and those facts also help to inform us about the state of Scottish education and the Government's record. In that respect, it is important to look at the holistic picture rather than an isolated study, which the motion is in danger of appearing to do. I do not say that that is done deliberately or that it paints a misleading picture, as I am sure that colleagues' concerns are well intentioned.

I will highlight one final point that might also have been unintentionally overlooked. Much has been made publicly of the comparison in the results between Scotland and England. However, it is worth noting—or even essential to note—that England did not meet the PISA standards of reporting in a sample that was found to be biased because more higher-achieving pupils participated than lower-achieving pupils. The OECD estimated that that likely resulted in an upward bias in the reported results of approximately seven or eight points. That is an important difference.

In the spirit of co-operation and in recognition of the challenges that we must face and overcome, we must all aim to work tirelessly with our colleagues from all parties to advance a common strategy for tackling the issues that have been highlighted. I hope that, in her closing speech, the cabinet secretary will take the opportunity to acknowledge the words of the chief executive of the Centre for Social Justice, that any strategy must

“go after the root causes of poverty—education, work, debt, addiction and family”—

if we are to be successful, and that she will signal the Government's willingness to work with the

Education, Children and Young People Committee to achieve that aim.

16:16

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): In his speech at the opening of the Parliament in 1999, Donald Dewar described the story of Scotland with vivid imagery that evoked our past. In particular, he described the richness of learning and the value of drawing out ideas. He spoke of

“The discourse of the enlightenment, when Edinburgh and Glasgow were a light held to the intellectual life of Europe”.

He spoke of a nation of poets and philosophers, of economics and science, and of reason and wit. Those are the foundations of much of our national life and our national institutions—institutions that, to this day, remain integral and command pride.

In that speech, quoting Burns, Donald Dewar also spoke about the idea

“that sense and worth ultimately prevail.”

That was understood by Tom Johnston, who set out the road to building in Scotland a more equitable education system, free of academic selection, in which everyone had the chance to learn and get on.

That was understood by Harold Wilson's Government, which set about, with reforming zeal, putting in place the comprehensive education system and creating new universities, thereby broadening horizons for more and more people. It was understood by Donald Dewar, who recognised that the education system in Scotland is an institution that is of fundamental importance to all our lives.

We have a comprehensive school system that is powered by exceptional teachers who want the best for young people, regardless of their background. Colleges are at the heart of learning at every stage of life, and provide people with opportunities to reskill and retrain.

Our world-leading universities are curing diseases, developing technologies that previously did not exist, and continuing to lead the discourse on international affairs. They are powered by people from comprehensive schools across Scotland.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I would like to make some progress, if the member will allow me.

Governments are custodians of that institution. They are tasked, as part of the social contract, with protecting it and enhancing it—not so that it remains unchanging or unmovable, but in order to consistently build on its foundations. The immense

power of this Parliament has given us a huge opportunity to do that. As Dewar also said:

“The past is part of us. But today there is a new voice in the land, the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland, a voice for the future.”

For 16 years, the SNP Government has had the opportunity to shape Scottish education. Narrowing the attainment gap was, as we have heard, the number 1 priority to ensure that the promise that we make to all young people—that the only limit is their ambition—could be better realised.

Where do we stand today? Promises have been broken and decline has been normalised. In all three subject areas that are covered by PISA, the scores of Scottish 15-year-olds declined between 2018 and 2022, with drops of 18 points in mathematics, 11 points in reading and 7 points in science. Over the decade from 2012 to 2022, the Scottish decline was equivalent to about 16 months of schooling in mathematics, eight months in reading and 18 months in science. In 2022, attainment in highers fell by 13 per cent among the most deprived quintile. That compares with a 5.9 per cent fall for the least deprived quintile. The SNP has knowingly reverted to a system that fails the poorest pupils, and the poorest 20 per cent have been affected twice as much as the richest 20 per cent.

Teachers are stretched to breaking point, with a lack of support and a lack of resource. Subject choice is narrowing in secondary schools, and universities are cutting courses. It is clear that this Government has no idea how to respond other than by spinning its way through the situation and ignoring the need for comprehensive change. What a waste.

No institution in Scotland is stronger after 16 years of SNP Government, and that makes me angry. It makes me angry for teachers and support staff who are being so badly let down and angry for parents who are worried about the future for their children—in particular, the parents of children with additional support needs. It makes me angry most of all for our young people, who are missing out on opportunities that were afforded to so many of us in the chamber.

More warm words from the cabinet secretary will not cut it. The time for warm words is over. It is clear that the Government cannot fix the problem that it has created, so it is beyond time for change, and it is beyond time for us to act on the countless recommendations that have been made in previous years.

Alasdair Allan: Paul O’Kane began by citing some examples of how his party improved education in Scotland. I am more than happy to acknowledge the verity of those examples, but can

he explain how he intends to continue in that tradition, with his party’s having committed, for the first two years of an incoming Labour Government, to the Conservatives’ spending plans? How does that fit with that tradition?

Paul O’Kane: When Labour Governments are in power across the United Kingdom, education substantially improves through investment. That is clear. Children are lifted out of poverty by the investment that is made. We will grow the economy, and in growing the economy we will invest in public services.

Let us look at the record of the Labour Government here in Scotland. I outlined some of it in my opening remarks. Schools improved, things got better, teachers told us how they felt valued, and parents, crucially, had trust in their local schools. There has been a 10 per cent drop in confidence in local schools since 2011, according to the Scottish household attitudes survey. What does that say?

Scottish Labour believes in an education system that enables our country to reach its potential, that equips our young people with the skills that they will rely on throughout their life, and that responds to the needs of employers in building a high-wage and high-skilled economy—a Scotland where “sense and worth ... prevail.”

16:22

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I, too, welcome this debate on our children’s and young people’s education, and the focus on how we can invest in better outcomes for our young people and their future.

I agree that the recent PISA results are a matter of concern, and I welcome yesterday’s statement from the cabinet secretary and her commitment to real-terms improvements in Scotland’s education system for our young people, their parents, and the future of this country.

Nevertheless, it is imperative that we avoid examining the PISA results in isolation and that we consider the inescapable influence that austerity and the pandemic, which have been intensified by the current cost of living crisis that has been driven by the Tories, have had on our youths’ educational experiences.

That said, as a mother of three teenagers I have personally witnessed the extraordinary resilience that is displayed by our young people in navigating the challenges along their educational journey. In the face of adversity, their determination really stands out. Yesterday’s publication of “Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels 2022/23” certainly showcases that remarkable display of resilience.

The proportions of pupils achieving expected levels of literacy and numeracy have reached record highs. I welcome the notable rise in the proportion of primary pupils achieving expected levels in literacy and numeracy and, in particular, how that positive trend extends across children from the most deprived areas and from the least deprived areas. I trust that everyone in the chamber today will agree that those achievements by our young people deserve not only acknowledgment but celebration.

In the report “Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective” by Professor Stobart, curriculum for excellence is described as

“a pioneering example of 21st-century curriculum reform”.

That is in stark contrast to the Tories’ unfounded perspective that curriculum for excellence has failed.

Furthermore, the report “Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future” stated:

“Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence continues to be a bold and widely supported initiative, and its design offers the flexibility needed to improve student learning further”.

Again, that contradicts the notion that curriculum for excellence has failed.

In response to the recommendations for review and improvement that the OCED made in its report, the Scottish Government committed to undertaking an ambitious process of education reform that included the “Let’s talk education” initiative, which was the biggest public engagement exercise on education to have been undertaken nationally in Scotland. That exercise has ensured that learners’ needs and experiences have continued to be at the forefront of reform and of the process of shaping a future Scottish education system that truly empowers and serves our young people.

Scotland has made commendable strides in narrowing the attainment gap, and the continuous efforts in education reform aim to enhance that positive trajectory.

However, we must acknowledge the harsh reality that an increasing number of families are grappling with unimaginable financial hardships. Consequently, due to stress that is induced by poverty, a growing proportion of children and young individuals are forced to spend their educational days grappling with anxieties, fatigue and hunger, instead of enjoying the opportunities that exist for learning and play. How can we expect our youth to fully engage in education under those circumstances?

Nevertheless, within its limited powers, the Scottish Government is advancing efforts to prevent poverty from hindering the education of

our children and young people. Notably, the progress encompasses initiatives including the transformative Scottish child payment, which has supported 43,885 children across Lanarkshire. That represents an investment of £62.5 million.

In addition, there is generous provision for cultivating positive family relationships and enhancing emotional health and wellbeing, and, consequently, promoting active participation in the school day. I will quote Barnardo’s Scotland, which said:

“If we uplift these children and families out of poverty, get them the right access to support and mental health then surely we can help children be ready in the class to learn”.

I completely agree.

I will make a few final points. Michael Marra and others believe that the PISA results are worth a moan, but using PISA as a stick to beat education with and, basically, rubbishing the Scottish education system in its entirety is unfair and unhelpful. It undermines the teachers and staff who are working so hard to support wellbeing, and it undermines the achievements of our children and young people, which go way beyond academic scores and exam results. Let us be mindful of how political point scoring can impact on our schools, and let us prioritise our young people’s needs.

16:27

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This is my 19th debate on school standards. I have been through the eras of Fiona Hyslop, Mike Russell, Angela Constance, John Swinney, Shirley-Anne Somerville and now Jenny Gilruth—who, I see, has gone out of the class, just like the rest of them.

Jenny Gilruth was, of course, a teacher, and that is a big plus mark as far as I am concerned. She served on the Education and Skills Committee for a short time in 2016 and then again from 2018 to 2020, when the question of school standards was never far from the agenda. That was largely because Nicola Sturgeon had told education leaders unequivocally that education was her number 1 priority and that there would be a new education bill. John Swinney followed that up by telling us that

“the status quo was not an option”.

No one disagreed.

Looking back at the Education and Skills Committee’s deliberations, there was plenty of evidence as to why that was the case. Jamie Greene reminded us that we should consider whether we would still be debating school standards if the Scottish Government had listened to and acted on the collective findings of the

Donaldson, McCormac, Cameron and Bloomer reviews of Scottish school education, all of which were commissioned by the Scottish Government and carried out by experts in their respective fields between 2011 and 2016. The collective message from those reviews was that, although Scottish education had much on which to pride itself, the school system had to be shaken out of its complacency. How true that was.

Of course, when those reports appeared, between 2011 and 2016, there were other warning signs. At the same time, the OECD, the Scottish survey of attainment, PISA, Reform Scotland and the Scottish Government's own statistics all provided compelling evidence that Scotland was flatlining and, worse still, that the attainment gap between rich and poor was widening, thereby disadvantaging a whole cohort of young people.

That has always been fundamentally at odds with the basic principles of the good Scottish education that was once renowned across the world. We should remind ourselves why Scotland's education was previously so good. It was because the curriculum was well founded on systematic knowledge, including for weaker pupils. Primary school education placed considerable importance on every child being able to read, write and count properly and also on working hard and respecting the teacher. Teachers were highly valued by parents and well grounded in their own subject disciplines. We took great pride in the pursuit of excellence. That is exactly how it should be today.

There is absolutely nothing at all that is inconsistent between that and the original principles of curriculum for excellence. That is why it won cross-party support, and it is why it was warmly welcomed by many international observers. The problem was, and remains, the implementation. With hindsight—I think that Peter Peacock would agree—the title curriculum for excellence was a misnomer. It was designed not to be a new curriculum, but to be a new methodology of teaching, and it is about that that so many questions have arisen. Several barriers have been placed in the way of the pursuit of excellence—barriers that have meant that teachers' attention has, all too often, been taken away from their central role of teaching. As a result, frustration has set in, and that has affected pupils' self-discipline in far too many cases. That needs to change, and I admire Jenny Gilruth for her willingness to tackle that indiscipline, but that needs to be accompanied by a system that inspires and delivers consistently high standards. That is not the case now.

First, we need to free up our teachers, including those who do so much for our pupils with additional support needs, many of whom have

genuine learning issues, who get labelled as being badly behaved when they are not and who have to exist in classes where there is no one-to-one attention.

Secondly, the Scottish Government needs to properly reform the education agencies. It should not just rebadge them and move the deckchairs around a bit; it should properly reform them to enhance the support that is available to teachers, because that has not happened.

Thirdly, and crucially—I come to the point that was raised by my colleague Brian Whittle—we must ask ourselves what education is for, because we need to consider the intrinsic value of education. We need to stand back and ask ourselves, from a holistic perspective, what we are asking our schools to do. That has to include quality provision of extracurricular activity, which is perhaps better named co-curricular activity. As well as "successful learners", curriculum for excellence is supposed to be about nurturing "confident individuals" and "responsible citizens". We should never forget that the co-curriculum is the most enriching part of many pupils' school career; but, because it cannot be easily measured, the education agencies have never wanted to know about it. That is to the great detriment of Scottish education.

I will finish on one important point. I fundamentally believe that Scottish education has the ability to be the best in the world again, but only if we recognise what the problem is and accept that we have to do an awful lot more to achieve that ambition.

16:33

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Anybody who is related to a teacher, as I am, or who has kids in school, as I do, knows that the impact on them of the past few years has been monumental. They deserve our great thanks, and hopefully that is a point of consensus on which we can all settle.

However, perhaps the most effective show of gratitude is to get our next steps on education right, and I fear that overly politicised debates miss the wood for the trees, although there have been some excellent contributions this afternoon. I have confidence in the cabinet secretary—as a former teacher with an extensive network of former colleagues, I am sure—to get it right.

There is no public service as critical as education. It is the most important duty on any society to give its young people good-quality education that equips them with the skills, knowledge and ability to thrive and prosper, but its success must be measured in outcomes and not through obsessive debates about inputs.

This afternoon, I want to talk about two of the most critical outcomes, as I see it. I am sure that I could talk about many more, but I will restrict my remarks to two. The first outcome concerns how, in our globalised world, our young people must thrive and prosper relative to their peers in other countries. There are plenty of questions about how helpful PISA results are, and we can surely all agree that they do not tell us the full story, but they do tell us something, and that something needs to be acknowledged. I want Scotland to flourish and prosper, to outperform other nations, to have lower levels of poverty and a more thriving economy and to lead the way on true equality. All of that relies fully and completely on a good education system.

We all speak to parents and teachers, many of whom can point to great successes in our education system. Whenever I visit a school, I am consistently impressed by the young people's knowledge, the breadth of education and the focus on values, which I saw today when speaking to people from Dingwall academy in the Parliament. However, we have all heard qualitative evidence from young people, parents and teachers on ways in which Scotland's education system needs reform. The First Minister noted that last week, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has rightly acknowledged that today. Literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge really matter. One parent told me with some concern that her daughter had just left sixth year never having studied algebra and that she had never owned a scientific calculator. I was never a fan of algebra, so I am probably slightly jealous, but it is a pretty critical element of a rounded education system.

Liz Smith talked about aims, and I was going to discuss clarifying the aim of our education system. If we boil it down, the question of aims is a very contested conversation. Education Scotland says that it aims

“to equip young people with knowledge, confidence and skills”.

What does it then say? That statement continues:

“giving them a competitive edge in a global job market.”

All the comparisons with a previous golden age that we have heard this afternoon are, in my view, nonsense. I imagine that most of us were educated during that so-called golden age, and that might be all the evidence that we need that it was not golden. What really matters is the modern-day international comparison.

Liz Smith: Kate Forbes makes some interesting comments. Does she agree, however, that, in the Scottish education system of the generation that she is talking about, there was an ability not only to impart knowledge but to inculcate the rounded individual, which made Scotland what it was?

Does she not think that that is important in the current system?

Kate Forbes: Liz Smith made some excellent points in her speech. In considering how we can reform the current system, we should look back to echo the previous system while accepting that it was not perfect.

As an aside, I was educated 20 years ago or so, not just within the Scottish state system but across different countries' systems, and I can certainly point to the fact that the system was not perfect 20 years ago.

On the second outcome that I want to discuss, the aim must be true for all children, irrespective of whether they grow up in the most deprived or least deprived communities in Scotland. The attainment gap is measured by educational outcomes, but we need to be clear that it is non-educational issues that are denying our people equal opportunities: poverty, trauma, hunger, family instability and homelessness. There is no fix to the attainment gap without comprehensive support for families and households and wise economic interventions. That burden cannot fall to teachers alone—it just cannot. To expect teachers to shoulder responsibility for all of that is completely unfair. They already have the essential role of educating, teaching and equipping our young people, pushing them, giving them a sense of ambition and aspiration and ensuring that they believe in themselves and can achieve whatever they wish. That is a full-time job in itself.

One of the things that exercises me the most is when politicians—those in the Parliament and others outside—suggest that education or schools should fix all of society's woes. They cannot do that single-handedly. So, my second constructive point is this: I would like there to be much better integration of services to support our young people and families more generally, so as to allow our teachers to be free to teach and to free our young people to learn.

The world has changed and so must education. Hanging all our analysis solely on PISA results is short-sighted but it does confirm that the cabinet secretary and others are right to talk about reform. The success or otherwise of the debate must be measured in outcomes, not inputs. The success of our education system will determine the opportunities for our young people on an international basis. Its importance cannot be underestimated.

16:40

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to participate in a debate in the chamber, particularly one on education. What a crucial time we find ourselves in.

I will start, and I make no bones about it, by quoting a journalist. On 24 November, Barry Black wrote in *The Scotsman*:

“Teacher and scientist Carl Sagan once said it is ‘better the hard truth than the comforting fantasy’. And there can’t be any group of people in more need of hard truths than policymakers in Scottish education. There is a comforting fantasy, continually rehearsed by those at the top, that progress is being made on educational equality in Scotland, that the gap in results between the richest and poorest pupils is closing. The hard truth is simply that it is not.”

He goes on to criticise not only the Scottish Government but all politicians who hide behind that fantasy. A significant number of contributions to the debate have pointed to the same thing. As I mentioned to the cabinet secretary, the only element of the PISA study that the Scottish Government could find to quote in the amendment that it lodged was that

“PISA found that pupils in Scotland were less likely to witness issues with a number of aspects of behaviour in school than in other parts of the UK”.

Yet there has been a call for us to come together across the chamber and recognise the challenges as well as the benefits and good points. The difficulty is that that responsibility rests most forcibly with those in the Scottish Government, because they are the people who our teachers, directors of education, local authorities and third sector and charities look up to. They are the people who have responsibility to deliver for our young people.

There have been many powerful and interesting contributions in the debate. The cabinet secretary spoke about the changes that the Government is bringing with the review on maths. It is interesting that maths and literacy have been highlighted when, as we came out of Covid, health and wellbeing were trumpeted as the most important area—and rightly so. However, we have heard about the challenging mental health problems that face our young people as well as those around them. ASN pupils were omitted from yesterday’s discussion on literacy and numeracy, but so were health and wellbeing. However, we have heard about the importance of co-curricular activities, such as physical education, sports clubs, associations and other things that our young people participate in outside of school and through school that contribute to their quality of life, leading them to be happy and have fun. It is important for some of our young people to have areas in which they can excel, when they cannot do that in other areas.

We can look at maths, but there are still questions about what we are going to look at. Are we going to look at what is being taught, how maths is being taught or the sequences through which maths is acquired? We have heard that, in the past, the curriculum in Scotland followed

logical steps. Those are the details that we need and that our teachers, young people and parents and the people of Scotland are saying that we need, rather than another review that goes round the houses. The cabinet secretary is aware that substantial work is being done across Scotland on how maths can be taught successfully to children who are challenged by maths in high school as well as earlier in their education. We can identify that, if steps are missed and building blocks do not exist in P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7, children will be challenged in maths. Why can we not build on that? Why can we not accept it and take it up? It carries pedagogical value.

I will mention Willie Rennie’s comments. The Scottish Government indicated that it appears that, through its stretch aims, we are looking at only a 30 per cent reduction in the attainment gap, which was noted in yesterday’s report. I hope that the Government will take the opportunity to say whether that there will be other strategies to narrow the remaining 70 per cent, or whether it is saying that a 30 per cent reduction in the attainment gap will be sufficient.

I want to mention Michelle Thomson’s comments. We can argue about the value of PISA, and any set of data can be challenged. However, Michelle Thomson’s comments about the need for communication support, particularly in the early years, are incredibly valid. We should all be aware of the challenges that our young people are facing as a result of Covid and the isolation of that time, which has meant that their communication abilities and strategies are not at the expected levels. That makes teaching those young people a challenge, particularly as they move up through primary education. That was a very powerful contribution.

Ben Macpherson discussed positive destinations, which were also raised by others. One of the challenges is that the target is measured for only three months. We are beyond the measuring period for the positive destination of children who left in the summer. If they worked in a charity shop, they had a positive destination. If that shop is closed, they do not have one any more. On the acquisition of data, we need to follow that destination much further.

There are a number of points that I wanted to make, but I recognise that time is tight. Brian Whittle’s contribution was very powerful and has been echoed by members. The expectation that somehow our schools can solve all these problems is wrong, but the solution for our young people is education.

I will finish by quoting my colleague Michael Marra and simply ask: how many wake-up calls do we need?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I call Jenny Gilruth to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:46

Jenny Gilruth: Over the weekend, I was reading a piece by the journalist David Leask, who spoke of the perceived golden age in Scottish education that Kate Forbes mentioned and who queried whether that was ever the case. It is worth Parliament reflecting that, for generations of young Scots, school education was far from inclusive. Education was for the academic, and the rest were sent elsewhere and encouraged to leave. School was not for them.

Yesterday morning, I listened to a headteacher in North Lanarkshire on the radio describing the shift in school education throughout the course of her 30-year teaching career. She said:

“When I started teaching it was very much about the academic side - once children come in the doors they become school pupils, once they leave they go home and there was a bit of a detachment.

Now you want the community to be involved - we offer a drop-in on a Wednesday, a parent and toddler on a Friday.

It is about making sure the doors are always open”.

The inclusivity of Scotland’s education system was a key theme that emerged from the recent national discussion on Scotland’s education system—a strength in our offer that is unique to our approach.

As I set out yesterday in my statement to Parliament, a knee-jerk political response to the challenges that we face in Scottish education will not help our young people. We need to work together with our teachers, while recognising the pressure that they are under, to determine and agree how best we can deliver the improvements that we all want to see.

I want to respond to some of the points that have been raised by members throughout what has been, in the main, quite a positive and helpful debate on educational improvement. I certainly welcome the commitment from many members to engage constructively with the Government on a pragmatic route forward.

On the ACEL data, Mr Rennie, who I know is no longer in the chamber—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second. I am well aware why Mr Rennie is not in the chamber, unlike, perhaps, the cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: I apologise, Presiding Officer. I am, and I have spoken to Mr Rennie, but I wanted to respond to his point, as we discussed earlier privately.

Mr Rennie mentioned the importance of the PISA data. I again draw Parliament’s attention to the ACEL data, which are, of course, official statistics and are based on the teacher professional judgments. I very much trust our teachers to make those accurate assessments about our children’s progress, and I hope that members will agree with that sentiment.

Mr Rennie also talked about the co-production of support materials for our classroom teachers. I agree with that sentiment. There is opportunity, through educational reform, to look again at how we support the profession at the chalkface. I also agree with Mr Rennie’s assertion about curriculum for excellence and some of the ways in which the curriculum development or change was implemented—that was also raised by Brian Whittle. Mr Rennie might know that I was in the classroom at that time. I reflect on that now, as a cabinet secretary in this Government, and I think that there are ways that we can improve such changes in the future.

I hope that Parliament hears that some of my apprehension about where we have got to on reform is that we do not repeat past mistakes. It is important that, when we drive forward those changes, we do so at a pace that supports the teaching profession.

To Mr Rennie’s point, which I thought was a salient one, I say that teachers are not second-guessing where the changes in the curriculum will happen. As a case in point, I spoke very recently to the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers, which gave me a good explanation of the changes that it could bring forward in its suite of qualifications. That is why we need to trust teachers to drive the reform improvements that we need. That is exactly why I yesterday gave the commitment to Parliament that we will appoint a maths specialist to lead on improvements to the maths curriculum.

Liam Kerr: The cabinet secretary might not know this but, after the Conservative Government took some very difficult and contentious reforms, England’s maths ranking in PISA went from 27th place in 2009 to 17th in 2014, and it is now 11th, which is a considerable improvement. Will the cabinet secretary engage positively with her counterpart in Westminster to achieve the same thing?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Kerr for his intervention—I am well aware of England’s rankings. He will also be aware of England’s approach to curriculum content and how it delivers education, which, in my experience, is a bit more prescriptive than our approach in Scotland. However, I am more than happy to engage with my Conservative counterpart, Gillian Keegan. I have not yet met her, but I should say that she

was not massively keen to engage with me on the recent RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—issue that we experienced. My door is always open, as Mr Kerr knows.

I will pick up some further comments that members made in the debate. Michelle Thomson spoke about challenges with PISA and the sampling discrepancies that can arise. She also mentioned the division between rich and poor countries, which I thought was an interesting point to consider historically, and which could change the way we view education. The point that she made on speech and language was well made. I will come back to that point, as it was also made by another member. She also raised the importance of excellence, and the new centre for teaching excellence will, to my mind, play a key role in driving some of the improvement that we need.

I am conscious of the time, so I will move quickly on to catch a few points that other colleagues made. Mr Macpherson made an impressive contribution. He spoke about the record numbers of our young people who now go on to positive destinations, which is welcome progress. He was also right to talk about the danger of teaching to the test, which is the point that I made in response to Mr Kerr there. We want to guard against any potential shift towards that in our approach to pedagogy.

Brian Whittle's point that getting education wrong means that every portfolio suffers is a live point for me, considering that we are currently engaged in budget negotiations—he is absolutely right. The point that Kate Forbes made about joining up services needs to be better reflected in how we future-proof our budgeting in the Scottish Government, and in recognising that the education budget cannot do all the heavy lifting. We need those partners to come in and plug the gaps where school education cannot necessarily be expected to do so.

John Mason spoke about education in his day. Having been a teacher, I cannot imagine ever being paid to hit a child, but that happened in Scotland's schools in my lifetime. We have come a long way in the past 40 years, but I recognise the current challenge on behaviour. That is why I set out to Parliament a number of weeks ago the action plan on behaviour issues that we will take forward with our local authority partners.

I am very conscious of time, so I will, unless there is time in hand, move to summing up. Scotland has a strong education system. That does not mean that I am not accepting of the need for improvements—far from it—but I invite the Opposition to reflect on the role that it can play in building a better future for Scotland's children and young people.

My view is that the chamber is Scotland's classroom. If we want better behaviour, let us start here. If we want more attentive pupils, let us have more attentive MSPs. If we want to stop the corrosive impact of misogyny in our schools, we should consider who we follow on social media, what we share and how we engage with female politicians, irrespective of party, because what we do here matters. If, as I think we heard yesterday and, to some extent, today, there is consensus for improvement in our education system, I will work with any and every party in the Scottish Parliament to achieve exactly that.

16:54

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate this afternoon.

I would like to highlight some of the contributions that have been made from across the chamber. There are a lot that I would like to highlight; I will do my best to get around everybody.

First and foremost, I will highlight the remarks that were made by the cabinet secretary, Martin Whitfield, Liz Smith, Willie Rennie and Pam Duncan-Glancy regarding the teaching profession. The profession deserves all our respect, and I echo those comments.

The ACEL figures were mentioned by the cabinet secretary, Martin Whitfield, Michelle Thomson and Willie Rennie. Liam Kerr made a comment regarding Professor Paterson's quote that putting the ACEL figures above PISA is

"either disingenuous or evidence of dismaying statistical ignorance."

It is important to restate that.

Jenny Gilruth: I accept the point that Roz McCall is making. She quoted Lindsay Paterson. I reiterate that we will not be putting any data set above another. It is important that we look at the data set in the round, and I hope that Roz McCall accepts that. The ACEL data is predicated on teacher judgment. We trust Scotland's teachers every year to mark our exams, to set the national standard, and to set the examination papers, so I hope that the Conservatives trust Scotland's teachers' judgment in relation to the ACEL data.

Roz McCall: I do accept that. I will make comments later on that will, I hope, address that, but I would like to get on a little bit.

The fact that these are the Covid PISA scores was highlighted by Michelle Thomson, Bill Kidd, the cabinet secretary, Ben Macpherson, Brian Whittle and Michael Marra. It is interesting that there has been an absolute split in the debate on how fundamental Covid was to the PISA scores

and any failing results. That should also be highlighted.

We have to move on from Covid excuses. It is incumbent on the Scottish Government to see where Scottish policies are failing and to use its powers to move past Covid. If we are on a trajectory that was highlighted by and halted by Covid, we have to do more to get round it.

Liam Kerr: On that exact point, Michelle Thomson brought up Andreas Schleicher. Andreas Schleicher was very clear that attainment was declining in Scotland long before Covid. Does Roz McCall not recognise that?

Roz McCall: I do recognise that. I will happily jump forward to my notes regarding Michelle Thomson's comment. If we look at the long-term trends, we find that the trajectory is downwards, and that started long before Covid.

Pam Duncan-Glancy talked about long-standing systemic problems not being addressed for years, and she said that the decline must be reversed, that teachers are under immense pressure, and that class sizes are still too large. I do not think that anyone can argue with that.

I also want to comment on my colleague Sue Webber's point that mobile phones have "the greatest negative impact". If the promise of a device for every pupil in Scotland's schools had come to fruition, it would have given headteachers the opportunity to ensure that online work was monitored through that device. It would also have given them the opportunity to ban mobile phones in the classroom. We should certainly look at pushing that forward.

I accept Ben Macpherson's comment that it is right for us to scrutinise. It is not only right; it is essential, especially when the education of young Scots is on the line.

Brian Whittle made the comment that education is "the cornerstone" of every policy in this place. That is a perfect phrase, which highlights that it is not good enough to rise up if the rest of the world rises up faster and better.

Liz Smith made an excellent comment about how we need to free up our teachers and remove barriers to let them teach. I agree whole-heartedly that Scottish education has the potential to be the best in the world. That is something that we should all recognise.

In preparing my notes ahead of the debate, I had hoped to be more consensual. For example, the full and frank way in which the cabinet secretary acknowledged yesterday the challenges that were raised in the PISA report was certainly welcome, as was her tone when calling for cross-party work for the good of Scotland's young people. Scottish Conservatives will always

welcome any moves to drive improvement across school education, and I look forward to debating education reform in the new year.

However, I am afraid that it was the former First Minister who asked us—and Scotland—to judge her on her Government's record on education. The former First Minister also said that she had a "sacred responsibility" to provide equal opportunities to all children. When those statements were made, the Scottish Government was full of ideas about guidelines that it would put in place to empower local authorities. The Government took complete ownership of education for all Scotland's young people, and it is more than disappointing to see some abdication of that ownership. I hope that that is only temporary.

The SNP's record, which has been rehearsed this afternoon, speaks for itself. The SNP Government has presided over 16 years of failure in education, with the latest PISA study confirming that Scotland has fallen to record low levels in maths, reading and science internationally. The SNP has starved schools and staff of resources, and the implementation of its curriculum for excellence has been an unmitigated disaster.

We Scottish Conservatives know that education is one of the routes out of poverty, because a thorough education that is based on knowledge, facts, the fundamental basics of reading, writing and counting, and respect for teachers and fellow pupils is a sure-fire way to change lives.

I know that the debate has moved on, but it would be remiss of me not to return to some of the issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

I have previously mentioned the issue of bullying and violence in questions to the cabinet secretary, but we simply cannot raise the issue and wait for a plan when it comes to discipline in the classroom. The current process across Scotland simply puts any consequences of bullying and violence in a classroom setting on to the victim. Bullied young people are the ones who have to alter their behaviour or move away from their friends to another seat or even class. Teachers are powerless to halt any violent or aggressive attack on pupils or even on themselves.

The OECD report found that bullying in Scottish schools is more frequent than the OECD average, that one in three of our students does not feel safe in schools and that pupils in Scotland are twice as likely to observe violence in school. There is a real sense of the need to act urgently; any delay is unacceptable.

I put a question on international standings to the cabinet secretary yesterday. I note the comment that PISA has a specific process to measure 15-

year-olds' ability to use their skills in reading, maths and science in order to meet real-life challenges. However, given that that is the only international benchmark that we use, that is the only league table that we can use to see how well Scotland is faring internationally.

It is also important to note that all the other countries that take part in the programme are monitored with the same criteria. Therefore, it is relevant to see just how well Scottish 15-year-olds fare in comparison with those in other countries in the application of that knowledge. Using our own internal processes is simply not enough to ensure that we provide an education that will open doors and opportunities across the globe. Therefore, it is disappointing that we have to wait until 2026 for TIMSS and PIRLS international league tables in order to properly assess our education system and ensure that it is fit for purpose globally.

We need a comprehensive vision for education in Scotland. I do not think that we have that currently. We need a vision that will enable every granny to look at the school that her grandchildren attend and know that there will be an informed learning environment in which they will be engaged and empowered. We need a vision that will enable pupils to learn about subjects that will not only allow them to go on to a job, college, university or positive destination, but will help them in a world in which they will always need to balance money at the end of the month. We need a vision for a world in which grammar and punctuation communication skills are more necessary than ever before and in which language is essential for proper understanding. We need a vision for a world in which information is filtered through artificial intelligence algorithms, and research and problem-solving skills are seen to be paramount in order to ensure that the truth is not masked behind opinion.

Grannies need to know that their grandchildren are safe when they are in a classroom and on school grounds. They need to know that there are consequences for misbehaviour and that boundaries are in place so that the few are not disrupting the chances of the many. In addition, pupils need to know that arts and sports are just as important as modern languages and calculus for a well-balanced body, mind and soul, and that learning home economics is a skill that will help them through every walk of life.

Until we have that vision, we are failing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on improving the performance of the Scottish education system.

Business Motions

17:04

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of business motions. Motion S6M-11651, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 19 December 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Budget 2024-25

followed by Ministerial Statement: Implementing the Medication Assisted Treatment Standards

followed by Scottish Government Debate: From a Warm Scots Welcome to a Warm Scots Future for Ukrainians in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.50 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 December 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Trusts and Succession (Scotland) Bill

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Standing Order Rule Changes - Proxy Voting

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 December 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.45 pm Portfolio Questions:

	Social Justice
1.10 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Tuesday 9 January 2024	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee Debate: How Devolution is Changing Post-EU
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 10 January 2024	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; Justice and Home Affairs
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 11 January 2024	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 18 December 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross to speak to and move amendment S6M-11651.1.

17:04

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I seek an addition to next week's business to deliver something that the Scottish National Party and Green Government promised: a statement by the end of the year on the dualling of the A9. I am standing here, trying to be helpful to the SNP business manager and to Parliament. [Interruption.] SNP MSPs might try to ridicule that, but I am simply trying to get something inserted into the business motion that the Government promised. That is why we lodged our amendment to have that statement next week.

The Government's most recent promise was to provide a statement by the end of the year. However, in the business motion that George Adam has just moved, which takes us up to the Christmas recess and therefore represents the last opportunity for a statement to be provided in this calendar year, there is no mention of the promised statement on the dualling of the A9. I do not think that it should be up to Opposition parties to use the parliamentary process to force the Government's hand, but if it is unwilling to provide a statement, we must do that.

Let us look at the history of the issue. In June—six months ago—the Government was planning to update Parliament on the A9 project. It got one of its back-bench MSPs, Jim Fairlie, to submit a Government-inspired question. That type of question is used to announce to Parliament and the public a project that is ready to go. However, that question was then withdrawn—something that we believe has never happened in this Parliament before.

I questioned the First Minister about that on 15 June and he told the Parliament that the question was withdrawn because we had a new transport minister and she needed time to look at the project. She has had several months to look at it, but we are now told that she will not even be the one to make the announcement in the statement—that will be the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition. The First Minister told me that the A9 is "very important", and he said:

"when we are ready to update Parliament with an announcement on the A9, we will absolutely do that,"

However, the Government was ready to update Parliament back in June, when it had that Government-inspired question lodged. The First Minister went on to say:

"We will also ensure, of course, that any update that we provide in a statement to Parliament is accurate."—[Official Report, 15 June 2023; c 13.]

Let us hope that the former transport minister Michael Matheson is not involved if we are looking for accuracy.

After that, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition told us that the update would come by the end of autumn and before the start of winter. Autumn has been and gone, as has the start of winter, yet there has still been no update for MSPs and the constituents that we represent.

Earlier this afternoon, the SNP business manager, in response to my colleague Edward Mountain, told Parliament:

“We expect to update Parliament on a renewed programme in the coming days.”

Why, then, has the Government asked Parliament tonight to vote for a business motion that does not include a statement on the A9? If a statement is coming “in the coming days”, why is it not in the motion that we are asked to support tonight?

The SNP Government has made repeated promises to the communities for which the road is crucial, but they have failed to materialise. There has been very little action on this vital road for communities from Perth to Inverness, and that is why the matter is so important. It is crucial that we hear a statement on it in Parliament before the end of the year. Scottish Conservatives research has shown that, at the current pace, it may take over a century to complete the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness. It cannot and must not take that long, so we need to hear in a statement what the next steps are, when the spades will be in the ground and when the dualling will be complete.

We have repeatedly tried to get a statement in Parliament. We were told that a statement would be made by the end of autumn, and on the last day of autumn we asked for one. We asked again two weeks ago, and we asked again yesterday. At the Parliamentary Bureau yesterday, my colleague Alex Burnett, who is our party’s business manager, was told that there was a Cabinet process to be followed. Exactly how long does that Cabinet process take? We have still had no statement.

Parliament deserves the opportunity to scrutinise the Government’s plans. I am hopeful that George Adam is about to stand up and say that he and the Government will accept our amendment, which proposes that a statement be included in next week’s business in order to deliver on the Government’s promises. If he does not do that, the question will fall to people such as John Swinney, Richard Lochhead, Emma Roddick, Maree Todd, Jim Fairlie, Kate Forbes and other representatives whose constituents are expecting an update in the chamber. Surely they will want to vote with the Scottish Conservatives to secure a statement in the business for next week, because their constituents expect it.

I move amendment S6M-11651.1, to insert after “2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care”:

“*followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on the Dualling of the A9*”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call George Adam to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:09

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): What we have heard from Mr Ross is a complete misunderstanding—he just has no clue about how the parliamentary process works in the Scottish Parliament. That is extremely disappointing, because the whole point of the Parliamentary Bureau is for all the business managers to talk about business in a space where we can discuss the issues and bring things forward.

Douglas Ross: Will George Adam give way on that point?

George Adam: We have heard enough from Mr Ross at the moment.

It comes down to basic respect for this Parliament. My job as Minister for Parliamentary Business is to ensure that we work within our Parliament’s processes. The Scottish Government remains committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, and we expect to update Parliament on a renewed programme in the coming days.

Douglas Ross: Will George Adam give way on that point?

George Adam: I do not understand what the Conservative Party cannot understand about the term “days”. That sounds pretty imminent to me, but, as everyone knows, the Scottish Government follows the parliamentary business process. That includes—I will explain this for Mr Ross, because he misunderstood this bit as well—Cabinet approval of the Scottish Government business and then the bureau’s consideration of the business programme as a whole before, finally, approval by Parliament as a whole is sought.

We should use the processes in the Parliament rather than grandstand at decision time. The founding principle of the Parliament is for us all to work together to deliver for the people of Scotland, and standing there for five minutes grandstanding is not part of that.

As I said, the Scottish Government remains firmly committed to completing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, and work to determine the most suitable procurement options

for the remaining sections of the A9 dualling is now well advanced. The Parliament will receive an update in the coming days. I repeat once again that it will be in the coming days.

Douglas Ross: Will George Adam give way on that point?

George Adam: We are now in full panto mode with the Conservatives.

Once the date for the statement has been scheduled, I will inform Parliament in the usual manner. Can we all just calm down, allow Parliament to do its job and stop the petty grandstanding?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-11651.1, in the name of Douglas Ross, which seeks to amend business motion S6M-11651, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The Parliament is not agreed. There will be a short—

Douglas Ross: It was yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry?

Douglas Ross: I just assumed that the Government parties were supporting the amendment. Are we not agreed?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will ask the question again. The question is, that amendment S6M-11651.1, in the name of Douglas Ross, which seeks to amend business motion S6M-11651, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The Parliament is not agreed, therefore we will move to a vote. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:12

Meeting suspended.

17:15

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-11651.1, in the name of Douglas Ross. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Clark. Your vote will be recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East 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)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 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)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 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-11651.1, in the name of Douglas Ross, is: For 56, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11651, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 19 December 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Budget 2024-25

followed by Ministerial Statement: Implementing the Medication Assisted Treatment Standards

followed by Scottish Government Debate: From a Warm Scots Welcome to a Warm Scots Future for Ukrainians in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.50 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 December 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Trusts and Succession (Scotland) Bill

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Standing Order Rule Changes - Proxy Voting

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 December 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.45 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice

1.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 9 January 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee Debate: How

	Devolution is Changing Post-EU
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 10 January 2024	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; Justice and Home Affairs
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 11 January 2024	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 18 December 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-11640 and S6M-11641, on stage 1 timetables for bills. I call George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Aggregates Tax and Devolved Taxes Administration (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 17 May 2024.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 31 May 2024.—[George Adam]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:17

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-11642, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I call George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Council Tax (Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.—[George Adam]

17:18

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I rise to speak against the motion on the draft Council Tax (Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2023.

When the First Minister announced the policy in April, he stated that it would improve the availability of sustainable long-term housing opportunities. In the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's deliberations, we have heard very little evidence to suggest that the policy will provide any additional homes or that it will encourage people who have second homes in Scotland to change how they use their properties.

There are also significant concerns about the policy in relation to potential behavioural change. The committee heard that there has been a decline in second home ownership and that there are, in Scotland, existing taxes on second homes, including the additional dwelling supplement, which is added to land and buildings transaction tax.

Witnesses to the committee also explained that they believe that the regulations could have unintended consequences. In particular, second home owners might instead increase the availability of their properties for holiday letting in order to become eligible for non-domestic rates, instead of paying council tax. The small business bonus provides relief from NDR of up to 100 per cent, which means that, in practice, many holiday-let owners currently pay no council tax or NDR.

We are all acutely aware of the pressures that local government in Scotland faces after a decade of SNP and Green ministers targeting them with budget cuts. Many councils will see the potential of a new revenue stream to fill that black hole, assuming that we see no behavioural change taking place. However, the policy presents no expectations on how councils should use that additional income—for example, in applying it to

providing more affordable housing and addressing the housing crisis in Scotland.

Therefore, at decision time, the Scottish Conservatives will not support the motion.

17:20

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): The regulations will deliver a key priority for the Government with regard to fairer housing and taxation systems. Both policies have been developed in partnership with local government, through the joint working group on sources of local government funding and council tax reform. In the spirit of the Verity house agreement, the regulations seek to empower local authorities to make decisions about the council tax treatment of second homes in order to determine the balance in use of housing to meet local needs.

In that way, councils would have discretion to apply to second homes either a discount of up to 50 per cent or a premium of up to 100 per cent. That recognises that local authority areas differ and that the impact of second homes across the country is disparate. What might cause pressures in some communities could provide benefit to others. Those decisions should be for councils, based on the market conditions and economic tolerances in their areas.

I note that the UK Government has recently legislated to provide councils in England with the same 100 per cent council tax premium on second homes. I have heard a lot of surprising things in the chamber, but it was intriguing to hear Miles Briggs adopting a more extreme position than his Westminster counterparts.

The instrument also allows councils to grant a six-month grace period with regard to the 100 per cent empty homes premium for new owners of empty properties who are undertaking repairs and renovations. Local authorities will have discretion to extend that six-month grace period. That is aimed at incentivising reoccupation of empty homes and at preventing the empty home council tax premium from becoming a deterrent to new ownership. We have committed to establishing joint best practice guidance with local government to ensure that all councils are aware of the flexibilities in relation to those policies.

The instrument will put councils front and centre in making decisions about the council tax treatment of second and empty homes in their areas. I hope that members will agree with the Government on that this evening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-11643, on designation of a lead committee. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Judicial Factors (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[George Adam].

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question on this motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:23

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-11635.3, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11635, in the name of Liam Kerr, on improving the performance of the Scottish education system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On a point of order, my screen has frozen. I would have voted yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your yes vote will be duly recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 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, 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 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)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (North East 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)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 64, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11635.1, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11635, in the name of Liam Kerr, on improving the performance of the Scottish education system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): On a point order, I am unsure whether my vote has been registered. I would have voted no.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your vote was registered, Mr Doris.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (North East 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)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 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, 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 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-11635.1, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, is: For 54, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11635, in the name of Liam Kerr, as amended, on improving the performance of the Scottish education system, 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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 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, 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)
 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)

Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 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)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (North East 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)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-11635, in the name of Liam Kerr, as amended, is: For 64, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the significance of the challenges facing the Scottish education system, as highlighted by the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report; welcomes the publication of Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels 2022-23 (ACEL), which shows that the proportion of primary school pupils achieving expected levels of literacy and numeracy has reached record highs, that the poverty-related attainment gap in literacy in primary school has reached the lowest level on record, and that attainment at secondary level has increased and the poverty-related attainment gap decreased; understands that ACEL represents the most up-to-date and comprehensive statistics on attainment in Scotland, and that the findings are testament to the hard work of teachers, support staff and pupils; notes that PISA found that pupils in Scotland were less likely to witness issues with a number of aspects of behaviour in school than in other parts of the UK; welcomes the Scottish Government's decision to rejoin Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); notes that Curriculum for Excellence was endorsed by the OECD in its 2021 report as the right approach for Scottish education, and agrees that the process of education reform, working in partnership with local authorities, and including the reorganisation of national bodies and reform of qualifications and assessments, offers the opportunity to raise standards, ensure that all children and young people can meet their full potential, and deliver excellence and equity across Scotland's schools.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11642, in the name of George Adam, on approval of a statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is now closed.

Bob Doris: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to cast my vote on that occasion. I would have voted yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Doris. Your vote will be recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)

(SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 87, Against 1, Abstentions 28.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Council Tax (Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-11643, in the name of George

Adam, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Judicial Factors (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. There will be a short pause before we move on to the final item of business.

LGBT+ Veterans

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11225, in the name of Keith Brown, on Fighting With Pride and advocacy for LGBT+ veterans. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament supports the work of Fighting With Pride (FWP), the LGBT+ military charity; commends what it sees as the opportunities provided by FWP's Pride in Veterans Standard (PiVS) programme, which provides training for veterans organisations, including those operating in the Clackmannanshire and Dunblane constituency, on how best to support LGBT+ veterans; understands that the charity was set up to mark the 20th anniversary of the end of the ban on LGBT+ personnel in the Armed Forces; notes with concern the comprehensive findings of the final report of the UK LGBT Veterans Independent Review, published in May 2023, which it considers highlights in meticulous detail the experience of LGBT+ veterans; welcomes the UK Government's apology to all LGBT+ veterans affected by the so-called "gay ban", and notes the calls for the UK Government to do more to respond to the concerns raised by the LGBT Veterans Independent Review, including specifically by not introducing a £50 million cap on funds allocated to compensate for lost earnings and pension entitlements, as well as for the profound distress caused by the so-called "gay ban" and the actions of the Armed Forces in implementing it.

17:33

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Earlier this year, I attended an event at the University of Stirling, which is in my constituency, for the official launch of Fighting With Pride in Scotland. Fighting With Pride is a veterans charity that works closely with veterans organisations across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom to improve the support that is available to LGBT+ armed forces veterans. I am grateful to all the members who signed the motion to enable the debate to take place, and I welcome those in the public gallery from Fighting With Pride.

In my constituency, Fighting With Pride has worked with veterans organisations such as the Wee County Veterans and with LGBT organisations such as the Forth Valley Lavender Room, and it has supported LGBT education in schools such as Dollar academy. Fighting With Pride also works symbiotically with national veterans groups such as Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland to better support LGBT+ veterans across the country.

Fighting With Pride's mission statement is to improve the support that is available for LGBT+ veterans. One of the most critical aspects of doing that is campaigning to right the wrongs that were

perpetrated on LGBT+ armed forces members during the so-called gay ban—the ban on LGBT+ service members in the UK armed forces, which ended only in 2000, just 23 years ago.

In my view, the so-called gay ban and the way in which it was implemented discriminated against LGBT+ members of the armed forces in our society, notwithstanding the difficult social and legal situation that all LGBT+ people faced at that time. Although homosexuality—to use the term of the time—was decriminalised for civilians in England in 1967 and, shamefully, not until 1980 for those in Scotland, the ban on LGBT people being members of the armed forces remained in place until 2000.

That meant that LGBT+ members of the armed forces—and they alone—were prevented by statute from loving those whom they chose to love or from living a life in which they were true to themselves. It was for that exact reason that Fighting With Pride was set up in 2019. As I mentioned, a number of Fighting With Pride's members and supporters are in the public gallery today. That includes the charity's operations manager for Scotland and Northern Ireland, Dougie Morgan, who is a resident of my constituency.

I have met Dougie a few times and he has described to me in his own words—not least at my first meeting with him at the event that I mentioned at the University of Stirling—how he had felt very different from a young age, although he did not, at that time, recognise that as being gay. Although he did privately know of his sexuality when he joined the armed forces in 1979, he had no concept of there being such a thing as a gay ban in place.

However—again, to use his own words—Dougie quickly came to realise the treatment that LGBT+ people could come to expect in the armed forces during that time, such as homophobic bullying, jokes and mistreatment and, in the most extreme cases, violent physical abuse, unfair detention or predatory sexual behaviour. That was not necessarily a direct result of the ban itself but a result of the culture that was aided and abetted by the ban's presence.

After almost all instances in which someone was outed as being LGBT+, their time in the armed forces was ended, almost always with immediate dismissal from the service. That meant a sudden end to their chosen career, simply because of who they were attracted to, who they loved or how they identified themselves. As a result of that experience, after leaving the forces, Dougie—in his own words—lived his life as someone else, masking his sexuality and pursuing a life that he felt would be socially acceptable in a way that being gay at that time simply was not.

During that period of his life, and because of what he had witnessed in his time in the forces, Dougie lived with complicated psychological issues, which were compounded by a challenging relationship with alcohol. I understand from my discussions with Fighting With Pride that Dougie's story is, unfortunately, far from unique.

After being forcibly outed in 2009, Dougie met his husband. Both of them were subject to a significant homophobic attack in 2016, the same year in which they were married. I mention that because Dougie's story shows not only how far we have come in terms of LGBT+ rights and acceptance in a comparatively short time, but how far we still have to go. It was in the aftermath of that attack that Dougie felt that it was necessary to do something to ensure that others would not be forced to hide their sexuality and live a parallel life that was not true to who they were, and he wanted to support LGBT+ veterans specifically. From that point onwards, Dougie began to share his experience in schools and with other groups. That eventually led to his involvement with Fighting With Pride, which, as I said, was founded in 2019.

Dougie's story is just one of the stories from thousands of LGBT+ veterans across Scotland and the rest of the UK who have been affected by the gay ban. I am grateful to Dougie for telling me his story and allowing me to use it in my speech to illustrate just one example of the adversity faced by LGBT+ veterans who served in the armed forces prior to 2000.

In July this year, the UK Government published the "LGBT Veterans Independent Review: Final Report". As the name suggests, it was an independent review into the service and experience of LGBT veterans who served in the armed forces prior to 2000. The report is comprehensive and detailed, and I, for one, welcome it—in fact, I contributed to it.

In my view, the most pertinent part of the report is the veterans' stories section, which ranges from pages 51 to 142. That section presents a vast number of testimonies that set out the lived experience of LGBT+ veterans who served during the ban. Those testimonies outline a picture of homophobic attitudes and jokes exacerbated and enabled by the ban; betrayal and disownment by friends and family as a result of being forcibly outed or dismissed from the service; post-traumatic stress disorder caused by homophobic and transphobic emotional and violent physical abuse while in the service; lifelong shame and guilt for being forcibly removed from a job that they loved simply because of their sexuality; and careers, families and livelihoods destroyed, all for no good reason.

I know that some members interact with a number of elements of what we might call the

defence and veterans establishment. To my mind, substantial remnants of the attitudes that I have described are still present in those organisations. This is a case that has not yet been won. I do not want to name any charities, defence organisations, parts of the Ministry of Defence and so on, but we have more to do to change those attitudes. I would like to see a much more proactive approach from those organisations across the board.

I recommend that everyone in the chamber and everyone listening to the speeches in this debate take the time to read the pages of the report of the independent review. Although such reports are useful for informing debates such as this, they are only as good as the action that they produce. The report of the independent review is helpful in that regard, as it outlines, for the devolved Governments and the UK Government, a number of recommendations and suggestions to better support LGBT+ veterans.

For my part, I have sought to bring awareness and action to the support that we give to such veterans. In bringing this members' business debate to the Scottish Parliament, I note the suggestions and recommendations to the Scottish Government that were made in the report, and I will work, as an MSP, in pursuit of those suggestions. I encourage others to do the same.

As for the United Kingdom Government's response, warm words have been forthcoming and an official apology has been issued, which is absolutely right and long overdue. However, one of the most significant long-term impacts of the so-called gay ban for veterans, other individuals and their friends and family, and for those in the institutions of government that are ultimately responsible for the ban, is the harm that has been caused. The UK Government therefore has a particular obligation to LGBT+ veterans.

On Monday, I was dismayed to read a BBC report showing that the UK Government had dropped a debate on the LGBT veterans independent review in the UK Parliament, which had previously been promised by the UK Secretary of State for Defence not long after the publication of the report of the independent review. I understand that that decision has now been overturned and that there will be a debate in the House of Commons in the new year, which is very welcome.

Given the special obligation of the UK Government on the issue, I echo the words of Fighting With Pride's open letter to the UK Prime Minister, which was published on Monday. The letter urges the UK Government to allow that debate to be held and, perhaps most importantly, it calls—as does the motion for our debate—for the UK Government to scrap the proposed £50

million cap on the fund for distribution to LGBT veterans affected by the gay ban. The obvious issue will be the amount of compensation available within the cap to individual veterans affected by the gay ban. The cap means that the more veterans who apply to the fund, the more the amount that individual veterans can obtain will inevitably decrease. That just stands to reason, given the maths. It is fairly clear that that amount will not be sufficient to compensate individual veterans properly.

In my view, the so-called gay ban is a shameful part of Scotland's and the UK's military history. Those who were prepared to serve their country with loyalty and distinction were not met with the same loyalty in return. That cannot be justified, and both Scotland and the UK must atone for that. I urge the UK Government to do so.

As a Parliament, we must stand united behind our LGBT+ veterans, and we call on the UK Government to do the same. We support Fighting With Pride and the immense amount of work that it does to support LGBT+ veterans. Crucially, we should implement the recommendations of the report of the independent review. Lastly, and most importantly, we should scrap the cap.

17:43

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the member for that excellent speech and for securing this debate in the Scottish Parliament.

I have a unique and privileged position in a debate such as this, because so many of the key protagonists in this sorry saga are very good friends of mine. They are armed forces veterans who were denied so much by the cruel, homophobic, transphobic and unfair policies and attitudes of yesteryear. I want to use my time today to tell their stories, because they deserve to live in our *Official Report* for posterity.

Simon Ingram joined the Royal Air Force in 1987. He was talented, and he was posted to RAF Kinloss with 201 squadron. He knew himself to be gay and, like any lad in the forces in the 1980s, he threw himself into squadron life and kept his secret close. Simultaneously, however, Simon was being covertly investigated by military police.

He was treated like a dissident, not a soldier. He was hauled out by military police in front of his squad, asked obtuse and obscene questions over several days and discharged in August 1993. When he went to the jobcentre, they said to him, "Sorry, Mr Ingram, we don't have much work going for international submarine hunters these days." Aged just 26, he found himself with no career, his house repossessed by the bank in negative equity, his pension removed, his medals gone. It took 15 years before he recovered from this discharge

financially; he still does not have a decent pension pot, although he tells me that he is working on it. Simon is my friend.

Patrick Lyster-Todd served at the Clyde submarine base in my West of Scotland region. He described his life in the army in the way that many gay men of that era will recognise—as a Jekyll-and-Hyde existence. In 1988, he met his first ever partner, Dennis. Dennis was HIV positive, and they both knew deep down that they had very precious little time together, such was the death sentence of the virus. Patrick faced the abominable and inhumane choice of his career or his partner. Staying in the forces simply was not an option. He applied to leave the navy, citing a spurious reason. Why? Because it would have been a criminal offence to tell the truth. Patrick gave his one-year notice, but two days before his last day in the navy, Dennis passed away. No one even knew what Patrick was going through, never mind being there to support him. Patrick is my friend, too.

Ed Hall was another former sub-lieutenant who was discharged from the navy for being gay. He founded Armed Forces Legal Action in 1993, and, working with the rank outsiders group and so many others, aimed to end the ban on gays and lesbians serving in the military. By 1994, he had finished writing a book, the aptly, imaginatively, and quite tongue-in-cheekily named, "We Can't Even March Straight", which catapulted the treatment of LGBT soldiers right into the mainstream media. By 1999, he himself had helped over 100 veterans lodge complaints with employment tribunals, and because of the work that he and so many other brave activists carried out—so many that I simply do not have time to mention—the ban was finally repealed in 2000. He is my friend, too.

That brings me to today's debate, which, of course, comes off the back of the monumentally important Atherton report. Credit is due to the UK Government, which ensured the report's passage, and which offered very frank apologies to those who suffered at the hand of state-sanctioned discrimination. However, for far too many today, an apology simply is not enough. There is still no justice and still no compensation for the lost careers, the lost livelihoods, the broken relationships, the lost income, the cancelled pensions, and more important, the lost dignity and respect.

After all, these are the people whom we expected to man our nuclear submarines and warships. These are the people who flew warplanes over our heads, who cared for injured soldiers, who marched over the hills of the Falklands and who were all lauded as heroes upon their return. They were expected to take a

bullet through the heart for their Queen and their country but not to give their heart to the person whom they loved. They spent their days delivering humanity and were rewarded with the most appalling inhumanity. They were expected to keep state secrets right up to their death but were forced to expose the secrets of their own lives. They lost their jobs, their money, their medals, their houses, their pensions, their lovers and their friends. Some paid the ultimate price with their health and even their lives.

If it were up to me, I would give them back not just their medals and their honours. Every single one of them should get a civic honour for their efforts against this injustice. So, to Duncan and Dougie and Graham and Elaine, Ed, Patrick, Simon, Craig, Caroline, to everybody else in the gallery behind me, and to every veteran who has suffered, I say: I would not just pay these veterans the money that they deserve. We owe them so much more than that—no caps, no limits, no ifs and no buts. Morally, it is simply the right thing to do.

I am also a realist, though. We are in politics. I know that Governments do not write blank cheques; the UK Government has said as much, and the Scottish Government knows it, too. Having worked carefully and closely on the historical abuse redress scheme, I know that although it was, indeed, uncapped in theory, it was capped in reality.

We all know that there is no blank cheque. It is not a simple ask, but it is a fair one. All that I can hope for is an honest and co-operative discussion between the Government and those who represent the veterans and that they will sit round the table and make progress. I am pleased to hear that Andrew Murrison has agreed to a full and proper Westminster debate on the issue. I also hope that what is said in the Scottish Parliament this evening forms a crucial part of that.

I am so lucky that, for the most part, despite some of the crap that I get on social media, I can be a gay man in public life and not have to choose between my freedom and my career and whom I love. However, let me say that that great privilege did not happen overnight, and I dedicate my words today to those who gave up their freedom for mine.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much. I know that emotions are running high, but I urge members to stay within the bounds of parliamentary protocols.

17:50

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and congratulate Keith Brown on securing it.

Jamie Greene has just delivered a powerful contribution. I am pleased to follow him in the debate and I want to thank him very much for speaking today.

Keith emphasised the fantastic work of Fighting With Pride, and I join him in welcoming that work on connecting LGBT+ veterans to organisations that can help them with whatever their needs are. I welcome members of Fighting With Pride to the public gallery this evening.

Fighting With Pride was established on the 20th anniversary of the complete lifting of the gay ban on LGBT+ service personnel—the UK Government even called it the gay ban. Fighting With Pride supports LGBT+ veterans and serving personnel and their families, particularly those who were affected by the ban, which was ultimately lifted on 12 January 2000. Before then, thousands of LGBT+ service personnel were removed or forced from service and abandoned, as has been described already.

The ban on LGBT+ service personnel was wide ranging and deeply hurtful to all those who were impacted. Some of those who breached the ban were either dismissed following a court-martial or administratively discharged. Others resigned or did not extend their contract due to the impact of the requirement to continually hide their sexuality. The policy was not enforced uniformly across the armed forces but, where it was enforced, it was usually carried out in a rigorous and often brutal way with long-term damaging consequences.

An independent review of the impact of the ban was published, and the statements that were taken as part of the review present shocking evidence. The testimonies demonstrate a culture of homophobia, bullying, blackmail, sexual assaults, abusive investigations into sexual orientation and sexual preference and disgraceful medical examinations, including conversion therapy and discharges without appeal. That led to appalling consequences in terms of mental health and wellbeing and homelessness. That takes me back to the days of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that was introduced in the United States of America, when I lived in Los Angeles. That policy was ended in 2011 by President Barack Obama. Such policies and practices have no place in any society, and I welcome the fact that we have moved on and that reparations have been made to those who were impacted.

I want to touch on the work of organisations across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish borders to support veterans and service personnel who are part of the LGBT+ community. The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen & Families Association is a trusted source of support for serving personnel, veterans and their families in their times of need. It was founded in 1885, and the Dumfriesshire and

Stewartry branch of SSAFA continues to do fantastic work for veterans. Its support covers regulars and reserves in the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the British Army and the Royal Air Force as well as their families, including anyone who has completed national service. The team in D&G knows and understands the unique demands of service life in the UK and overseas and, in times of need, they enable forces families to thrive.

I am interested in the work that SSAFA has been doing with the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, which has awarded a grant, on behalf of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, to assist with the delivery of specialist support on the Forcesline helpline. Funding of £25,000 is being allocated to Forcesline to uplift and fully support any additional and specific needs from the veteran LGBT+ community that might result from the pre-2000 homosexuality ban. I remind folk that the Forcesline number is 0800 260 6767.

That work is also publicised by the Veterans Garden in Dumfries, which is run by army veteran Mark Harper—no relation. Mark is doing an amazing job at that garden at the Crichton, which provides a safe space for veterans, regardless of their sexual orientation. I hope that the minister will visit the garden to see its updated premises.

I again welcome the debate and thank Keith Brown for all that he does to champion veterans' affairs.

17:55

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the member for Clackmannanshire and Dunblane for lodging the motion and bringing this incredibly important debate to the Parliament. I particularly compliment Mr Greene, one of the Conservative members for West Scotland, for his moving speech, and I pay particular tribute to those from Fighting With Pride who are present in the gallery.

Although the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK began in 1967 and was extended to Scotland in 1980, those in the armed forces had to wait far longer to be treated as equals, and the so-called gay ban was not lifted until many years later, in January 2000. In the years between decriminalisation and the lifting of the ban on LGBT+ personnel serving in the armed forces, thousands of servicemen and servicewomen were dishonourably discharged. In many cases, that destroyed their lives, and it gave rise to a culture that enabled bullying, homophobic abuse, sexual assault and conversion therapy to run rampant across the forces.

LGBT+ servicemen and servicewomen had their medals and honours stripped from them when they were wrongfully dismissed from service. It was therefore right that, in 2021, it was announced

that LGBT+ veterans would be able to claim their medals back. Although the onus is on the individual to make that administrative process happen, restoring honours and medals to those who served this country with distinction is a move in the right direction.

We can take some degree of solace in the progress that has been made, perhaps most symbolically by the current governor of Edinburgh castle, Major General Alastair Bruce, who, like Keith Brown, is a Falklands war veteran. He served in the Scots Guards and, in July 2021, became the highest ranking officer in the British Army to have a same-sex wedding, when he married his partner of 20 years. It was sad to listen to his testimony about how he had to conceal who he was and change his lifestyle for many years because of the culture in the forces and about how insidious that became. I nonetheless congratulate him on living as his true self by getting married in full dress uniform, and I further congratulate him on his recent appointment as honorary colonel of the 52nd Lowland and sixth battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, my former unit. I am sure that he will be a fantastic honorary colonel.

Lord Etherton's review, which was published in July this year, is a welcome step forward in realising the experiences of many LGBT+ veterans. The subsequent apology from the Prime Minister for what he described as the "appalling failure" of the British state was also a welcome intervention, but much more must be done to right the wrongs of the past.

Before the ban was lifted, LGBT+ members of the armed forces were dismissed from service with no income or pension and, in some cases, no roof over their head, as was so harrowingly described by Mr Greene. More than 1,000 submissions were made in response to Lord Etherton's call for evidence, including 301 from veterans who had been dismissed or discharged due to their sexuality, 297 from veterans who felt compelled to end their service because of the ban and 38 from family members and friends of personnel, some of whom had taken their own lives as a result of the discrimination that they faced.

Some of the testimony is truly shocking. Here is one example:

"When serving in the MOD I was unable to declare my sexuality. My partner at the time (now my wife) was diagnosed with aggressive cancer. I was unable to speak to anyone about it at a very stressful time for fear of recriminations. My boss at the time was particularly vindictive and probably knew about my sexuality. He deliberately blocked my selection for a post graduate master degree already approved."

Another response said:

"Military police would often wait outside known gay venues and follow those who looked like sailors back to the

dockyard. Raids would often follow the next day. Even joking around in the mess and calling someone a poof would result in an investigation by military police involving locker searches.”

Another commented:

“The hatred for homosexuality was institutionalised. I joined at 17 and a half not fully aware of my own sexuality but you quickly learn to conceal it or face bullying and harassment or worse physical abuse especially for any male members which was almost normalised and encouraged from senior officers.”

Although, rightly, we are having this debate in the Scottish Parliament, it was disappointing to learn that the British Government was reluctant to have a debate in Government time in the House of Commons, as this is an important issue that MPs should also debate. However, I am pleased that it has been reported tonight that that is being reviewed by the UK Government and that its position will change, because key recommendations in the Etherton report need to be challenged, such as the £50 million cap on the funds that will be allocated to compensate wrongfully dismissed veterans.

LGBT+ servicemen and servicewomen were treated abhorrently before the ban was lifted in 2000. It is absolutely right that we look at ways to right the wrongs of the past, by returning honours to servicemen and servicewomen and by recognising the important and continuing role of LGBT+ people in our armed forces. Fighting With Pride, which was established on the 20th anniversary of the lifting of the ban and which, as the member for Clackmannanshire and Dunblane so eloquently expressed, continues to advocate for LGBT+ veterans and their families, is pushing for those who were wrongfully dismissed or mistreated to get the recognition and recompense—the reparations—that they truly deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Graeme Dey to respond to the debate, for around seven minutes.

18:00

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I was going to say that I am pleased to be closing the debate on behalf of the Government, but I am not at all sure about that. Truth be told, although I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute, as others have done, to Fighting With Pride—and I thank Keith Brown for giving me and others that chance—I struggle with the issue at the core of the debate.

The work of Fighting With Pride to shine a light on the impact of the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the armed forces has been outstanding. However, should all of us not be

deeply uncomfortable, as I certainly am, that those serving personnel were ever placed in those circumstances? I will be unequivocal. The Scottish Government is clear that the ban was abhorrent and should never have been in place.

Many veterans and their families who were impacted by the ban still bear the mental scars from the discrimination and treatment that they faced, and it is vital that we remain committed to supporting them in the courageous battles that they still face. As did every other veteran, those brave individuals served to protect the liberty and freedoms that we all enjoy today. They should never have faced the cruel treatment—in some cases, it included dishonourable dismissal—that they faced, with all the lifelong impact that that has had.

Keith Brown highlighted the experiences of Dougie Morgan. In a powerful and moving contribution, Jamie Greene talked of his friends Simon Ingram, Patrick Lyster-Todd and Ed Hall. Yesterday, in responding to a veteran who had written to me, I re-read his letter, which laid out his experiences in the military. Those were as horrific as they were heartbreaking.

Keith Brown, Jamie Greene and Paul Sweeney are right that we need actions, not apologies or warm words, to demonstrate our collective contrition over the shameful treatment of those men and women, some of whom, as we have heard, are in the public gallery today.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I did not intend to contribute to the debate, but listening to members across the chamber has made me think.

When it comes to the condemnation of and the scrapping of the cap, everyone has come together in the spirit that they should. Will the minister consider asking the First Minister and the leaders of all the other parties to write to the UK Government before the debate that was mentioned, asking it to scrap the cap and to recognise what all these veterans have gone through?

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

Graeme Dey: That suggestion is certainly worthy of consideration. I have raised the issue directly with my UK Government counterpart. Given the strength of feeling that has been aired tonight, and the common cause, we should take that issue away and consider it.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government welcomed the publication of Lord Etherton’s independent review. As we have heard, the report was an emotive and at times extremely difficult read, but it is hugely important that people have

had the opportunity to share their experiences. I acknowledge the bravery of all those who did that.

As I said, it is now imperative that action is taken on the report's recommendations. I understand that, earlier today, the UK Government made a statement to Parliament on that. Having been in the chamber for most of the afternoon, I look forward to catching up with the detail of that statement.

It is important that the UK Government takes a pragmatic and flexible approach to delivering the recommendations, particularly when it comes to financial compensation and any associated cap on the value of individual payments.

Keith Brown: The point that the minister made about financial compensation seems to be at the heart of a lot of the debate. I agree with Jamie Greene that no Government can say that unrestricted financial resources are available. However, the minister knows that somebody who was dishonourably discharged from the Royal Air Force, for example, would have been unable to get a job with a commercial airline and to use the vital life skill that they had learned as a pilot. That kind of thing also has to be compensated for. That should be the limit—it should be about what compensation is relevant to the individual concerned. That is where we will get the cap. Does the minister agree?

Graeme Dey: I agree. I would also make the point that, for a great many of those individuals, there is no record of the reason why they left the service. In some instances, they were just hauled out and told that it would be better if they resigned. Identifying all those individuals is a challenge.

On that point, I understand that Fighting With Pride has offered to assist with the process to ensure that the integrity of the financial awards scheme is maintained. That speaks volumes for the organisation and should be embraced. This is not an issue for party politicking—Jamie Greene set the tone for us in that regard. It is just about righting a wrong.

For our part, the Scottish Government is giving careful consideration to how best to deliver on the two suggestions in the Etherton report that were directed at Scotland. The first suggestion is that we ensure that appropriate training and policies are in place among veterans' mental health providers and housing organisations so that LGBTQI+ veterans do not face any repeat of the homophobic discrimination that they suffered in the armed forces. The second is that we put in place a form of kitemark for those organisations to demonstrate their commitment to being welcoming and inclusive to all.

We are not limited to taking forward only those actions. There is always more that we could and

should be doing to support veterans, and the LGBTQI+ community more widely. For example, I have asked officials to look at making that kitemarking a requirement, from next year, for all organisations that receive grant funding through the Scottish veterans fund. I hope to be able to make a fuller announcement on the details of that in due course.

I am also delighted that, for the past two years, we have had the opportunity to fund directly Fighting With Pride's journey home project through the veterans fund. I take the opportunity to reiterate the Government's thanks to Craig, Caroline, Dougie and the rest of the team for the work that they have put into developing the pride in veterans standard, which I hope will eventually ensure that all organisations are committed to delivering the absolute highest standards for LGBTQI+ veteran inclusion. LGBTQI+ veterans deserve to feel confident and welcomed in accessing services and support. I am delighted that, since the launch of the standard, the number of organisations that have signed up to it has increased and continues to do so.

The Scottish Government remains committed to advancing equality for LGBTQI+ people more generally, which is why we fund a range of projects to tackle inequality and realise the rights of LGBTQI+ people across all areas of Scottish life. In this financial year alone, funding of £1.1 million has been provided to organisations that work to promote equality in Scotland.

Our armed forces personnel and veterans deserve the utmost respect and recognition, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are—all of them—an integral part of our communities today and will remain so in the future.

Meeting closed at 18:08.

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