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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 7 March 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Rural National Health Service Boards (Support)

1. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support rural health boards. (S6O-03174)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): It is for health boards to plan and provide services that best meet the needs of local people, including those in remote and rural areas, consistent with national policies and frameworks. As someone who grew up in a rural island community, I recognise that remote and rural national health service boards experience particular challenges, which is why we continue to work to support the delivery of services that are flexible and responsive to local population needs and geographic challenges. An example of that is the national centre for remote and rural health and care, which was launched last October.

As for resources, the Scottish Government's budget for this year provides funding of more than £19.5 billion for NHS recovery, health and social care, including more than £14.2 billion of investment for NHS boards, delivering a real-terms uplift of almost 3 per cent compared with what is happening through the United Kingdom Government's continued austerity approach.

Oliver Mundell: Steering away from the political debate around specific budgets, I am concerned that the current funding model does not take into account the ageing demographic in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway and the challenges in delivering health services across a wide geographical area. In the light of the recent work on rural depopulation, will the cabinet secretary look again at whether current funding formulas truly account for the needs of ageing people in rural communities?

Neil Gray: I hope that, wherever Oliver Mundell appears to be steering to on screen, he is doing so safely.

To go back to the question in hand, I set out in my initial answer that I recognise that remote, rural and island communities have particular

demographic challenges. I will always take representations from Oliver Mundell and other members who represent rural areas, and from members of our health boards, on how we can support them in the delivery of such services. I have already referenced the work that has been done on the national centre for remote and rural health and care, and I hope that its work will continue to inform the decisions that we need to take in that area.

As much as Oliver Mundell would wish not to talk about the budgetary situation, the financial landscape is incredibly pressing and we need to be cognisant of that as we take our decisions.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Because of staff shortages, NHS Western Isles is offering record salaries to general practitioners to relocate to the islands. Will the Scottish Government now reassess rural and island recruitment incentives to attract staff, given that the cost of employing locums is excessive?

Moreover, given that one of the reasons for the current difficulty is people's inability to find homes, will the Government also take steps to address the housing crisis in those areas by placing a ceiling on the numbers of holiday homes and second homes that a community can sustain, and by placing a burden on homes that are subsidised by the public purse, to keep them within the local housing market?

Neil Gray: My colleagues across Government will note Rhoda Grant's calls on the housing front and her request that we crack down further on holiday lets. I know from the rural housing action plan, which my colleague Paul McLennan is progressing, that action is being taken to provide greater housing supply in those areas. I recognise that recruiters, not just for health and social care services but across the public sector, face that challenge in ensuring that we can attract people to live and work in those areas, and I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government on that.

The Presiding Officer: As there is much interest in this session, concise questions and responses will be appreciated.

Medication in Schools (NHS Fife)

2. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it has intervened to direct NHS Fife and the relevant education authorities to permit schools to issue basic medication, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, without the need for a general practitioner prescription, in light of reports that primary care is struggling in NHS Fife. (S6O-03175)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government

has not directed NHS Fife or Fife Council to give permission to schools to issue basic medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Our guidance on supporting children and young people with healthcare needs in schools states:

“schools should not purchase non-prescribed medication unless using those powers permitted under the provisions of the Human Medicines Regulations.”

Those regulations permit schools to buy and hold salbutamol inhalers to treat asthma or adrenaline auto-injectors to treat anaphylaxis.

Parents may provide schools with non-prescribed medications, alongside clear and appropriate instructions for their use, and give consent for the medication to be administered. Alternatively, pupils—or parents or carers on their behalf—can access the national health service’s pharmacy first Scotland service, which is provided by community pharmacies, to receive advice and medicines to treat minor illnesses and common clinical conditions.

Sandesh Gulhane: I draw attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests as a practising NHS GP and as someone who recently worked in NHS Fife, which proved to be far more challenging than it needed to be. I was unable to order blood tests that I could order at other health boards, and I could not organise radiological investigations. It was an absolute nightmare.

However, none of that compares to the disgrace that was the rejection of referrals from GPs to the hospital. It is clear to me, from having spoken to other GPs across the health board, that there is an underlying presumption of rejection of referrals, presumably to improve figures. I was told that it depends on the day and on the mood of the consultant whether a GP referral is rejected.

Forcing GPs to waste their time by issuing prescriptions for basic medications—because schools insist upon it; please just help sort that, minister—and by having to fight the system to get patients seen and treated is unacceptable. Will the minister call out that postcode lottery and undertake an investigation into the practices of NHS Fife?

Jenni Minto: That was quite a question. It is something that we will take note of and look at. We have regular meetings with NHS Fife, and we have discussions on those things.

With regard to prescriptions for schools, I laid out in my first response that community pharmacies are the places where families should go.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Health centres in North East Fife have not been given the members of the multidisciplinary team that they were promised. However, local GPs have offered

to solve the problem by doing the recruitment themselves. The previous health secretary said that that would lead to different services in different parts of the country. Does the minister accept that people in North East Fife are already facing different outcomes? Will she allow GPs to recruit those staff themselves?

Jenni Minto: We have been working with GPs in Fife to ensure that we get the right volume of staff there. I am happy to look into proposals to allow GPs to appoint people within their practices, and I am happy to get back to the member on that.

Pupil Assaults in School

3. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce the number of assaults by pupils in schools. (S6O-03176)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am absolutely clear that our schools should be safe and consistent learning environments for all. No teacher, support assistant or pupil should face violence in Scotland’s schools.

The behaviour in Scottish schools research that was published in November 2023 provides a robust and accurate national picture in relation to behaviour in Scotland’s schools, and the series of behaviour summits that I held in September, October and November, alongside the BISSR findings, are informing the national action plan. In my statement to Parliament last year, I confirmed that the multiyear joint action plan would be developed, together with local authorities, trade unions and others, to tackle instances of challenging behaviour, and that plan will be published in the spring.

This week, the First Minister and I launched the gender-based violence framework, which aims to address the issues of misogyny and gender-based violence in schools, a theme that was captured by BISSR.

Maurice Golden: I was recently contacted by a constituent in Angus, who told me how her son required hospital treatment after being assaulted by a fellow pupil. Unfortunately, my constituent has been dismayed by the school’s response: the headteacher has twice declined to meet her personally; a proposed safety plan was full of holes; and, incredibly, it was suggested that her son be removed from his peers and educated separately while requests to exclude the alleged attacker were rebuffed. Does the cabinet secretary believe that that family are receiving the support that they need? What will she do to ensure that they get that support?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Golden for raising his constituent’s query. Obviously, he has outlined

some of the details of that case in the chamber. If he is able to share more details with my office, I will speak to officials regarding the specifics.

In that instance, it would, of course, be a matter for the local authority to engage with the parent and the headteacher. Mr Golden has outlined a challenging instance, and it is worth reflecting that that is also captured by the BISSR that was published last year. I am happy to engage with the member on the specifics of his ask.

The Presiding Officer: Bill Kidd has a short supplementary question.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): We know that poverty and child hunger have a key impact on children's behaviour at school. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that no child in Scotland goes to school hungry?

Jenny Gilruth: We have the most comprehensive free school meal offer of any nation in the United Kingdom, and we are currently extending it to cover primary 6 and 7 children in receipt of the Scottish child payment from February 2025 as the next step towards universal provision in our primary schools.

School-based Violence

4. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the Educational Institute of Scotland and other teacher unions to discuss school-based violence. (S6O-03177)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I meet our national teaching unions regularly to discuss a range of topics, including violence. I met the EIS and other teaching unions last Monday, and, on 31 January, I chaired a meeting of the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools to discuss the national behaviour action plan. That meeting was attended by the main teaching unions, including the EIS. I held a round-table meeting with the EIS and other teaching unions on 6 December to discuss their reflections on the national behaviour in Scottish schools research and their own views on actions that are required in the relationships and behaviour action plan.

Martin Whitfield: The cabinet secretary will, no doubt, have heard from those unions about the disappointment that they felt that the Scottish Government was so desperately unaware of the EIS Aberdeen local association report on violence. Some 800 teachers had responded. A national plan is coming forward. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that teacher wellbeing will be added as a quality indicator in school inspections, given the impact of violence on our teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: The localised evidence that Martin Whitfield has spoken to is hugely important in informing the national action plan, which will set out a range of actions for the Government to respond to, and also for local authorities. It is important that that is understood.

I continue to engage with the EIS at the national level with Andrea Bradley and with the other teaching unions, a number of which have also published documentary evidence on the extent of challenging behaviour in our schools.

Martin Whitfield asked a specific question about a quality indicator in school inspections. I think that that would be a matter for the newly appointed interim chief inspector. However, I am more than happy to speak to her about that process and about including that indicator in future school inspections for her consideration.

The Presiding Officer: Liam Kerr has a brief supplementary question.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Following the shocking EIS report on violence in Aberdeen, Aberdeen City Council is introducing a whistleblowing form for teachers who feel that they are discouraged from reporting violent incidents by pupils. Does the cabinet secretary welcome that move, or does she have concerns?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that I would have concerns. I think that that is an appropriate move from that local authority to respond to challenges in its area. I understand that other local authorities use similar protocol in relation to incidents of that nature. We will certainly seek to engage with Aberdeen City Council, as I have already done, on its approach to challenging behaviour.

Ministerial Population Task Force

5. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is taking forward the work and priorities of its ministerial population task force. (S6O-03178)

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): The population strategy sets out the task force's priorities around the opportunities and challenges for Scotland's changing population. We are committed to a collaborative approach to delivering those ambitions, including with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities through our recurring population round tables, with membership from Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise on the population programme board, which supports the task force.

Our addressing depopulation action plan, which was published in February, states our commitment to working with regional, local and community

partners to deliver a sustainable solution to population challenges. We will also launch our talent attraction and migration service this year. That will support our ambition for Scotland to be as attractive and welcoming as possible by helping employers to use the immigration system to fill skills needs and supporting individuals to move to and settle in Scotland.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the minister for that substantial answer, and I appreciate the need for actions to address depopulation in some areas of Scotland. Conversely, however, we also require actions to meet the growing needs of areas with significant growing populations—such as my constituency of Edinburgh Northern and Leith. As the Scottish Government begins to consider its budget for 2024-25, will the ministerial task force examine rapid population growth in the Lothians, and will it consider meeting Lothian MSPs, local councils, NHS Lothian and other relevant bodies to hear about the pressures and concerns?

Emma Roddick: As the minister responsible for population, I am more than happy to meet anyone to discuss the impact of a lack of a balanced population, which affects those who face depopulation and those who face rapid growth, in different ways.

In 2023, the Scottish Government undertook exploratory research about the drivers and implications of rapid localised growth. That was considered by the ministerial population task force and local government partners.

As a next step, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is working with local authorities to develop an enhanced understanding of the implications of population growth, particularly in east-coast local authority areas. We are engaging directly with local authorities through the joint Scottish Government-COSLA population round table to hear about those distinct challenges. That work will build on our understanding of the challenges and will inform the next steps of the ministerial population task force.

The Presiding Officer: Let us pick up the pace, colleagues.

Vaping (Action to Minimise Harm)

6. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what public health measures are being taken to minimise harm from vaping, prior to the introduction of the proposed ban on single-use vapes. (S6O-03179)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Our tobacco and vaping framework, which was published in November 2023, committed to taking action to reduce vaping among non-smokers and young people. Vapes should not be used by young people or adult non-

smokers; they are one of a range of possible cessation tools available for existing smokers to quit.

Alongside the framework, we launched the take hold marketing campaign, which successfully increased the awareness of parents, carers and children of the harms and risks of nicotine addiction from vaping.

New resources on vaping were also launched on the Parent Club, NHS Inform and Young Scot websites. We continue to work across the four nations on progressing the outcomes from the smoke-free generation consultation.

Gillian Mackay: Organisations are concerned about how disposable or single-use vapes are defined. They are concerned that manufacturers might try to add a USB port to a disposable vape to get around potential regulation, as well as about the potential scope of exemptions in the regulations. Will the minister provide some assurances on those issues and detail any other work that is under way while we wait for a ban to be in place, such as instructing retailers to put vapes behind cover and tackling advertising?

Jenni Minto: The Scottish Government has published its draft regulations, which define a single-use vape as

“a vape which is not designed or intended to be re-used ... and includes any vape which is ... not refillable, ... not rechargeable, or ... not refillable and not rechargeable”.

The purpose of that is to support any future design changes to those devices.

Organisations can view the full proposed definition in the draft regulations on the Scottish Government website. As I have said, we are working closely with other United Kingdom nations to ensure a consistent definition across the UK, and with trading standards officers and other organisations to ensure that the definition is fit for purpose.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Funding Deficit)

7. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed NHS Dumfries and Galloway's funding deficit with the national health service board. (S6O-03180)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): More than £0.5 billion of increased investment is provided for front-line NHS boards in the 2024-25 budget. That real-terms uplift has taken total funding to £13.2 billion. Despite our significant investment, the system is under extreme pressure as a result of the on-going impacts of Covid, Brexit, inflation, the cost crisis and United Kingdom Government spending decisions.

The Scottish Government's financial delivery unit is in on-going contact with all boards to address the financial challenge. That includes scrutinising and challenging financial plans and agreeing actions to support recurring savings and financial sustainability. The FDU last met NHS Dumfries and Galloway on 4 March.

Colin Smyth: NHS Dumfries and Galloway has projected that it will face a £54 million deficit by March 2025, and the Scottish Government has ordered it to find £29 million in savings in the forthcoming year alone. In a region where people cannot find an NHS dentist to register with; mums-to-be in Wigtownshire have to take a 150-mile round trip to Dumfries to give birth because the maternity unit in Stranraer remains closed; cottage hospitals that were closed in order to deal with Covid have not reopened; and there are record vacancies for consultants and record waiting lists, where exactly does the cabinet secretary expect NHS Dumfries and Galloway to make cuts of nearly £30 million in the next year alone without that having a devastating impact on patient care?

Neil Gray: I thank Colin Smyth for his question and his interest in the area. Despite our significant investment, which I have already outlined, all NHS boards, like other public services, are under unprecedented pressure as a result of inflation and, quite frankly, yesterday's budget.

The support that we are providing through the likes of the financial delivery unit consists of: funding to cover pay increases; scrutiny and challenge of three-year financial plans; considering and reviewing the financial impact of national and local service planning options; and work to deliver recurring savings of a minimum of 3 per cent, which is supported by our sustainability and value programme and the financial improvement group. That targeted additional support through the Scottish Government's FDU will be there to monitor and support boards with their financial performance and to support financial improvement.

I recognise the challenges that Colin Smyth has set out. I will continue to work with boards to ensure that we see continued progression and improvement in our health service, while also addressing the significant financial challenges that we are facing.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Waiting Times (Accident and Emergency Departments)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): New statistics that were released this week revealed that January this year was the worst month ever for long waits at Scotland's A and E departments. Almost 9,000 patients waited for more than half a day for emergency treatment.

We spoke to Kirsteen Campbell from Ross-shire. She spent more than seven hours in a waiting room at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital after experiencing symptoms of a heart attack or blood clot during a visit to Clydebank. She told me that, to alleviate the pain that she was in, she had to lie on the floor, surrounded by vomit and other bodily fluids, because there was no bed available. What does Humza Yousaf have to say to Kirsteen? How will he fix the problem?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Before I answer Douglas Ross's question, I want to say, on behalf of the Scottish Government and the party that I lead, how sad we were to hear the tragic news of the loss of Nick Sheridan. Nick was an extremely talented journalist and author, and he will be greatly missed. Many of us in the chamber will have been questioned by Nick, no doubt quite robustly, whether it was on BBC "Drivetime" or on the many other programmes that he presented. My thoughts are with his family, his many friends and his colleagues, for whom it will undoubtedly be a very sad time.

On the serious question that Douglas Ross asked, I would say to Kirsteen Campbell and anybody else who has had to wait too long—longer than any of us would expect—for A and E treatment, elective care or diagnostics that, first and foremost, the Government apologises for that. However, we are still recovering from the global pandemic, which affected every health service in the country, and that is precisely why the Deputy First Minister ensured that record funding—more than £19.5 billion—is going into the national health service. It is why we ensured that those on front line who are dealing with, treating and caring for the likes of Kirsteen and many other patients across Scotland are the best paid in the entire United Kingdom. It is why we increased their pay to record levels, and it is also why, under this Government, we have increased staffing levels to historic highs.

Are the long waits that too many patients have to endure acceptable? Not at all. That is why we are investing in our NHS and in our staff. What

makes that far more difficult, of course, is having real-term budget cuts from Westminster. If public spending for NHS England is slashed, that has consequences for Scotland, too.

The Government will continue to invest in our NHS and, most crucially, in our NHS staff, who do an incredible job day in, day out.

Douglas Ross: On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I, too, pay tribute to Nick Sheridan. I have been interviewed by him in the past, and he was a robust but extremely professional journalist. I know that his loss will be felt so much by his family and friends, as well as by his colleagues at the BBC and across the media, who regarded him so highly.

I listened carefully to the First Minister's answer. The example of Kirsteen and A and E departments that I gave in my first question is replicated across our NHS. This week, we learned that patients in Scotland's NHS are nearly 30 times more likely to be waiting more than two years for treatment than those south of the border are. More than 8,000 patients have been waiting over two years for treatment in Scotland's NHS. Eight thousand have been waiting more than two years. Does Humza Yousaf think that it is acceptable for one person—never mind thousands—to wait more than two years for treatment? What is he planning to do specifically to deal with the appalling waits for treatment?

The First Minister: I said in my first response that we do not believe that it is acceptable for anybody to have to endure a long wait—be it for unscheduled care, elective care or diagnostics. However, I hope that we all understand that the impact of the global pandemic has affected health services not just in Scotland but around the world.

Douglas Ross asked what we are doing about this. It is because of our investment in the NHS—record investment—that we are seeing progress and recovery. I will look at the statistics that came out this week, which Douglas Ross referred to. They show a 15 per cent increase in operations performed in January compared with the previous month. In comparison with January from the year before, there was a 16 per cent increase. That shows that activity is moving in the right direction. In January this year, 702 operations were carried out each day, which compares with 604 in January of the previous year.

On long waits, there have been elements of recovery. The number of new out-patients who are waiting more than two years is down by 66 per cent. Two-year waits for in-patients and day cases are down by 25 per cent.

Douglas Ross asked what we are specifically doing about this. We are making sure that we are investing in our capacity. Through our network of

treatment centres and 20,000 additional surgeries, we have provided that capacity.

I go back to my central point and will end on it. We are investing record amounts in our NHS. We are investing in our staff. We are making sure that they are the best paid. That job becomes immeasurably difficult when the UK Government has, in real terms, taken £500 million out of our budget over the past two years. Douglas Ross really needs to use whatever influence he has—of course, we know that he does not have much—to make sure that the Conservatives fund public services and do not slash them to the bone.

Douglas Ross: When we are speaking about our NHS and patients, it is really important that we speak to the 8,000 people across Scotland who are suffering and waiting more than two years—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I suspend the meeting briefly.

12:07

Meeting suspended.

12:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross.

Douglas Ross: I was saying that the 8,000 people in Scotland who have been waiting more than two years for treatment want to hear more from the First Minister about how he is going to deal with that.

It is unsurprising that Humza Yousaf still blames Covid, but the crisis in Scotland's NHS has continued to get worse since the pandemic. Since he became First Minister, more than 500,000 days have been lost because of delayed discharge—that means that, over the past 12 months, 500,000 hospital beds could have been available for other patients.

The Scottish National Party promised to eradicate delayed discharge eight years ago. If it had done that, as it promised—*[Interruption.]* I think that the First Minister just said that that is stupid—

The First Minister: I did not say that at all.

Douglas Ross: It was a promise from the SNP Government—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, let us conduct our business in an orderly fashion.

Douglas Ross: Well, SNP members were disagreeing with something. I will be interested to know whether the First Minister disagrees that it was a promise to eradicate completely delayed

discharge eight years ago. If the SNP had done that, waiting times would be lower for emergency care, ambulances and emergency treatment. How costly has the failure to eradicate delayed discharge been for patients who are waiting in Scotland's NHS?

The First Minister: First, Douglas Ross should withdraw and retract his comment. I did not, in fact, say anything to Douglas Ross—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I ask the First Minister to take a seat.

Colleagues, it is exceptionally important that we conduct our business in an orderly fashion. We can best do that not by shouting and pointing at one another but by ensuring that the person who has been called to speak has the opportunity to do so and that we listen respectfully.

The First Minister: That is right, Presiding Officer. Douglas Ross, having clearly been left hung out to dry by his colleagues, is desperate to simply make up what has been said or not said.

When it comes to the NHS in Scotland, I am very proud of the fact that the actions that we have taken mean that Scotland remains the only country anywhere in the UK not to have lost a single day to NHS strike action.

When it comes to social care, which Douglas Ross is absolutely right to point to, Brexit has been a complete and utter disaster for social care recruitment. Not only that, but the recent changes to migration rules have been described as absolutely devastating by those who work in social care.

We can add to that, as I have already said, a real-terms cut to our budget over the past couple of years, including a £1.3 billion cut to our capital budget, which directly affects health infrastructure. We are attempting to recover our NHS in the face of 14 years of Conservative austerity.

The SNP-led Scottish Government will invest in our NHS and make sure that we have record staffing levels and the best-paid NHS staff anywhere in the UK, and we will continue to make sure that we invest in our public services, while Douglas Ross and his party take a hatchet to public services across the UK.

Douglas Ross: Last week, a whistleblower in NHS Grampian revealed to *The Press and Journal* that, at one stage, 18 ambulances were stuck outside Aberdeen royal infirmary. The whistleblower said that that could have been

“up to half of the north-east's fleet of ambulances ... stuck in one place and unable to leave ... instead of supporting and protecting the communities we serve.”

I can repeat that if the First Minister is getting advice from the health secretary, because I think that it is really important—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Please continue, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: It is really important that the First Minister listens to what our professionals in Scotland's NHS are saying. The whistleblower in NHS Grampian continued—[*Interruption.*] What? Is that the response that we are going to get from a cabinet secretary in the Scottish Government? I hope that that is withdrawn.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross—

Douglas Ross: I hope that that is withdrawn.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I did not hear the comment that you obviously heard from the floor. However, it is essential that members desist from making any commentary when their colleagues are putting questions to one another and responding to them. We will not continue in that vein. I would be grateful if members would remind themselves of standing orders and the need to treat one another with courtesy and respect.

Douglas Ross: I cannot believe that Angus Robertson is smirking after saying that, when I am quoting from an ambulance worker in NHS Grampian. I will continue to read out the whistleblower's words, because they seem to be uncomfortable for the SNP Government. The whistleblower in NHS Grampian continued:

“Many of my colleagues share a concern that we're unable to help those most in need because we're tied up at the hospital and not where they need us to be.”

That is happening across Scotland. We spoke to Ian Black, who gave up waiting for an ambulance after 15 hours, when he was told that Monklands hospital was full. When he eventually got an ambulance the following morning, it emerged that he had suffered a stroke. Ian is still alive to explain his situation, but if that happens to other people, they might not be. Waiting 15 hours for an ambulance after a stroke would be fatal in other circumstances.

Will the First Minister please, therefore, take the issue more seriously than others on his front bench do and tell us what urgent action he is taking to stop ambulances being stuck outside Scotland's hospitals? People will lose their lives if he does not.

The First Minister: Of course I take the issue seriously. I am not sure why Douglas Ross is so rattled in this session of First Minister's question time. He mentioned *The Press and Journal*—a great paper that I read regularly—so it might be something to do with that—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: The health challenges that those across the country—and, no doubt, the Scottish Ambulance Service—are facing are why we have increased funding for the Scottish Ambulance Service in the next financial year. In the current financial year, we ensured that the Scottish Ambulance Service was provided with funding of £50 million, which has helped it in recruiting an additional 317 staff by April this year. We are increasing numbers and recruiting more staff where we can.

There is no getting away from the fact that the global pandemic had an impact on health services across the country, including in Scotland. Despite that, however, and thanks to the efforts of incredible paramedics, agenda for change staff and doctors up and down the country, we continue to have the best-performing accident and emergency service, and the best-paid staff, in the UK. We have more qualified nurses and midwives per head of population than there are in England, and we have not lost a single day of NHS activity to strike action. On waiting times, for example, we have made improvements and have seen recovery.

However, there is still far more for us to do. This Government is not just committed to the NHS; we will support it, in its greatest hour of need by ensuring that it has record investment of more than £19.5 billion. That is in stark contrast to the UK Conservative Government, which has slashed public spending to the bone so that Douglas Ross and high earners can get a tax cut. That is the wrong priority—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I suspend the meeting briefly.

12:17

Meeting suspended.

12:17

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We resume once more.

Treatment Time Guarantee

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I start by echoing the comments about Nick Sheridan. He was a young, talented and charismatic journalist with a huge future ahead of him, and our thoughts are with his family and friends and all his colleagues at the BBC.

When we are discussing issues of life and death in our national health service, I think—to be frank—that patients across Scotland deserve

better than what they have seen in the past 20 minutes at First Minister's questions.

The treatment time guarantee is a legally binding maximum waiting time of 12 weeks from referral to treatment. How many times has the Scottish National Party Government broken that law?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Although I do not have that figure to hand, there is no doubt that we have seen increases in waits, and long waits, which is due—again—to the global pandemic. We know that there were challenges before the global pandemic, and it is fair to reference that, but we are making progress on those long waits. We are investing in our recovery, which is why we saw, for example, the number of operations that were performed in January this year increase by 15 per cent in comparison with the month before.

These challenges are faced across the United Kingdom. If we look at data for 31 December 2023, we see that in Scotland there were 124 patients per 1,000 of the population waiting for the treatment time guarantee and new out-patient appointments. That is fewer than in England, where 134 patients per 1,000 are on the RTT—referral to treatment—waiting list, and in Wales, where the figure is 244 per 1,000.

That is, of course, cold comfort to those in Scotland who are waiting, but the point is that these issues are having an impact on our health service across the UK.

I go back to the point that I made to Douglas Ross and to Anas Sarwar. We are investing in that recovery, and we are beginning to see progress in reducing the numbers of those who are waiting the longest and in increasing activity in the NHS. This Government will continue to invest in our NHS, with record funding of more than £19.5 billion.

Anas Sarwar: It is written in law that a patient should be treated within 12 weeks. The SNP has broken the law more than 680,000 times. Humza Yousaf might try to blame the pandemic, but the law was broken more than 320,000 times before Covid. Shona Robison broke the law 158,000 times, Michael Matheson broke the law 184,000 times, and Humza Yousaf broke the law 235,000 times. Since the First Minister published his so-called NHS recovery plan, the SNP has broken the law 306,735 times. Every one of those breaches is someone waiting anxiously for a medical procedure, often in pain. Many have put their lives on hold, stopped work or retired because of their condition. Too many of them have been forced to go private, in the middle of a cost of living crisis, just to stop the pain. Will the First Minister apologise to the 680,000 people whose lives his Government has failed by breaking the law?

The First Minister: I already said in response to Douglas Ross that of course the Government apologises and regrets anybody having to wait longer, whether it is in relation to unscheduled care, long waits or the treatment time guarantee. We do not want a single person waiting a day longer—a minute longer—than they have to do.

However, Anas Sarwar completely ignores the impact of the pandemic. He does that every time he talks about the national health service. The pandemic was the biggest shock that our NHS has faced in its 75-year existence. Progress was being made on waiting times before the pandemic, but there is no doubt that the impact of the global pandemic on our health service has been severe.

I go back to the point that we are beginning to see some improvements and increases in activity. For example, we have seen a reduction in the number of people who have waited the longest: since June 2022, we have seen a 66 per cent reduction in the number of people waiting two years for new out-patient appointments and a reduction of a quarter for in-patient and day-case treatments.

What are we doing about this? We are ensuring an increased capacity for 20,000 additional surgeries. We have also provided seven mobile MRI and three mobile CT scanners to increase additional activity.

The Presiding Officer: Be brief, First Minister.

The First Minister: We are also supporting mobile operating theatres up and down the country.

I go back to a point that I have made before to Douglas Ross and Anas Sarwar: we are doing all of that in the face of 14 years of UK Tory austerity and a real-terms cut to our budget. It would be much better for us if we had control over our own finances, so that we would not be beholden to cruel Westminster Governments that continue to cut our budget.

Anas Sarwar: They have had 17 years in government, and that is their best answer? Seriously.

Across nearly every measure, this Government has failed. It has broken the treatment time guarantee law 680,000 times, 320,000 times of which were before the pandemic. Humza Yousaf wants to pretend that things are getting better, but let us look at the NHS stats that were published this week. A third of patients are not being seen within four hours in our accident and emergency departments. In one month, more than 8,500 people have waited in A and E for more than 12 hours. There have been 55,000 fewer planned operations in the past year compared to before the pandemic. Some 5,500 children are waiting to

receive mental health treatment. Only one in five people is getting crucial bowel cancer tests on time, which is shocking when cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer.

Does the First Minister accept that waiting time standards exist for a reason; that every time they are missed, it puts lives at risk; and that his Government's incompetence is destroying the NHS and failing staff and patients?

The First Minister: It is, of course—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will suspend once more.

12:24

Meeting suspended.

12:24

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I call the First Minister to respond.

The First Minister: Let me go back to the fact that the global pandemic has undoubtedly caused challenges for health services right across the UK, including in Labour-run Wales, Conservative-run England and, of course, here in Scotland, where we are in charge of the NHS.

This week's statistics have shown the outcome of the record investment that we have made in the NHS, with, for example, head count in the NHS at record high levels.

We have made improvements in child and adolescent mental health services, which was referenced by Anas Sarwar. There are still improvements to be made and work to be done, but we continue to see sustained improvements in CAMHS waits. National performance against the 18-week CAMHS standard is the fourth highest since records began and the highest achieved since the quarter ending in March 2016. We have also seen increases in CAMHS staffing.

I end on the point that I made to Anas Sarwar and, indeed, to Douglas Ross a moment ago. We know that the NHS is struggling as a result of the global pandemic, which is why we are investing more than £19.5 billion in that most precious of institutions, our national health service. However, we are doing that in the face of a real-terms cut from the Conservative Government over the past couple of years.

What makes that situation even more difficult is that, when Labour's general election co-ordinator is asked whether he disagrees with a single Conservative budget proposal, he says no—Labour has the same spending plans as the

Conservatives. Whether it is Labour austerity or Conservative austerity, Westminster austerity will undoubtedly continue to impact and damage our public services. In the face of that, the Government makes no apologies for record investment in our NHS.

Children's Participation in Sport (World Indoor Athletics Championships)

3. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government can take to help encourage children into sport and cultivate future world-class athletes, in light of the recent victories of Josh Kerr and Jemma Reekie at the world indoor athletics championships in Glasgow. (S6F-02891)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I, too, offer huge congratulations to Josh and Jemma on their fantastic medal-winning performances. I also thank the team and all those involved in the world indoor athletics championships in Glasgow for the incredible work that they have done in putting on spectacular championships earlier this month.

We know that being physically active is one of the best things that all children and young people can do to help their social, physical and mental wellbeing. As is set out in the programme for government, we are working with sportscotland to ensure that active schools programmes are free for all children and young people by the end of this parliamentary session, which will provide them with more opportunities to take part in sport before, during and after school.

The investment by sportscotland helps to support key partners to deliver programmes that address the inequalities that exist in access to sport and physical activity. By increasing participation and creating a pathway for success at every level in all sports, we will ensure that anyone in Scotland can and does achieve their full potential.

Brian Whittle: I quickly point out that we do not just have Josh and Jemma; we also have previous world 1,500m champion Jake Wightman and Olympic medallist Laura Muir in the middle-distance events—or, to give middle-distance events their full title, proper sport. *[Laughter.]* I cannot wait for the Olympics.

As much as those athletes are inspirational to our young, budding sportspeople, those young people have to be able to access sport. School sport is on the decline and local authorities are closing so many of our public sports facilities, or, at least, are having to increase charges. Access to sport is on a steep decline. With the huge societal, community, health and educational benefits that sport brings, does the First Minister agree that

cutting those opportunities for participation is a false economy? *[Interruption.]*

12:28

Meeting suspended.

12:29

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We resume once more, and I call Brian Whittle.

Brian Whittle: I have asked my question, Presiding Officer. I will ask it again, if you like.

The Presiding Officer: Smashing. That being the case, I call the First Minister.

The First Minister: In fairness, Presiding Officer, it was a good question. I do not think that Brian Whittle has to repeat it.

I know that Brian Whittle has had a long-standing interest, as an accomplished athlete. I was going to say “at one time”, but Mr Whittle continues to be an accomplished athlete of sorts. *[Laughter.]* I will stop digging and move on.

Brian Whittle was right to mention our many fantastic Scottish athletes, such as Jake Wightman, Laura Muir and Eilish McColgan, among others. I will give some reassurance to Brian Whittle, if I can. Across 2023-24, sportscotland is investing £36.7 million of Scottish Government and national lottery funding into Scottish governing bodies of sports. That represents an 8.6 per cent increase on the previous year. Brian Whittle's point about local facilities is well made. That is why the Government is providing local government with record funding of more than £14 billion. That is a real-terms increase, despite the real-terms budget cuts that I mentioned.

I go back to the point that I have made throughout this First Minister's question time. It would be far easier for local government to support our sports facilities if we were not facing a £500 million cut over two years to our budget, or a £1.3 billion cut to our capital budget. Any influence that Scottish Tories have—which seems very minimal indeed—to help their Conservative colleagues in the UK Government to make sure that they are spending on public services would be much appreciated.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Having the opportunity to share in sporting victories can play an important part in encouraging children into sport. Does the First Minister agree that showing Scotland's men's and women's football matches on free-to-air television could help to inspire the next generation of talent?

What steps can be taken to open up those games to as wide an audience as possible?

The First Minister: I agree with Fulton MacGregor. We want to ensure that our children do not miss out on the opportunity of being inspired by seeing their footballing heroes play. It is not just children, though. We want to encourage everybody, at any stage of their life, to become physically active. Being able to watch sporting activity, particularly some very important football matches and tournaments coming up this year, could inspire a whole generation of boys and girls to take up the sport.

Broadcasting and the listed events regime are reserved, but we want a fairer and more representative service for Scotland. We continue to argue for the regime's improvement to ensure that it better reflects and prioritises the interests of Scottish audiences. We will continue to advocate for the inclusion of national football matches, such as qualifiers for future world cups and European championships, to be included in the regime. We have written to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on a number of occasions on the matter, but I am afraid that we have not received any reply.

United Kingdom Spring Statement

4. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what impact the spring statement will have on Scotland. (S6F-02887)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The spring statement marks another failure by the UK Government to deliver funding for the people and public services of Scotland. The combined cut of national insurance across autumn and spring statements equates to the loss of up to £1.6 billion in potential consequential for Scotland. That is £1.6 billion that we could be spending further on the national health service, education, transport, our justice services and all our public services. Health consequential of £237 million are nowhere near enough, given the pressures that we face. They do not cover, for example, the recurring cost of the agenda for change pay deal. Based on the latest forecasts, our block grant for capital is now expected to reduce in real terms by £1.3 billion by 2027-28. The absence of investment in public services and infrastructure is nothing short of a betrayal of our public services by the UK Government.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the First Minister—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will suspend once more.

12:33

Meeting suspended.

12:34

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: It is extremely regrettable that the opportunity of elected representatives to put questions to the First Minister is being disrupted today. Members will be aware of the steps that the Parliament has been required to take as a result of previous disruptions. I assure them that we will certainly review today's events. It is absolutely essential in a democracy that members have the opportunity to put questions to the First Minister. *[Applause.]*

I call Kenneth Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you, Presiding Officer, and I thank the First Minister for his answer.

The toxic Tory legacy of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak is that, for the first time, per capita incomes at the end of this UK Parliament will be lower than at its start.

Does the First Minister agree with the Scottish Chambers of Commerce that the

“overriding impression”

is that the chancellor’s

“‘long-term plan’ to address our economic stagnation has been left for another day”?

Does he agree with Citizens Advice Scotland that

“there was a complete absence of the kind of support those on lower incomes need”?

Finally, does he agree with Douglas Ross, who said that he was

“deeply disappointed”

in the one-year extension of the windfall tax on the oil and gas industry and that it was

“a step in the wrong direction”?

The First Minister: I hesitate to say that I agree with Douglas Ross. However, on this occasion, when Douglas Ross said that the chancellor’s budget was going to harm Scotland and was bad for Scotland, it was probably the first time that he had ever been in tune with Scottish public opinion. It is so disastrous a betrayal of workers in the north-east that, apparently, Douglas Ross threatened to resign, but he is still sitting here. I wonder whether he sold out the north-east for a peerage or to become a privy councillor. We do not know, but I am sure that, in time, we will find out.

Kenneth Gibson is absolutely right. Over more than 14 years of economic mismanagement, the Tories have imposed on this country a disastrous

Brexit that we did not vote for, and, as a Government that we did not elect, they have ushered in a cost of living crisis. For the first time on record, as Kenneth Gibson rightly says, the economy is set to be smaller in real terms per capita at the time of the next general election than it was at the previous election.

Astonishingly, Labour does not oppose a single measure in the budget. So, whether it is run by Labour or Conservatives, we know that Westminster does not work for Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will have a brief suspension.

12:37

Meeting suspended.

12:37

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I call Liz Smith.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The chancellor's budget prioritised improving public sector output and efficiency, with, for example, £3 billion going to the national health service to update information technology, streamline data and utilise artificial intelligence. When will we see similar changes in Scotland through public sector reform, as the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been calling for?

The First Minister: "Brave" is one word to describe Liz Smith's intervention, because we will not see a single penny of that investment this year or in the next financial year. The UK Government has kicked that investment into the long grass, when her party will be out of power—and quite rightly so.

When it comes to the priorities of the Conservative UK Government, I note that it has prioritised a tax cut for Liz Smith and other higher earners to the tune of £1,500, while at the same time slashing public spending to the bone. That is the priority of the Conservative Party. Apparently, it is also the priority of the Labour Party, which does not oppose a single measure in the Conservatives' budget. Is it any wonder that people in Scotland know that Westminster does not work for Scotland and that only the Scottish National Party will stand up for this country?

Community Deer Management

5. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to promote community deer management on publicly owned land. (S6F-02896)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Through a pioneering pilot project, NatureScot has been supporting community deer stalking at Creag Meagaidh national nature reserve. The initiative gives people who live nearby the opportunity to learn deer management skills, as well as giving them access to the reserve—when they are fully trained and qualified—to shoot deer in season for their own consumption. Crown Estate Scotland also supports access to land for deer management by letting its shooting rights to local shooting associations and syndicates.

Community deer management models are common in many European countries, and the Scottish Government's—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will have a brief suspension.

12:40

Meeting suspended.

12:40

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We can resume. I call the First Minister.

The First Minister: These constant interruptions are deeply frustrating, but the issues of food security and poverty are very important to the Government that I lead. It is up to protesters to decide where they protest, but I say gently to them that I think that they are protesting at the wrong Parliament, because, of course, it is Westminster austerity that is causing such issues.

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, I would be grateful if you could address Sharon Dowey's question.

The First Minister: As far as the issue at hand is concerned, I will not repeat the full answer, but I will say that community deer management models are common in many European countries, and the Scottish Government's deer board, which met on Monday, discussed the findings from Creag Meagaidh. We want to ensure that local communities reap the benefits as we step up deer management in Scotland to meet our climate and our nature aims.

Sharon Dowey: Community-integrated deer management has numerous benefits. It builds resilience and opportunities in local communities, reduces the burden of large deer contracts on the taxpayer and helps to protect the environment across areas such as the Carrick forest in Ayrshire. Local wild venison is a fantastic sustainable food source to be harvested, processed and consumed, which we must champion. I note the work of the British

Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Country Food Trust, which are in Parliament this week.

Does the First Minister agree that the Scottish Government must do more work with rural stakeholders such as BASC to bolster Scotland's venison potential?

The First Minister: I agree with a lot of what Sharon Dowey has said. We know that effective deer management can help to tackle the twin climate and biodiversity crises. We want local communities to benefit from deer management. They can benefit not only from the socioeconomic opportunities that it offers, but—as Sharon Dowey rightly said—from venison as a healthy and nutritious food source.

I am more than happy to ensure that the cabinet secretary writes to Sharon Dowey with details of how we are supporting effective deer management. I am sure that Sharon Dowey is aware of this, but I make the point that we intend to introduce legislation that will ensure that we have effective deer management in the context of the twin climate and biodiversity crises. In fact, the consultation will remain open until 29 March. We will continue to engage with rural stakeholders, including BASC and others, to ensure effective deer management for Scotland.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Can the First Minister say whether the Scottish Government will give consideration to replicating pilots such as the one that has been undertaken at Creag Meagaidh on areas of publicly owned land in the crofting counties to allow crofters to—subject to their receiving the proper training—take in-season deer for their own consumption or, potentially, sell it on, thereby incentivising their participation in what is a vital strand of nature restoration?

The First Minister: That suggestion is certainly worthy of consideration. As I have said, it is important that local communities across Scotland are able to benefit from deer management, not only through the socioeconomic opportunities that it offers, but because of the fact that venison is a healthy and nutritious food source.

Given the success of the Creag Meagaidh pilot project, I am keen that we support more community-led deer management schemes. I know that the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity is looking at what more can be done to establish more schemes, and that she would be happy to discuss the matter in more detail with the member.

Gender-based Violence

6. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of

international women's day on 8 March, what steps the Scottish Government is taking to tackle gender-based violence. (S6F-02905)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Over the past week, there has rightly been a sharp focus on the violence that women and girls face, predominantly at the hands of men. Collectively, we must stand against that, and we must tackle the societal attitudes and root out the toxic behaviours that underpin those actions that lead to such abuse and violence against women. The Government is doing that through our equally safe strategy, which focuses on early intervention, prevention, and support services, but, of course, we want to go further and do more.

We also want to transform how our justice system responds to sexual violence to ensure that women and girls can have confidence in a justice system that will effectively hold perpetrators to account and, crucially, will not retraumatise women who have suffered such abuse. That is why our Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill is so important and can play a major role in supporting survivors and victims of gender-based violence.

Rona Mackay: When speaking about the Government's proposal for a sexual offences court, Scotland's second-highest judge, Lady Dorrian, told the Criminal Justice Committee:

“the fact is that there is no option to do nothing. Either you embed this in a new culture in a court of uniform practice across the country, or you try to embed it piecemeal”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 10 January 2024; c 5.]

Will proposals such as the one for a specialist court give women and girls confidence in our justice system and improve the experience of complainers?

The First Minister: Absolutely. Establishing the sexual offences court can, alongside the raft of other measures contained in the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill that are intended to improve victims' experiences, play a crucial role in building the confidence of women and girls in our justice system.

Lady Dorrian is absolutely right: doing nothing is simply not an option that anyone in this chamber can or should consider. Piecemeal reform will fail to deliver the cultural changes that we so desperately need. Those changes in culture, processes and practice are clearly necessary. It is only by systematic reform of our court system, including the creation of a sexual offences court, that we can embed a culture that supports victims and survivors of sexual offences and gives them confidence that they will be treated with dignity and respect within a system that effectively holds perpetrators to account. I encourage everyone

here to support the important proposals contained within the bill.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Image-based abuse often involves girls being coerced into creating or sharing nude images, which are then shared with someone else without those girls' consent. A report by Revealing Reality, a think tank funded by the Home Office, found that that was a particular problem for school pupils and that, for many boys, sharing nude images without consent was seen as a way of gaining respect from their male peers. The report also found that boys often do not understand that what they are doing is abusive.

I acknowledge the Scottish Government's work in this area by cabinet secretary Jenny Gilruth and by the minister Siobhian Brown. Would the First Minister consider conducting research not only on the impact that that abuse has on girls but on its extent, so that we can be clear about what exactly we are trying to tackle?

The First Minister: I am happy to consider Pauline McNeill's suggestions and I pay tribute to her long track record of standing up in Parliament to tackle violence against women and girls.

The Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016 makes the sharing of intimate images without consent a criminal offence, and a wide range of laws relates to image-based sexual abuse. I agree with Pauline McNeill that this is not about just legislation, although that is important—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We will suspend briefly.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister.

The First Minister: I will not repeat all that I have said already.

I know that Pauline McNeill recognises the importance of legislation. She also makes an important point about understanding the nature and extent of the problem, so that we can deal with it.

I was pleased to visit Moffat academy earlier this week with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to launch our guidance on gender-based violence in schools, which was published this week. It makes it clear that the sharing of sexual images is unacceptable, while also giving schools guidance, and the appropriate tools, to address such issues. Indeed, one project that we

heard about while at Moffat academy was the mentors in violence prevention programme, which empowers older pupils to talk to younger ones about the importance of issues such as consent.

I will continue the work on positive masculinity that I am leading, so that we can work collectively with boys and young men to eradicate the toxic behaviours that are far too prevalent in our society. I look forward to continuing work with Pauline McNeill and members from across the chamber, as we work together to tackle gender-based violence.

Child Neurodevelopmental Assessment (Waiting Times)

7. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to reduce waiting times for children referred for a neurodevelopmental assessment. (S6F-02904)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): While we know that there is increasing demand for neurodevelopmental support and assessments, we expect children to receive appropriate support as soon as possible. In 2021, we published a national neurodevelopmental specification, which aims to improve the quality of care for children, young people and their families. As the member might know, the specification outlines seven standards for service providers, which have been developed with children, families and key partners and are underpinned by the fact that support should be in place when children need it, instead of its being dependent on a formal diagnosis. The support, which is likely to be community based, should be quickly and easily accessible.

We continue to work with health boards and local authorities to enhance support for neurodivergent children and young people, including on how quickly they can access the support that I have mentioned. We provided more than £1 million to support five pilots to implement targeted aspects of the specification, and the learning from that will support its wider implementation right across the country.

Colin Smyth: The First Minister is correct: the Government set a standard of care in September 2021. That standard says that children and young people who are referred for a neurodevelopmental assessment should have an initial appointment within no more than four weeks. At that time, my constituent, who was just 10 years old, had been on the waiting list with NHS Lanarkshire for a year. She is now 13 years old; she has been on that waiting list for three and a half years and still has no appointment. Her mum told me:

"My daughter has spent a quarter of her life on a waiting list and no one seems to care."

Why does no one care? Why, on Humza Yousaf's watch as health secretary and now as First Minister, have that wee girl and countless others had to wait nearly four years just to receive an assessment, never mind any care that they might need?

The First Minister: Colin Smyth, understandably, did not mention the name of the individual constituent. If she is the one that he has written to the health secretary about, we have responded to him. My officials have been in touch with the health board, which says that it will be contacting the family imminently. Colin Smyth has been given an update, if his constituent is the one that I believe her to be.

We will continue to work with the health board, because I fully accept, without any equivocation, Colin Smyth's point that waiting three and a half or almost four years is simply not acceptable. That is why we are providing funding to our health service and our health boards in relation to tackling some of these issues and why we have continued over the past few years to prioritise mental health funding to record levels under the Scottish National Party Government.

If the member wants further information about his constituent's case, he is more than welcome to write back to the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care. However, my officials have contacted NHS Lanarkshire and asked for an immediate update. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: We will suspend briefly.

12:53

Meeting suspended.

12:53

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister.

The First Minister: As I have said, my officials have been in touch with NHS Lanarkshire, and we hope that there will be some progress for the particular family very soon. I am happy to continue to liaise with Colin Smyth on his constituent's case.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Diagnosis is an important step on the journey of people seeking support for the diverse range of conditions that fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence, but many other steps come after it. Can the First Minister provide any further information on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to champion the rights of neurodivergent people?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government is committed to championing the rights of neurodivergent people, and I am grateful to Karen Adam for raising the issue. Again, she has a track record of raising such issues in the chamber. We are consulting on the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill, which will aim to ensure that the rights of neurodivergent people, including autistic people and people with learning disabilities, are respected, protected and—crucially—championed. Karen Adam will be aware of the consultation on that bill, which will run to 21 April this year.

In addition, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, supported by Inspiring Scotland, have partnered with people with lived experience and other stakeholders to establish a new leadership and engagement framework that will put people's voices and experiences firmly at its heart.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Many children coped with the challenges of the pandemic, but for those who were already struggling with mental ill health, the impacts of lockdowns and lost schooling are likely to have made their conditions worse. Shockingly, just 40 per cent of young people referred to child and adolescent mental health services in the Borders started treatment within the 18-week target. I remind the First Minister that his own target is for 90 per cent of such patients to be treated within 18 weeks. There should be no more lame excuses. Will his Government get to grips with this scandalous CAMHS crisis now?

The First Minister: There is no doubt about the impacts of the pandemic, not only on young people's mental health, which Rachael Hamilton has rightly pointed out, but on the demand on our health services.

That is why, in an earlier answer, I referenced the latest CAMHS statistics, which show that there is room for improvement but that we are seeing a recovery in our services. The figures show that this Government is continuing to ensure that it makes significant investment not only in vital CAMHS services and their staffing but in pre-crisis intervention work. That is why we are providing local authorities with £15 million per annum to fund community-based mental health support. According to local authority reports, more than 58,000 children, young people and their families accessed such support in the first half of 2023.

We will continue to invest in our NHS, through our record investment of more than £19.5 billion, and we will continue to make progress on the journey of recovery that we are firmly on.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

Unfortunately, the opportunity for more elected members to represent their constituents by putting questions to the First Minister has been disrupted once again. I think that we would all agree that the principle of this Parliament's being open and accessible is extremely important. Visitors are very welcome to attend to see their elected representatives at work, but not to disrupt that work. I advise colleagues that the Parliament will work with security colleagues and Police Scotland and will take any further action that is required in that regard.

That concludes First Minister's question time. We will suspend briefly to allow those in the chamber and the public gallery to leave.

12:57

Meeting suspended.

12:59

On resuming—

Mossmorran (Just Transition)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask members of the public who have been visiting to hear our proceedings this lunchtime to leave the gallery quietly and quickly, please, because we are about to continue our business. I would appreciate your co-operation. Thank you very much indeed.

We move to the next item of business, which is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11697, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on a site-specific just transition for Mossmorran. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that the Mossmorran petrochemical site, in the Mid Scotland and Fife region, which comprises of Shell's Natural Gas Liquids (NGL) Plant and ExxonMobil's Fife Ethylene Plant, is responsible for nearly 10% of Scotland's industrial emissions; notes the view that limiting global temperature increases to 1.5°C and well below 2°C, in line with the Paris Agreement, will require rapid and sustained reductions in emissions across all sectors; understands that industry is the second-highest emitting sector in Scotland, and notes the view that a worker-led just transition for the sector is essential for reaching Scotland's ambition to achieve net zero by 2045; notes the view that industrial decarbonisation plans cannot omit emissions from Mossmorran, and that a decarbonisation pathway for the site needs to be identified collaboratively with operators, workers, unions, and local and national governments at the earliest opportunity; understands that the two Mossmorran plants directly employ approximately 250 workers, and periodically many more through short-term maintenance contracts, and notes the belief that the process of just transition for Scotland's industrial sites needs to be worker-led and delivered in a way that leaves nobody behind.

12:59

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank members who have signed the motion and who are joining me in the chamber to debate the future of the Mossmorran petrochemical site. I have been working on the issue since being re-elected to Parliament in 2016, initially focusing on the noise pollution caused by flaring affecting neighbouring communities, then moving on to the health and safety risks experienced by workers. Now, I am working on the prospect of delivering a just transition for the site. I welcome the work of other members on the issue, including yourself, Deputy Presiding Officer, in your role as the constituency MSP.

The latest research into North Sea oil and gas that was commissioned by the Scottish Government shows a rapidly declining basin. The decline in fossil fuel reserves is irrefutable, and our choice now is whether we accept a slow withering

of skills and expertise or grasp the opportunity to safeguard workers' jobs and maximise the growth of employment opportunities in both renewables and industrial decarbonisation. As the secretary-general of the United Nations, António Guterres, stated, we need

"climate action on all fronts — everything, everywhere, all at once."

We do not have the luxury of focusing on just one region or just one industrial site. Workers across Scotland, including at Mossmorran, deserve the assurance that their jobs, too, will be safeguarded in our transition to net zero.

Any credible plan for industrial decarbonisation in Scotland must tackle emissions at Mossmorran. The two plants there directly employ approximately 250 workers, and many other workers are employed on a short-term basis from other parts of Scotland and overseas. The United Kingdom Climate Change Committee reported that the industry is the second-highest emitting sector in Scotland, with the Mossmorran site, operated by Shell and ExxonMobil, being responsible for nearly 10 per cent of Scotland's total climate change emissions.

In 2022, I commissioned Transition Economics to produce a report on Mossmorran, which considered decarbonisation pathways for the site. Those included carbon capture and storage, blue hydrogen and bioethanol. All the decarbonisation options had risks and trade-offs, but it was clear that a fairer, greener future was possible for Mossmorran, its workers and the local community. The report concluded that planning for the net zero future of the site needed to begin as quickly as possible, with operators, workers, unions and Governments brought together around the table.

In October last year I organised a summit facilitated by Dr Daria Shapovalova, co-ordinator of the just transition lab at the University of Aberdeen. That brought together workers, unions, non-governmental organisations and the just transition commissioners in Lochgelly to start the conversation. I wanted to understand what their priorities were for the just transition plan at Mossmorran. All the participants called for a meaningful transition for the site, to be led first and foremost by workers and properly funded by both industry and Government. They cautioned against "just transition" being used as an empty slogan and warned us about what might happen if there was a further delay to real, tangible actions. The workers and unions highlighted the urgency of engaging with operators to collaborate on the development and delivery of a plan for the site.

The operators of the Mossmorran plant, Shell and ExxonMobil, are among the world's largest oil and gas operators, reporting profits in the billions

just last month, but we have not yet seen from them the level of commitment needed to make a genuine transition at Mossmorran happen. The operators have signed up to the Acorn carbon capture and storage cluster, and we are awaiting progress on the bid in track 2 that could allow Grangemouth and Mossmorran to feed in. Questions remain about the effectiveness of CCS, but if the project can meet the higher standards for capture, it could provide a major part of the decarbonisation pathway.

However, in a meeting that I held with both operators shortly after that first summit, it was clear that there was a lack of communication between them and the workforce on those matters. Where does Mossmorran sit in their global portfolios of sites awaiting CCS and other investments? What opportunities would there be for the workforce in skills development or retraining under such a plan? So many questions remain unanswered, and the operators still need to convince the workforce and the community that decarbonisation will actually happen.

Just this week, ExxonMobil's chief executive blamed the public for the failure to tackle the climate emergency and claimed that ExxonMobil and other oil and gas giants

"have opportunities to make fuels with lower carbon in it, but people aren't willing to spend the money to do that."

However, it is painfully obvious to me that it is those who make the mega profits from oil and gas who are unwilling to spend enough of them on the transition to a greener future that they have to make.

We had plans to host the second summit tomorrow. It would have welcomed all the participants from our initial summit as well as the site operators, Fife Council and national Governments. However, despite the welcome interest from the minister and Government officials in attending the summit, the site operators—ExxonMobil and Shell—have declined our invitation. Their decision not to come to the table is disappointing. How can we have faith that private companies will invest in the just transition that we so desperately need if they fail to do the bare minimum and join the conversation?

What we have seen recently at Grangemouth should be enough of a warning to us all. We cannot sit on our hands. The future of Mossmorran cannot be decided behind closed doors; it needs to be planned early and openly.

Earlier this week, we agreed that we will go ahead with another summit later this year. We will keep working with Unite the union, the GMB, just transition commissioners and the Scottish Trades Union Congress to ensure that everyone is around the table. I publicly extend an invitation again to

the minister, other MSPs and the two site operators to come and be part of that conversation.

The Government's transition work at Grangemouth has been welcome, but it must be accelerated to other sites across Scotland where emissions are vast and the biggest single steps towards net zero must be made. We have no time to waste. It is our duty to map out the alternative future for sites such as Mossmorran, and we must do so in a fair and just manner that leaves no workers or local communities behind. Inaction is not an option. I will continue to take that duty seriously, and I hope that many members who are joining me in the chamber will do the same.

13:07

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Mark Ruskell for bringing the motion to the chamber to let us discuss an issue that is of paramount importance to our country, our environment and our future.

The Mossmorran petrochemical site is a significant contributor to Scotland's industrial emissions—it accounts for nearly 10 per cent of our national total. That figure is not just a statistic; it is a call for urgent action in our journey towards a sustainable and resilient Scotland.

The Paris agreement, which aims to limit global temperature increases to well below 2°C, and to 1.5°C, is not merely an international obligation; it is a moral imperative for Scotland. To meet those ambitious goals, rapid and sustained reductions in emissions across all sectors, including the industry in question, are non-negotiable. As the second-highest emitting sector in our country, the industrial sector's transformation is not just necessary—it is inevitable.

At the heart of the transformation is the Mossmorran site. That site, which is located just outside my constituency, embodies our industrial strengths and our environmental challenges. The path forward is clear. We must identify a decarbonised pathway for Mossmorran—one that is developed collaboratively with operators, workers, unions and local and national Government. That pathway is not just about reducing emissions; it is about setting a precedent for how industrial Scotland adapts to the realities of the climate emergency.

The concept of a just transition is central to this discussion. It is a principle that ensures that the shift towards a low-carbon economy is fair and inclusive and leaves no one behind. For the workers at Mossmorran and, indeed, workers across Fife and Scotland's industrial sector, that transition is not just a challenge; it is an opportunity for sustainable jobs, for innovation,

and for a healthier environment and healthier communities.

With its 250 direct employees and many more people who are engaged through short-term maintenance contracts, the Mossmorran site stands as a microcosm of the broader challenges that our industrial workforce faces with decarbonisation. Those workers are not mere cogs in the industrial machine; they are skilled and dedicated individuals whose knowledge and expertise are invaluable assets to our journey towards net zero. That is why I very much welcome the announcement that the Scottish Government will boost the just transition fund by an extra £25 million to ensure a fair and just transition for the energy sector.

As many will know, my Kirkcaldy constituency and the surrounding areas in Fife have seen great industrial, economic and societal changes over the past century. The history of that area is deeply interwoven with the coal-mining industry and, for better or worse, we are familiar with the challenges that inevitably arise with changes in the energy landscape.

The legacy of the closure of the mines in Kirkcaldy and throughout Scotland is well known. The blow was not just economic but cultural and social. It left behind a legacy of unemployment and social challenges, and a community grappling with its identity and future. Therefore, the process of transition to low-carbon operations at Mossmorran, as at all other industrial sites in Scotland, must be led by those who know it best: the workers. A worker-led transition is the only way to ensure that the move to green jobs is done in a way that respects the dignity, expertise and needs of our workforce.

That transition will not be easy. It requires substantial investment not just in technology but in people. As a former mechanical engineer in the oil and gas industry, I am acutely aware of the importance of training and reskilling programmes—which must be at the heart of our just transition strategy—in ensuring that Scotland's workforce is ready to meet the demands of a low-carbon economy. In addition, we must ensure that the new green jobs are secure, well paid and accessible to all—in particular, to those who are currently employed in high-emission industries.

The role of collaboration in the process cannot be overstated. The decarbonisation of Mossmorran and the industrial sector more broadly must be a joint effort between government, industry, workers and the community. Each stakeholder brings unique insights and resources to the table, making our collective action stronger and more effective.

It is also crucial to remember the communities that live in the shadow of Mossmorran. Fife, with its rich history and vibrant community, finds itself at the forefront of Scotland's journey towards a greener future. Any transition plans must include measures to protect those communities from environmental and health impacts, so that they, too, benefit from Scotland's green transformation.

The journey towards net zero in Scotland by 2045 is filled with challenges but also with unparalleled opportunities. The decarbonisation of Mossmorran represents a crucial step in that journey, serving as a blueprint for how we can transform Scotland's industry and landscape in a way that is sustainable, equitable and just.

13:11

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank Mark Ruskell for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is an important debate, because, as we have seen from the announcement that was made on Grangemouth, the facilities will not be around forever. The planning process for what is next for the workforce and the local area needs to take place now, so that, in theory, we can have a smooth transition from one industry to the next.

I start by thanking the workforce of Mossmorran. The plant plays a key role in meeting the existing UK energy needs, given that 80 per cent of UK homes still rely on natural gas to keep them warm. However, the work at Mossmorran goes towards not just heating but the production of tyres, deodorants, cooking fuel, car windscreens, food packaging, detergents and anaesthetic for medical procedures. We therefore have much to be thankful for.

That demonstrates why having sites such as Mossmorran in our oil and gas industry is so incredibly important. However, that is about not just the production of vital goods but the highly skilled, well-paid jobs that contribute to local economies.

I think that everyone in the chamber agrees that we need to stop burning fossil fuels, and that will take time. What we sometimes disagree on is how we get there. Mark Ruskell takes a hard stance against any new licences in the North Sea. That position is shared by Labour and the SNP. However, I feel that, while there is still a demand, we should focus on reducing that demand and on ensuring that our consumption of oil and gas products is done in a way that causes least harm to the environment.

That is why it is important to note the work that Shell, especially, has done to decarbonise the yard—albeit that I am sure that it can go further. The yard will always be a large consumer of

energy and producer of emissions, so doing more to reduce those emissions will impact significantly on Scotland's overall emissions. Mark Ruskell made a good point about bringing together all the players to develop a decarbonisation pathway.

I have not been to Mossmorran, but I met Petroineos at Grangemouth and was impressed by how much work it was doing on decarbonisation—it had a huge programme, with huge investment to match. Maybe Mossmorran has the same. If so, that is great, but maybe those plans should be shared more widely. It is strange that Shell and ExxonMobil are not engaging in the process that Mark Ruskell set out.

Mr Ruskell was also right to highlight the contractor workforce in his motion. Too often, it is only the direct workforce that is taken into account when planning for a site's future, but we need to consider the wider economic impact of a facility. That goes even further than the contractors to the indirectly related jobs in nearby communities—taxi drivers, hairdressers, bartenders and teachers—which have to be taken into account when we look at a transition to make sure that no one is left behind.

A Unite the union survey of workers in Grangemouth showed that only 3 per cent of the workers expressed confidence in the Government's just transition plans for oil and gas workers, so there is clearly more that can be done. It will be good to hear from the minister what discussions the Government has had with Shell and ExxonMobil about the future of those facilities. In the case of Grangemouth, it appears that the Government was warned about what was coming by Petroineos but failed to get ahead of the game and start the planning process for the workforce earlier.

In conclusion, I agree with Mark Ruskell that planning for the future of Mossmorran and the community that depends on it must start now. I hope that that can be done in a cross-party, consensual way, with everyone at the table. We owe it to the community and the workers of Mossmorran to ensure that there is a safe economic future. I look forward to hearing from the Government what progress has been made to date.

13:16

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I congratulate Mark Ruskell on securing the debate. Ultimately, I believe that the debate should focus less on the specific Mossmorran site and more on a Scotland-wide—indeed, a UK-wide—approach to decarbonisation and the just transition. Put simply, we will not achieve the just transition that Scotland needs if we continue to approach the

issue on a case-by-case, site-specific basis, without greater effort to take in the big picture. Policy without strategy will lead only to failure, and I am afraid that policy without strategy and action often seems to be the order of the day.

It is clear that, if we are to meet our climate targets in Scotland, we need both the Scottish and UK Governments to work together with a joint focus, a joined-up strategy and the clarity and consistency that will secure the investment that is needed to reach those goals. There also needs to be further clarity on what is meant by a just transition. In my discussions with trade unions and employers, whether they are in the oil and gas sector or the renewables sector, they have told me that the greatest challenge that they now face is the massive shortage of skilled labour across all sectors. This week, I was in Methil, where it is hoped that a lot of work can be done in the renewables sector, but the ability to get skilled labour is a massive issue there. Whether you are a steel welder in Mossmorran or a welder in Methil, there will be major difficulties if we cannot get the welders or the technicians.

It seems to me that, in many of the companies that I have spoken to, the idea of decarbonisation and a just transition has not been met with much resistance. However, they are clear that they are relying on the Scottish Government and the UK Government to make the just transition happen. Where there is resistance, I strongly believe that it stems from concerns that the Scottish and UK Governments are not driving the progress that is necessary to make the just transition feasible, despite both Governments paying a lot of lip service to and espousing their green credentials.

I regularly speak to businesses and trade unions that are involved in the sectors that are crucial to the just transition. Unless we move away from the current piecemeal approach, in which bits of policy take the place of long-term strategy, and give the just transition the attention and resources that it demands, businesses cannot plan for the future. The Just Transition Partnership summarised the issues clearly.

Mark Ruskell: I certainly do not disagree with Alex Rowley's argument that we need an industrial strategy that binds together the two Governments in their work in Scotland with industry. However, does he accept that we need a plan for decarbonising the ethylene production site at Mossmorran, as well as a wider industrial strategy that includes Scotland? Does he accept that that plan has to come from the workers and those who have spent their careers operating the site? They understand the issues intricately, and they know what skills will be required for the transition and what the technical solutions might be.

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

Alex Rowley: It is interesting to hear what the workers I have spoken to are really frightened of. Given the age range in many workforces in the sector, workers are frightened that, when they retire, the skills will go with them. They want a clear industrial strategy that will give young people the opportunities to get those skills and take them forward. The skills agenda and the industrial strategy are key to that, but there has to be certainty from the Scottish and UK Governments about what investment will be made. I will come on to Mark Ruskell's paper, which sets out some solutions.

The Scottish Government should not start from the assumption that a just transition will just happen one way or another. Much more work needs to be done before we can start to look at site-specific plans, which would do little more than shift away from the Government the responsibility for achieving a just transition.

The Government must play its part if we are to succeed. For example, carbon capture and storage and the use of hydrogen as an energy source have not been deployed swiftly enough. Those two elements are instrumental in the report that Mark Ruskell commissioned.

Companies across the UK are battling over a smaller pool of the skilled labour that needs to be in place if we are to make the just transition happen. Ultimately, contradictions will arise when there is no unifying strategy to rely on. Ministers are considering an application for a new gas plant at Peterhead, which seems to fly in the face of what the Scottish Government has said about achieving net zero by 2045 and which was described at the end of last year as a climate disaster. How does that proposal fit into the just transition that we all say that we desire?

I am deeply passionate about the issue and I want to avoid a climate disaster, so I believe that we have to take action. If we are serious about achieving our climate goals, it is crucial that the Scottish Government, working with the UK Government, gives the subject the time, attention and clarity that are needed.

13:22

The Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work (Gillian Martin): Like everyone else, I thank Mark Ruskell for bringing the debate to the chamber. We have heard insightful and encouraging contributions on the Mossmorran industrial site—not just from Mark Ruskell, who has worked on the issue over the years, as he outlined, but from all members who have spoken today.

I wish that we could have such debates more often. I am finding it difficult to disagree with anything that anyone has said, because we have a shared goal. The just transition of our high-carbon industries needs political consensus, so we all need to get our shoulders behind the wheel and have a shared vision of what we want to achieve. Vast economic opportunities are out there for Scotland if we do that, but there will be economic peril if we do not do that. I am pleased with how the debate has gone, and I hope that such an approach continues into other discussions about the subject.

It is critical to secure a truly just transition for Mossmorran and to work on that with all relevant stakeholders. Everyone has to be in the room—Mark Ruskell is absolutely right about that.

Members are more than familiar with the important contribution that the Mossmorran site makes to the local economy. Douglas Lumsden mentioned that he has never been there; I am going there in the middle of this month, but I also went there in my role before politics, when I was helping Shell to make safety videos. I am aware of how central the site is to the local economy.

Douglas Lumsden made a good point about the wider economic impact. It is not just about the workers at the plant—to whom I pay tribute—but about the wider community. A just transition is never just about one site but is about the impact on the wider community.

It has been mentioned that Mossmorran has a critical role to play in the Scottish cluster and in carbon capture, usage and storage. However, other potential activities could transition the plant, and I am keen to discuss them in detail when I meet ExxonMobil and Shell at Mossmorran later this month.

The Government is committed to achieving a just transition to net zero emissions by 2045. Members know that I was only recently given responsibility for a just transition as well as for energy and fair work. I was delighted to see all those things coming together, because the just transition has been inextricable from my portfolio as energy minister since March last year. Like Alex Rowley, I am passionate about the subject. I come from the north-east, where there has to be a just transition. I recognise that other members across Scotland have key sites in high-carbon sectors that need attention similar to that given to North Sea oil and gas.

I recognise that Mossmorran is responsible for 8.4 per cent of Scotland's industrial emissions, so we have to consider how to reduce the emissions of the plant as it operates right now. A great deal of work and investment have gone into that already, but we also need to look to the future. For

example, there is less demand for plastic packaging. That is driven by consumers and will have a knock-on effect on new operations for Mossmorran.

Alex Rowley talked about being in Methil. I imagine that he was at Harland and Wolff—in fact, I know that he was, because the company told me; I am not psychic. At Harland and Wolff, there is a really interesting situation. The plant is poised and ready to make the jackets for turbines in the North Sea.

Harland and Wolff has a tremendous number of apprentices working with it. I pay tribute to the work of Forth Valley College and Fife College in upskilling the young workforce. It is absolutely right that we utilise the existing workforce's skills and experience in all our high-emitting industrial sites to help to upskill young people when they come in.

David Torrance: The H100 Fife project, which is in my constituency, is a great example of how hydrogen will be used for heating our homes, which is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. Does the minister agree that the partnership between Fife College and Scotland Gas Networks in training the new generation of engineers in hydrogen is a great example that should be replicated across Scotland?

Gillian Martin: I visited H100 in the summer of last year. It is a tremendously exciting project. SGN is working well with the local community in Methil. I know that it has had the amount of subscribers to be part of the project that it hoped for. That is an example of a company working in a community not only to facilitate a just transition but to spread the benefits of that transition among the community. I thank David Torrance for mentioning the project.

David Torrance pointed to not only the importance but the opportunities of reducing emissions from our industries. We cannot ignore those opportunities. That is what a just transition is about. It is sometimes talked about in negative terms, but we have to start talking about it in positive terms. Everything is there for the taking. That is why the UK Government and the Scottish Government have to work together and make investment where it is needed.

I point to some of the investment that we have made. The Scottish industrial energy transformation fund offers match funding for targeted projects. To date, £16 million has been offered in grants as part of a £43 million investment across 27 projects. However, there is more to be done. We have £500 million of just transition money for the north-east, but we also have to look at what we can do to spread the

learning from what is happening there. We also need clarity on when the Scottish cluster CCUS project will be given the status that is required for people to make investment decisions.

Douglas Lumsden: The minister mentioned the £500 million just transition fund for the north-east, which is good for a north-east MSP, but I guess that other people who are watching might think, “What about my area?” or, “What about Mossmorran?” What can the Government do to help other areas, not just the north-east?

Gillian Martin: There is a great deal that we can do. The green industrial strategy, which will be rolled out this summer, will address that point. We have to recognise that it is not just in the north-east where there are opportunities, as well as some difficulties if we do not get the just transition right for oil and gas workers. On the wider community, the oil and gas workers in the north-east are linked to the petrochemical workers in Grangemouth and Mossmorran. They are all part of the same sector, so we have to make sure that we include all of them.

Grangemouth has been mentioned. We are working with partners in the Grangemouth future industry board to develop a just transition plan for the industrial cluster that is located there. I want to explain why we are prioritising that at the moment. Grangemouth is a significantly larger cluster and is home to multiple industrial operators. It is our largest port and has significant links to the transport sector. Also, as we all know, decisions are being made about the future of the refinery there.

There will be learning for Mossmorran from that process. We are prioritising Grangemouth at the moment, but that does not mean that we are not looking at what is happening in Mossmorran. That is part of the reason for my visit there. I am interested to hear what plans the operators have for the plant, particularly on low-carbon technologies. I am interested in what they might be doing on hydrogen and in hearing, from their perspective, how they might contribute to carbon capture, utilisation and storage. Our experience from the approach that has been taken in developing the Grangemouth industrial just transition plan has highlighted the importance of comprehensive engagement and planning, and of creating conditions for co-design to succeed.

To go back to something that David Torrance said, I agree 100 per cent that the transition must be worker led. We cannot do this without the engagement and buy-in of the workers and their associated unions. I have had an early conversation with Roz Foyer of the Scottish Trades Union Congress about the just transition element of my portfolio and how I can work more closely and effectively with the unions that work in

all the areas concerned. We have been clear that trade union and worker representation will be critical in all our just transition plans, and that is the approach that we have taken in the draft energy strategy and just transition plan. I assure Alex Rowley that his point about a high-level strategic plan will be addressed in the energy strategy and just transition plan, which we will produce early in the summer. We are already adopting the approach that is set out in that draft plan in the just transition plan for Grangemouth.

Before I close, I want to go back to something that Douglas Lumsden said and to my initial point about political consensus. Political consensus is what workers and the public want. We have to steel ourselves and stop making so many political points, because the workers and stakeholders are watching what we do. We need to work in partnership with local authorities, the unions and the workers, and both Governments have to work hand in hand. That includes both Governments putting in significant investment. I would have liked the £28 billion pledge to remain, and I am sure that my Labour colleagues would have liked that, too. I am not making a political point; I am just saying that, if the UK Government changes, I urge Labour colleagues in Scotland to make the point that Scotland must be central to any green investment from the new UK Government.

I can see that the Presiding Officer would like me to finish, so I will leave it there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio on this occasion is transport. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. There is quite a bit of interest, so brevity in questions and responses, as far as possible, would be appreciated.

Rail Services (Safety and Accessibility)

1. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking, including through discussion with the United Kingdom Government, to ensure that rail services are safe and accessible for all. (S6O-03166)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Although rail safety and accessibility are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government has fully funded the Office of Rail and Road's independent determination of Network Rail's costs to deliver a safe and high-performing network.

Officials at Transport Scotland meet regularly with representatives from the Department for Transport and Network Rail to discuss various matters, including safety and accessibility. Only last week, I met the chair of the Network Rail board and the chair of the Office of Rail and Road board to discuss how the Scottish ministers' requirements will be delivered by Network Rail.

Ruth Maguire: Anyone who regularly uses the railway will have witnessed the benefit of having a safety-critical guard on the train. I personally received invaluable assistance recently in supporting a young female passenger who was being harassed by an older male.

I know that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that public transport is safe and accessible for all and is mindful in particular of the challenges that are faced by women and girls who are travelling alone. Will the cabinet secretary use her influence to implore publicly owned ScotRail to show that it is, too, and to keep the guard on ScotRail services?

Fiona Hyslop: While staffing is generally a matter for ScotRail as the employer, the Scottish Government continues to specify a requirement that all ScotRail services should have a second staff member on board to assist passengers. In

addition, Transport Scotland is taking forward with stakeholders the 10 recommendations from the work on women and girls' safety on public transport.

I can also relay that ScotRail's travel safe team is successful in its operation, and is doing joint patrols with British Transport Police where there are areas of antisocial behaviour that can cause difficulties.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The ScotRail high-speed trains reportedly contributed to the tragic outcomes at Carmont, as they are less safe than trains that meet modern standards. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport and her predecessors have consistently refused to give me a date for replacement. Many suggest that that is due to the cost of the break clause in the contract with the rolling stock company.

Could the cabinet secretary confirm whether financial considerations play any part at all in the refusal to replace those HSTs?

Fiona Hyslop: I say very politely to Liam Kerr that he raised a similar point recently, and he was wrong and misrepresented the findings of the Carmont board in relation to those trains. What I can say, though, on the aspects of replacement is that that is an active consideration. We are engaging in replacement, and we will inform Parliament at the due point.

In relation to the member's point, therefore, it is not about cost; it is a recognition that we need to replace those trains in line with other aspects, including—as he knows—the decarbonisation of the line at Aberdeen South. I would implore him—I have written to him; I am not sure whether he has received the letter correcting him in his misunderstanding—to consider that it is really wrong to misrepresent the Carmont safety board and its recommendations.

M77 Bus Lane Corridor

2. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will revisit the feasibility of a bus lane corridor on the northbound M77 into Glasgow. (S6O-03167)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The second strategic transport projects review, which was published in 2022, recommends that

“bus priority interventions are implemented within Scotland's cities and towns where congestion is highest”.

That recommendation seeks to implement schemes that are targeted at delivering faster and more reliable journey times for bus passengers.

STPR2 also states:

“In the case of the trunk road and motorway network, Transport Scotland”

will

“build on the current work progressing plans for”

bus priority on

“the M8, M77 and M80”.

That work remains under development, in particular considering the changes in travel patterns following Covid and wider policy priorities.

Willie Coffey: With the news confirmed yesterday that more than £1 billion has been cut from our capital budget by the UK Government, and with no prospect of that being reinstated by any future UK Government, how can we in Scotland make progress with such projects, including park-and-ride facilities, that would help to encourage more commuters out of their cars and on to the excellent bus services that we offer?

Jim Fairlie: This Government is committed to improving public transport to encourage a modal shift to it, which would result in a reduction of car-based trips and associated emissions. Bus priority measures at appropriate locations have the potential to deliver greater punctuality, to reduce journey times and to offer a competitive alternative to the private car, particularly where the measures include interchange with other public transport services and active travel. The second strategic transport projects review also recommends a framework for the delivery of mobility hubs to enhance transport interchanges and accessibility services.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The minister quite rightly highlights that pinch points for traffic going in and out of a city need to be considered when planning for successful bus lane usage. Does he also recognise that, along the A77, there are pinch points, such as at the Bellfield interchange, through which 41 per cent of traffic in and out of North Ayrshire travels? I am sure that my colleague Sharon Dowey could mention also the Dutch House roundabout and other roundabouts along that route. If we do not get them right, unfortunately, a bus lane will not be practical.

Jim Fairlie: As I said, Transport Scotland is looking at areas right across the country. Once that review is complete, we will have better answers on that.

Potholes

3. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it plans to support local authorities to address the issue of potholes in the road network. (S6O-03168)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I appreciate the road maintenance challenges across Scotland and the importance of a safe, well-performing road network. However, local road maintenance is the responsibility of local authorities, which allocate resources on the basis of local priorities. The 2024-25 local government settlement provides record funding of more than £14 billion to local authorities, including £144 million of funding for the council tax freeze, which represents an increase of £795.7 million. Ultimately, it is for locally elected representatives to make local decisions on how best to deliver services to their local communities.

Russell Findlay: Roads in my West Scotland region are in a dangerous state of disrepair, just as they are across Scotland. One in four constituents who replied to my annual report say that potholes and poor road conditions are their main concern, with one Paisley resident telling me that cratered local roads are

“like the surface of the moon”.

The Scottish National Party has slashed council budgets year after year. Surely the cabinet secretary can admit that her Government must fill the councils’ funding gap so that they can fill the potholes.

Fiona Hyslop: The member says that all on the day after the autumn statement that provided no capital support for the Scottish Government. *[Interruption.]*

I am not going to diminish people’s experience of roads—as MSPs, we all understand what that is. However, the member could refer to the Scottish local government finance statistics for 2022-23. They show that the net revenue expenditure by local authorities on roads maintenance increased by 12.2 per cent, from £143 million in 2021-22 to £161 million in 2022-23—an increase of £18 million. There is an issue with how local authorities spend their funding, but those statistics show that, despite difficult circumstances, local authorities spent significantly more on roads maintenance in that year than in the year before.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary wish, as I do, that the Tories would explain to us how the Scottish Government is supposed to support local authorities to address potholes, as they ask, when their party is utterly content to see Scotland’s budget slashed by their Westminster masters? Does she agree that that sort of gaslighting is why the people of Scotland will never elect them to run this country?

Fiona Hyslop: I completely agree. Conservative Party members have no credibility when they come to the chamber and ask for the Government

to give more money to local authorities at a time when their party is providing absolutely no increase to our budget and is taking 10 per cent out of our capital budget over the next 10 years. I think that they live in some kind of parallel universe.

Bus Partnership Fund

4. Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the bus partnership fund, including what the spending plans are for the £473.1 million that is reportedly unspent to date, and when the fund will be resumed. (S6O-03169)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Following the United Kingdom autumn statement delivering the worst-case scenario for Scotland and a nearly 10 per cent real-terms cut in our capital budget from the UK Government, which my colleague has just mentioned, the Scottish Government had to take difficult decisions to deliver a balanced and sustainable spending plan for 2024-25. As such, regrettably, the bus partnership fund has been paused for 2024-25. However, future funding availability will be considered as part of our annual budget-setting process and prioritisation exercises.

Rachael Hamilton: Since the pandemic, lifeline bus services, particularly those in rural areas such as the Borders, have come under significant pressure because of increased operating costs and reduced revenue income. Some operators have withdrawn services completely in rural areas, which affects young people and elderly people.

A temporary pause in direct funding for the bus partnership fund is disastrous for the future of rural bus travel. Will Jim Fairlie tell me where the funding has gone and when he will reinstate the direct funding for the bus partnership fund to ensure that rural local authorities and transport operators can continue to provide vital rural transport links?

Jim Fairlie: There is the parallel universe that Fiona Hyslop was just talking about. The budget has been cut by £1.6 billion, and we cannot magic money out of the air. The Scottish Government will continue to put in place the priorities that it can to ensure that rural—*[Interruption.]* I am absolutely not minimising rural bus users' difficulties—I fully understand them—but we cannot magic money out of nowhere. If the budget is continuously cut, services will be frozen.

We will come to the decision about how we will get those things back in line once we can put budgets back in place without the savage cuts that

we are currently facing from Westminster Tories. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that we will listen to the questions with courtesy and respect, and we will listen to the responses with the same courtesy and respect. There are a number of supplementary questions, and I will try to get them all in, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Did the minister hear the finance secretary say during the budget process that she had received no alternative proposals from the Conservatives? As a consequence, the proposition that has just been put to the minister is laughable. The finances cannot be delivered to support it because of the cuts to the Scottish Government's budget by the United Kingdom Government budget.

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely agree, but we must always come back to the point that this affects people. When we cut budgets, it is Rachael Hamilton's constituents, my constituents and John Swinney's constituents who feel the brunt of it. We must find a way to work together to get the budgets back in place so that we can provide the services that we want to provide.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have spoken to Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, South East of Scotland Transport Partnership and many individual local authorities, which, between them, must have put in hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of bids for the fund. Does the minister accept that it is crucial that we have that investment if we are to get the bus services up to a point where people will want to leave the car at home and use them? Therefore, can we ensure that we prioritise that budget as part of the overall strategy to get more people out of cars and into buses?

Jim Fairlie: I agree with a lot of what Alex Rowley is saying. Of course we want to get more people onto public transport, including buses, exactly as he says. The fund is paused; the Government has not said that it will not continue in a later year. If we can get our budgets back to where we would like them to be after the cuts that we have faced, that is what the Government will do. We are absolutely committed to making bus travel work for the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): When the Scottish National Party came to power, there were almost half a billion journeys on the buses every year. Over the following decade, that number dropped by 100 million, before dropping further since the pandemic. In the years before the autumn statement, why did the Government fail to spend the budget that was designed to reverse that decline?

Jim Fairlie: I very much hear what Willie Rennie says, but he completely forgot to talk about the pandemic and the fall in the number of bus users during it. In the south of Scotland alone, more than 180,000 people benefit from free bus travel, and there have been more than 460,000 journeys in the past month alone. We are absolutely committed to trying to do everything that we can to maintain bus services in Scotland, and it would be really helpful if our budgets did not get continuously slashed.

MV Caledonian Isles

5. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support ferry users, in light of reports that MV Caledonian Isles will be out of action for four more months. (S6O-03170)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The delay in the MV Caledonian Isles returning from essential dry docking is regrettable, and I recognise the frustration felt by the Arran community as a result. I spoke with Caledonian MacBrayne's chief executive last week to convey my concern, and I have been clear that I expect CalMac to apply the revised route prioritisation matrix, which includes more emphasis on the level of use by island residents and commercial vehicles, along with higher prioritisation for routes with limited capacity on alternative services.

The Arran community and others across the network need those assurances, particularly as we look towards the Easter break and beyond. Meanwhile, Arran is being served by the MV Isle of Arran, with no capacity issues currently being reported.

Katy Clark: As the cabinet secretary knows, the Arran route is the busiest service, with islanders, tourism and the wider economy heavily reliant on it. The cabinet secretary has alluded to the fact that, as the year progresses, the MV Isle of Arran will not have the capacity needed to provide the service. In the discussions that she has had, what has been said about how capacity can be increased on the route as the year progresses?

Fiona Hyslop: That was one of the messages that I gave CalMac with regard to the capacity issues, particularly for the highly-used service to Arran. CalMac's activities will include identifying any alternative measures that, during the July to August period in particular, might improve capacity for Arran and help to support the holiday season.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In tourism, perception is critical. Irresponsible comments by Tory list MSPs that the ferry service is catastrophic do nothing to convey the reality that Arran is open for business. CalMac is making 11th-hour efforts to maximise capacity

on the Ardrossan to Brodick route with the MV Isle of Lewis berthing trials, the results of which will not be known until next week. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Arran's community must be fully briefed on those trials so that they can plan effectively for Easter?

Fiona Hyslop: The berthing trials are part of the attempt to identify other ways of improving capacity. I completely agree with the sentiment expressed by Kenneth Gibson that, despite such challenges, Arran and all our islands are very much open for business this Easter. It is important that we all take responsibility to ensure that our messaging on that is clear, including in comments made in the chamber and by others in the press.

Train Line Reopening (Ayr Station Hotel)

6. **Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the reopening of the train line south of Ayr, in light of the fire at the Ayr station hotel. (S6O-03171)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The restoration of rail services, including those running south of Ayr, is dependent on the completion of works to make the Ayr station hotel building safe, for which South Ayrshire Council is responsible. I understand that the council leader might have suggested dates for restoring the rail services; however, the basis upon which he made those suggestions is not clear. That was inadvisable, as he had no locus to do that; I made it clear when I met him that he must not take on the role of speaking for the rail authorities.

Announcements on the restoration of rail services can be for only Network Rail and ScotRail to advise. Only when the council's works to make the hotel safer are completed will the rail industry be able to get access to carry out the necessary works to enable the restoration of services. Once there is certainty on the completion date for the safety-related works, Scotland's Railway will start to communicate the timings for services being restored.

Sharon Dowey: The closure of the line is having a huge impact on visitor numbers to Ayr and the surrounding local economy. The Scottish grand national will be at Ayr racecourse on 20 April, with well over 20,000 racegoers coming to Ayr for the weekend. As the grand national supports a lot of jobs, gives a substantial boost to many Ayrshire businesses and is a major event for the local economy, it is imperative that the railway be opened before it starts. After all, the current arrangements are totally inadequate, especially given the fact that no trains can travel south. What action is being taken now to reopen the line, and will the cabinet secretary guarantee that the

railway will be back to normal before the Scottish grand national?

Fiona Hyslop: The member really has to take a level of responsibility here. The railway can open only when it is safe to do so, and it is imperative that we all make considered remarks about when the rail service can be restored.

I hear what Sharon Dowe says about the grand national, which is one of the biggest days of the year in Ayr. I remember waitressing on grand national day and how busy the town was with people coming in. What I can say to her is that we will, with all our Transport Scotland colleagues, identify how we can support transportation to Ayr to ensure a successful Scottish grand national that day.

Western Isles Ferries (Deployment Decisions)

7. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what factors are assessed when determining vessel deployment decisions for Western Isles ferry routes. (S6O-03172)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Vessel deployment is an operational matter for CalMac Ferries, but ministers recognise the impact that is being felt as a result of service disruption. Following a request by communities, and ministers seeking this work, CalMac has reviewed the route prioritisation matrix for the major vessel fleet with the support of the ferries community board.

Following public consultation, CalMac has made a number of changes to its prioritisation approach, including more emphasis on the level of use by island residents and commercial vehicles, along with higher prioritisation for routes with limited capacity on alternative services. I fully expect that to be applied by CalMac when it considers options.

Alasdair Allan: My constituents have welcomed the summer timetable redeployment decisions that were announced yesterday for the period while the MV Caledonian Isles undergoes extensive repairs. However, CalMac is still exploring another alternative, namely the use of the MV Isle of Lewis on the Uig triangle, taking it away from the Castlebay to Oban route. Will the cabinet secretary assure my constituents that any vessel to be deployed on the latter route in such a scenario is more likely to be reliably suitable for such an exposed route than the MV Isle of Arran, which was being considered for the route by CalMac as recently as last week?

Fiona Hyslop: Scottish ministers note the concerns of communities as CalMac seeks to optimise deployment of the reduced fleet across the summer period until the return of the MV

Caledonian Isles. As Dr Allan will be aware, it is the operator's responsibility to make detailed deployment decisions, although we expect it to take account of the capacity and capability of vessels in its consideration. We understand that trials will be taking place next week to further consider the feasibility of that option.

Fife Circle Improvement Plan

8. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the improvement plan for the Fife circle railway line. (S6O-03173)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): It was helpful to meet Annabelle Ewing last month. Improving services for Fife communities is a priority issue for me and my officials at Transport Scotland, and I am pleased that there has been a reduction in the number of short-form services in Fife. However, although that is welcome, further work is required.

My officials have engaged with ScotRail through Scottish Rail Holdings to require improvements to rolling stock maintenance in order to make more trains available for service each day. A range of work is under way to improve services in Fife and, with the £116 million investment by the Scottish Government, we look forward to the reopening of the Levenmouth line.

Annabelle Ewing: Although it is welcome news that improvements are evidently in the pipeline, what my constituents want to know is: when will the improvement plan be implemented and will it address directly the long-standing problems with overcrowding and cancelled trains?

Fiona Hyslop: Overcrowding on Fife services is due to the short-forming of trains that serve the route, and that is caused by poor diesel fleet reliability. That is a legacy issue, caused in part by the poor staffing and fleet choices that were made by the previous franchisee.

My officials have required ScotRail to develop an improvement plan, which is currently under way and covers issues such as fleet availability and a monitoring system. Now that the plan is in place, it is proving useful in directing improvement action. There is a recruitment campaign, and that and related management action should deliver material improvements in the availability of maintenance staff in a matter of months. A number of fleet improvement investments are also being identified, which should deliver further improvements over the next two to three years.

Some of the items that I have mentioned are more immediate, and I will make sure that they are put forward in a form that people can see, particularly Annabelle Ewing, who has pursued the matter assiduously.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): With new stations being opened at Leven and Cameron Bridge in June this year, rail campaigners across Fife are feeling inspired and hopeful. Key progress is being made in the business cases for the reopening of stations at St Andrews and Newburgh. Will the cabinet secretary congratulate the communities that are leading the way? Does she see a need to expand rail further in Fife to achieve the modal shift away from car usage that we require nationally?

Fiona Hyslop: A number of communities right across Scotland—in particular, in Fife and the St Andrews area—are pursuing improvements of and developments in the rail system. I commend the efforts of all those involved in the Starlink campaign for progressing the transport appraisal for the St Andrews area, which involves considering a range of multimodal transport options.

We want to improve modal shift, and it is important that rail is part of that work. I understand that the planning appraisal that Mark Ruskell has just referred to is on-going and that there is no final conclusion to it.

Liam Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Earlier on, I asked the cabinet secretary a straight question on whether financial considerations were holding up the replacement of the class 43s. In her response, she suggested—in, dare I say, somewhat intemperate language—that I was wrong and that I was misrepresenting the findings of the Carmont board in relation to those trains. I am happy to send her a copy of the report, but I refer her especially to sections 76 and 77, especially the bit that says:

“RAIB considers it more likely than not that the outcome would have been better if the train had been compliant with modern crashworthiness standards.”

Therefore, Presiding Officer, will you give the cabinet secretary an opportunity to read the report, to reflect on her remarks, to correct the record and to send me an apology?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. That is not a point of order, as you well know.

Fiona Hyslop: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Obviously, things that are said in this chamber—not just my response, but Liam Kerr’s original questions this week and last—appear in the *Official Report*. It is really important that the safety record is understood, and I will be more than delighted to resend the letter to Liam Kerr in order to correct his misrepresentations today and previously.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That, too, is not a point of order, but it is now on the record.

Emma Caldwell Case

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is an urgent statement by Angela Constance on the Emma Caldwell case. Before the statement begins, I wish to ensure that all members are aware that, because legal proceedings in the case remain live, the sub judice rule is engaged. I therefore request that members focus on the issues that are discussed in the statement itself and that they avoid any speculation about, or discussion of, the detail of the individual case.

The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Before I make the statement, it is important that I make it clear that while legal proceedings in the Emma Caldwell case remain live, I must be careful not to refer to any details of the criminal case itself. In addition, I know that members will understand that, at this time, there are restrictions on what I can say and on the level of detail that I can offer, both in the statement and in responses to questions.

I know of no greater loss than that which comes with the loss of one’s child. It seems to be unimaginable that the loss, grief, and pain—a pain that Margaret Caldwell has described as “enduring” and “excruciating”—could be further compounded by almost two decades of not knowing what had happened to your child or why they were taken from you.

The courage and conviction of the Caldwell family and Emma’s mum, Margaret, will have left a lasting impression on everyone who has had the privilege of engaging with the family. Mrs Caldwell has lived through what no one should ever live through. Therefore, let me repeat the words of the First Minister when he and I met the family earlier this week. He said:

“We are so deeply sorry for your and your family’s loss and for the pain and grief you have all had to endure. And for the two decades of fighting a fight that you, and William (before he passed away) and your family should never have had to go through.”

When we met on Tuesday, Mrs Caldwell reminded us that at the heart of all this is Emma—a gentle and kind daughter who was deeply loved and who was incredibly close to her mum, her dad and her siblings.

Nineteen years have elapsed between Emma’s murder and a conviction. There can be no doubt about the serious failings that brought a grieving

family to having to fight for their right—for Emma's right—to justice.

I know that Mrs Caldwell has met the chief constable, and it is right that Police Scotland has publicly and personally apologised for letting Emma and her family down in the original investigation by Strathclyde Police. The chief constable said:

"A significant number of women and girls who showed remarkable courage to speak up at that time also did not get the justice and support they needed and deserved from Strathclyde Police."

That said, I commend those who were involved in the recent reinvestigation of the case, and I know that Mrs Caldwell and the family have also thanked those who were involved in securing last week's conviction.

I am clear and confident that Police Scotland is, like society, changing, and that it is different from the legacy forces of the past, but that is not enough to comfort the Caldwell family, nor does it do justice to Emma's memory.

The First Minister made it clear last week that we would give serious consideration to the Caldwell family's call for a public inquiry into Emma's case, and that we would take a decision only after we had heard directly from Margaret Caldwell and her family. Following the meeting with the Caldwell family, I can today announce that there will be an independent judge-led statutory public inquiry, and that preparations for the inquiry will begin immediately.

I have not taken that decision lightly; I recognise that a statutory public inquiry is a very significant undertaking. It will take time to set up the inquiry and for it to hear evidence and reach its findings. Nonetheless, given the gravity of the case, the length of time that it took for justice to be served, the horrific extent of the sexual violence that has been suffered by the victims and survivors, and the suffering that has been endured by their families, the case for holding a public inquiry is clear and compelling. It is time to apply fresh scrutiny to the case so that we can understand what went wrong, ensure that lessons are learned for the future and provide answers to all the victims and survivors.

I have asked my officials to begin immediate preparatory work to set up the inquiry. As part of that work, they will explore the options for who would lead such an inquiry. After discussing that with the family, we are in agreement that what is most important is that the person who leads the inquiry has the confidence of the family, understands their trauma and has the necessary expertise to lead an inquiry of this nature and importance. That will lead to us considering the judiciary within and outwith Scotland. To be clear, I

have faith and confidence in the independence and integrity of the Scottish judiciary; however, there is precedent for looking beyond Scotland for a chair, and it is important that we explore all options at this stage.

Because an intimation of intention to appeal has been lodged in the case, I cannot go into further detail today. However, I commit to updating Parliament when all legal proceedings in the case are at an end and when we have appointed an inquiry chair. We will work alongside the chair and the family in setting and agreeing the terms of reference.

I welcome Police Scotland's statement that "time is no barrier to justice",

and I support the call for anyone who has been a victim of sexual violence to come forward and speak to the police, no matter when the offences took place.

We must go further and faster in order to eradicate the scourge of violence against women, and we must tackle the root causes. That means focusing on challenging misogyny and the toxic masculinity that underpins that behaviour. It means that we must challenge and address gender inequality and that, when those unacceptable behaviours turn into violence and abuse, we must ensure that men—the perpetrator is almost always a man—are held to account for their actions and are brought to justice. Our equally safe strategy sets out those priority areas and it details the approach that we are taking to prevent and tackle violence against women and girls, through focusing on early intervention and prevention, and on support services.

As part of my role in progressing the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, I have heard from many victims and survivors that, for them, the justice system is distressing and disempowering. Women and girls have told the Government and the Criminal Justice Committee that their experiences of the justice system have been worse than the crime itself. That is completely unacceptable and must be addressed. That is why I urge members to look at the proposals in our bill and the reforms that we want to drive forward so that we have a justice system that works for sexual offence complainants. A consistent and robust response throughout the justice system, from initial complaint to the end of any trial, is critical in our efforts to prevent violence against women and girls. We must all do better to support the courageous women who speak up, and to show all the women and girls in our country who feel that they do not have a voice—including those who are on the margins of society through trauma or addiction, who need us—that they, too, will be heard.

Let me finish where I began, Presiding Officer. I say this to the Caldwell family: that no matter what I say today or announce in this chamber, it will not be enough to respond to your loss and tragedy, but I, this Government and—I very much believe—this Parliament want to do everything that we can. For you, Margaret, for William, for your family and for women and girls across this country, but most of all for Emma, I am pleased to tell Parliament today that there will be a public inquiry. I will continue to give all that I have in order to eradicate violence against women and girls across this country, so that no one else has to endure what you have endured.

However, I want Margaret to have the final words, which she shared with me earlier. She said:

“My daughter Emma and the many victims who so courageously spoke up deserve nothing less than a robust independent public inquiry and a judge who will act without fear or favour. There are those who say that such inquiries take too long, but my family has struggled for 19 years to get justice. We will wait however long it takes to see the truth and will accept nothing less.”

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question would press their request-to-speak buttons.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I begin by paying tribute to Margaret Caldwell and her family, who are in the public gallery today. None of us can truly imagine the depth of her suffering over the past two decades—a daughter lost to cancer, her other daughter murdered, and her husband, William, also taken by cancer. Margaret’s agony has been compounded by what appears to be corruption at the heart of Scotland’s criminal justice system. She was deceived and lied to by those in positions of power and trust in the police and the Crown Office.

I have just met Margaret and her family, and their strength and dignity are truly humbling. Her campaign for Emma has been backed by good police officers, lawyers and journalists. However, let me be clear that her daughter’s killer is now behind bars only because of her love and her strength. I believe that, if it had been left to Police Scotland and the Crown Office, Iain Packer would almost certainly still be out there raping women with impunity.

Today’s announcement of an inquiry is welcome, but a key question remains unanswered. Margaret believes that only a judge with no connections to Scotland’s criminal justice

establishment should be appointed. To be credible and trusted, the inquiry must be truly independent, so I hope that the cabinet secretary can agree today to Margaret’s call for an external judicial appointment.

Angela Constance: Today of all days, I have no intention of uttering the name of anyone who has been convicted of such heinous crimes. The only names that I will utter are those of Margaret and Emma and, of course, the Caldwell family. Mr Findlay is quite correct to pay tribute to Emma’s courageous and tenacious family, who have endured what no family should ever endure. They are a credit to Emma and her memory, and also to the safety and wellbeing of women and girls across the country.

Right now, the priority for me is to set up the inquiry. I give Parliament an undertaking to keep members informed. As I said in my statement, as regards next steps, I will continue to engage with the family and also with others, such as the Lord President and the Lord Advocate, with whom I am required to engage. I am open to the inquiry having a chair from outwith Scotland. As I also said in my statement, there is precedent for that. Members might recall that Sir Anthony Campbell led the independent public inquiry on fingerprint evidence.

Today, we must all put our shoulder to the wheel to ensure that the inquiry is set up on the strongest and most stable footing, so that we can all say to the Caldwell family that, although we recognise that their pain will never fade, we can open a new chapter in their journey for justice.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): It is the job of this Parliament to ensure that no family should ever have to wait two decades for justice. The long and commendable fight that the Caldwell family, whom I, too, had the humbling pleasure of meeting today, have endured to get justice for their daughter, Emma, has also served to question the fate of other women, such as the four vulnerable women who were murdered in Glasgow in the 1990s. They have highlighted the injustice of serious violence against women that is so prevalent in our society.

Scottish Labour stands four square behind the Government and Angela Constance on her decision to hold a public inquiry to establish, among other matters, why there was no prosecution in 2008, when it appeared that the Crown and the police had enough evidence for that to happen. A public inquiry must get to the truth of that, which should include probing all the criminal justice agencies, which have questions to answer. What happened between 2008, when it is believed that there was sufficient evidence, and 2024, when there were finally a conviction and a sentence?

The cabinet secretary has said that she will consider appointing an inquiry chair from outside Scotland. Scottish Labour would support that, given the unique nature of the inquiry that is required here, so that the family can have full confidence in the inquiry's conclusions. If I might press the cabinet secretary a little, notwithstanding what she said about judicial matters relating to the appeal, I am sure that she would agree that the inquiry should be conducted in a timely manner following that appeal.

Angela Constance: I appreciate Ms McNeill's support on this matter. The purpose of the public inquiry is to provide fresh scrutiny of the full course of events over the past 19 years. It will, of course, scrutinise all aspects of our justice system. I assure Ms McNeill and other members that whoever leads the independent inquiry at the end of the day cannot have had any previous involvement in this case. I know that that is perhaps stating the obvious, but it is important to put it on record.

Ms McNeill also touched on the importance of the many victims in this case, in that inquiries continue on other unsolved murders. I put it on record that, according to statistics published last October, for the period since the establishment of Police Scotland in 2013-14 until 2022-23 all 591 reported homicides, which account for 602 victims, have been solved. However, of course, there are historical cases—I do not like the phrase “cold cases”—where families are still waiting for justice and for the day when they are able to breathe again.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's comments, and I express my deepest sorrow to the family of Emma Caldwell for their loss.

We know that inquiries can take time, and we would not want anyone involved in this case to have to wait any longer than necessary for the answers that they are looking for. Has the cabinet secretary had the opportunity to discuss the long timescales that are often involved in any inquiry with the Caldwell family, so that they know the process that will follow?

Angela Constance: One of the many reasons why I wished to engage directly with the Caldwell family, along with the First Minister, was to share our knowledge and experience of previous and on-going inquiries. It is important that people have full sight of the complexity of the work that is required to establish an inquiry and of the length of time that it takes. Pauline McNeill also raised that point, which I omitted to address earlier. I am acutely conscious that the family has already waited a long time, and I of course want to make decisive progress, but we need to invest the time now, up

front, to ensure that the inquiry has a strong and stable footing and has the full confidence of the Parliament and of the Caldwell family. There are some aspects that will most certainly take time.

Once again, I will end with the words of Margaret, who said:

“There are those who say that such inquiries take too long. My family have struggled for 19 years to get justice and we will wait however long it takes to see the truth, and will accept nothing less.”

It was very important that I had the conversation directly with the Caldwell family. I have a duty of care to them, and I wanted to ensure that they were apprised of what establishing a public inquiry involves.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Margaret Caldwell came into the Parliament today and spoke with my colleagues. One thing that she was clear about was that she wanted the Scottish Government to confirm that it will discuss and agree the exact terms of the inquiry with her and her family. She also hoped that her family would be given full representation within the proceedings of the inquiry. Will the cabinet secretary give that undertaking today to Margaret and her family?

Angela Constance: I would reassure the member, the Caldwell family and the Parliament that I will have full and on-going engagement with the family and with other victims, as required. Some of the aspects that Ms Dowey has narrated will be for the chair, but I am committed to investing the time right now. Yes, we want some pace in this process, but we will do it right. We will get the right person and we will get the right terms of reference. Given the magnitude of the case, I want us all to be marching forward together.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): We know that many survivors of sexual offences do not want to report them straight away, so I, too, welcome Police Scotland's settlement that

“time is no barrier to justice”.

What more could be done to encourage victims of sexual violence and domestic violence to come forward, no matter when the offences took place?

Angela Constance: In recent years there has been an increase in the reporting of historical sexual offences cases. That has been driven in part by the #MeToo movement and, I hope, by increased confidence in the police and in our justice system. I would encourage anyone who has been a victim of crime to report it.

We know, however, that sexual offences remain significantly underreported, and we must continue our work to reform the justice system to ensure that it commands the support of victims and survivors. That is one of the reasons why we have

set out proposals in the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that, when victims report crimes, they are treated with compassion and respect by an effective, objective and transparent system from the moment of the complaint to the end of any subsequent trial.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The chief constable has said that the police have reflected and learned from the initial investigation and subsequent reinvestigation but, as the cabinet secretary has said, there are still huge concerns about how women are treated by the justice system. The family have been waiting for 19 years. I heard what the cabinet secretary said regarding their role in setting the terms of reference. What discussions will the cabinet secretary have with the family about the remit of the inquiry and whether the investigation would be dealt with in the same way if it happened now?

Angela Constance: For clarity and for the record, so that members are aware of this, it will not be possible to formally appoint a chair or settle the terms of reference until all legal proceedings are disposed of. It is important to say that.

On the broader point about policing in Scotland, policing, like society, has changed and, crucially, continues to change. The police have rightly apologised, but that does not remove the need for a public inquiry. I welcome the fact that the chief constable is supportive of a public inquiry and committed to co-operating fully with it, as we would expect.

Of course, the inquiry is a statutory public inquiry, with all the legal powers that surround that. I point members to “HMICS Thematic Inspection of Organisational Culture in Police Scotland”, which was published in December. It narrates the journey of change and how Police Scotland is heading in the right direction. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland’s earlier thematic review of domestic abuse, which was published at the start of last year, spoke about the proactive steps that Police Scotland is taking to change societal attitudes to gender-based violence, including domestic abuse.

There is no part of our justice system that is beyond scrutiny, challenge or change. That applies to all of us in the Government and in the chamber, as well as to the justice system in its entirety and all its component parts.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): My thoughts are also with Margaret Caldwell and the Caldwell family.

What more can be done to encourage women to have confidence that they will be listened to? What difference does the cabinet secretary think that the passing of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice

Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is currently making its way through the Parliament, might make to that objective?

Angela Constance: Obviously, I am conscious that the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill is currently under stage 1 scrutiny, and I am aware that the Criminal Justice Committee, which Mr MacGregor sits on, has taken extensive evidence on it—and rightly so. Many members in the chamber will be familiar with our propositions in relation to a sexual offences court, trauma-informed practice and independent legal representation. The bill has other measures in it, of course. I contend—as I always do—that no part of our system is beyond scrutiny. I am conscious that we are about to engage more fully in that stage 1 process and in the legislative process as a whole.

The basic point to reiterate is that it is imperative that victims and witnesses trust the way in which our justice system responds, particularly to rape and sexual assault, so that we can continue to encourage people to report crimes, we can hold perpetrators to account, and we can support complainers to give their best evidence while reducing the risk of retraumatisation. It is imperative that we focus on the end-to-end justice journey. We all have a part to play in making life better in pursuit of the delivery of justice.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I echo the cabinet secretary’s sentiments and those that were expressed by others in paying tribute to Margaret Caldwell and the rest of Emma’s family for their tireless and courageous campaign for justice. I welcome the confirmation of the inquiry, the cabinet secretary’s confirmation that she will look at the inquiry being led by a judge from outwith Scotland, and her commitment to keeping the Parliament updated.

The cabinet secretary outlined fairly the issues of the length of time that such public inquiries can take. Will she give a commitment to members to discuss with Margaret Caldwell and her family the possibility of an interim report being provided as part of the inquiry process?

Angela Constance: As always, I appreciate the tone and tenor of Liam McArthur’s questioning.

Matters in and around the approach that is taken, including whether that approach is modular—with interim reports or with chapters—are, ultimately, for the chair. However, we can all learn from recent practice. We have to ensure that a public inquiry is equipped to do a thorough job, given the investment that we all will have in it. However, where possible, we want things to be done in a timely fashion.

Mr McArthur is also correct to point out that a considerable programme of work will be required

in agreeing and engaging with the family and others on the terms of reference and the identification of a chair. We have to establish a formal set-up date. There will be issues in and around the premises, the secretariat, legal teams, the infrastructure and how evidence is managed and gathered, as well as hearings and how deliberations are managed.

Then, of course, there is the reporting. We are starting an immense amount of work today. We are committed to doing that properly but, where possible, timeously.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): It is clear that a significant number of women were failed not just by a culture of misogyny in Strathclyde Police but by a misogynistic system that criminalised them rather than the men who exploited them and caused harm. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that that injustice in our criminal justice system is addressed, so that the burden of criminality never again falls on the victims of male violence?

Angela Constance: As I hope that I have said, no matter someone's background or their past or present, it is imperative that everyone who has been a victim trusts the way in which our justice system responds to rape and sexual assault, so that we can continue to encourage anyone who has been a victim to report a crime, irrespective of their background or the trauma that they have endured.

The Government has always been clear that prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls and is utterly unacceptable. We need a victim-centred, trauma-informed justice approach. That requires collaboration with various justice partners, including Police Scotland, to ensure that women who are involved in and impacted by prostitution are recognised as victims and are offered support and advice so that they feel safe in outlining their circumstances and concerns in the knowledge that the services are equipped to provide non-judgmental, informed support.

Fairly recently, we published a strategy about taking our work forward. Lessons will be learned from that work and from the pilot that will take the strategy forward. That will inform all future options, including future legislative considerations, which will include whether to criminalise the purchase of sex.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I, too, pay tribute to Margaret Caldwell and her family. A wait of 19 years for justice is not just. Having women and vulnerable people ignored—not listened to or treated with compassion or dignity when they make complaints or report crimes—is just not good enough. Further to her previous answers about support for

complainers, what assurances can the cabinet secretary give to victims, survivors and witnesses who feel that they have been let down by the justice system when they have made complaints?

Angela Constance: This morning, I attended a workshop in my capacity as co-chair of the victims task force, which I chair with the Lord Advocate. Essentially, the purpose of that work is to map out in detail the end-to-end justice journey and the improvements that are required at every point that is described as a pain point in our system by victims and survivors. I assure the member that, crucially, we continue to invest record levels of funding into a range of front-line services. Just this week, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety announced an additional £2 million of funding for Rape Crisis Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid so that those organisations can reduce their waiting lists for women who need support services, including refuge places and counselling.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Magdalene Robertson was Packer's first known victim. She was raped as a teenager, yet she was ignored and misled by the criminal justice system. Then there are Packer's dozens of other victims. None was believed and some are no longer alive to see that justice is done. Will the cabinet secretary give an undertaking that every victim's voice will be heard?

Angela Constance: The purpose of a public inquiry, as I have already outlined, is to examine the scope and magnitude of events that took place over nearly two decades and to acknowledge that far too many victims have waited too long for justice.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): My thoughts go to Margaret Caldwell and Emma's family. What role do people—mainly men—have to play in calling out the actions and behaviours of other men who perpetrate misogyny and sexism, which can then lead to violence against women and girls?

Angela Constance: The short answer is that we all have a role to play in the eradication of violence against women and girls, but it has to be acknowledged that that cannot be achieved without men recognising the vital role that they must play daily in tackling the deep-rooted sexism and misogyny that are inherent in the perpetration of such offences. Those who perpetrate violence and abuse, the majority of whom are men, must change their actions and behaviour. It is vital that the violence, abuse and misogyny that women face are seen as a societal issue, not as a women-only issue. It is only through fundamental change across our society that women can be protected.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

International Women's Day

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12416, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on international women's day—global perspective.

15:34

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Kaukab Stewart): It is a privilege to open the debate and make my first opening speech to the Parliament as the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. I am delighted to support a Cabinet in which the majority of members are women—indeed, it is believed to have the highest proportion of women of any Government in the world, which clearly demonstrates our commitment to equality in action.

Joining the ministerial team is an honour, particularly as I am the first woman of colour to hold a ministerial position in Scotland. I am proud to be that first woman, but I am determined that I will not be the last. Women of colour are leaders in their communities in Scotland and around the world and should be reflected in the leaders we elect to serve us. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the chamber.

It is a privilege to speak to the motion to mark international women's day, whose theme this year is "Inspire Inclusion". That serves as a reminder that gender inequality affects everyone. Resourcing and amplifying the voices of women, girls, other marginalised groups and advocates for human rights, particularly in the global south, is a vital lever for advancing gender equality in the pursuit of a fairer world.

We meet at a time of increasing global conflict, as our concerns continue to grow about the impact on all civilians who are affected by violence. We know that conflict disproportionately affects women. We see that in devastating reports from non-governmental organisations in Gaza that show that there has been an increase in the number of miscarriages and premature births. Pregnant women are having caesarean sections without anaesthetic, and others are being forced to use scraps of tents in place of period products.

The evidence is clear. UN Women reports that a peace agreement that includes women is 35 per cent more likely to last 15 years or more. Despite that, of 18 peace agreements that were reached in 2022, only one was overseen by women representatives.

When I represented the Parliament at the 66th Commonwealth parliamentary conference in

Ghana, a clear thread among the remarkable and inspiring parliamentarians I met was that human rights are not just for some but for all. We must do more to ensure women's full involvement in achieving and sustaining peace and stability.

Last week marked the second anniversary of Russia's illegal war against Ukraine. I know that every member of the Parliament is shocked and appalled at the resulting violence and the humanitarian crisis that continues to unfold. Providing support and sanctuary for displaced people from Ukraine remains the Government's priority. Since the war started, 26,000 people have come to the United Kingdom with sponsorship by a Scottish host or by the Scottish Government. Sixty per cent of all arrivals have been women, but we are particularly concerned that the UK Government's visa changes will make it harder for families to be reunited in the UK.

We are investing more than £100 million in 2023-24 and more than £40 million in 2024-25 in the Ukrainian resettlement programme to ensure that people continue to receive a warm Scots welcome and are supported to rebuild their lives in our communities for as long as they need to call Scotland their home.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the minister to her role. I previously raised concerns that, even in a safe country such as Scotland, there are vulnerabilities for women who are resettling. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that women are kept safe, particularly when they move between locations?

Kaukab Stewart: When people are moving around, it is easy to slip through the system, but I hope that our equally safe strategy captures the situation for such women.

We must push forward to ensure that women's and girls' rights are at the heart of everything that we do at home and abroad. Our global perspective complements domestic equality policy, and the Conservative amendment is right to draw attention to the unacceptable practice of female genital mutilation, which is the physical manifestation of a deep-rooted gender inequality. FGM is illegal in Scotland and is recognised internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. It is important that we work collectively to prioritise both protection and prevention.

Globally, there is growing momentum towards adopting a feminist approach to international policy considerations—one that is fair, intersectional and based on human rights. In Scotland, we are committed to taking a feminist approach to all of our international work. As part of that, we will continue to strive to give people who are most affected by structural inequalities and injustice, conflict, climate change and

environmental damage a platform to speak for themselves, influence and make decisions.

Our commitment to invest in women and girls as advocates for human rights is clear. We have invested in the Scottish human rights defender fellowship programme and, as part of that, in 2023-24, we are supporting three women from the global south to undertake fellowships in Scotland on gender and the environment.

Since the programme was established, in 2018, we have welcomed 17 human rights defenders—the majority of whom have been women—from 16 different countries to participate in the programme, and we support them to further develop their skills and networks in safety.

We also fund the women in conflict 1325 fellowship programme, which is delivered by Beyond Borders Scotland. The United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 was the first Security Council resolution on women, peace and security, and our fellowship programme has, to date, helped 362 women peace builders by providing training and building their capacity in the prevention and resolution of conflict.

I am pleased to announce today that we have just awarded the contract for our new international development women and girls fund. Following a competitive process, the fund is the first new programme to be launched as part of the equalities programme, following our 2021 international development review. We will deliver the fund in partnership with Ecorys, in collaboration with the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. In line with the UN sustainable development goal, the main aim of the new £3 million women and girls fund is to support the advancement of gender equality and the rights of women and girls in our African partner countries.

We recognise the lack of funding for women's rights in the global south. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in 2021, less than 1 per cent of global bilateral overseas development assistance for gender equality and women's empowerment went specifically to women's rights organisations and movements—the very organisations that are the key drivers of change in addressing gender inequality. When gender equality remains one of the greatest human rights challenges globally, that simply is not good enough, and the fund puts feminist principles into action.

As we begin phase 1, taking a grass-roots, participatory approach, the focus and delivery mechanisms will be designed by Malawian, Rwandan and Zambian women and girls. Through that process, local women and girls will be empowered to define and meet their priorities.

They will have the decision-making power. The aim is to challenge and shift typical structural inequalities by moving beyond simply hearing the voices of women and girls to ensuring that their voices actually influence the actions that are taken. Reflecting our commitment to equalising power, the fund will provide direct funding to organisations led by local women and girls to support them to advocate and advance the rights of women and girls in their cultural context.

I am pleased to note that a guidance note outlining our approach to mainstreaming gender equality across our international development portfolio was published a few weeks ago. That aligns with our commitments to do no harm and to build more gender-responsive programmes. The new mainstreaming approach will, equally, apply to our new health and education programmes, which we will also launch in 2024.

It is important to recognise that women are not a homogeneous group—we exist in all our wonderful multifaceted diversity. We must remember that achieving gender equality does not involve just one glass ceiling being smashed. For many women, that metaphor does not illustrate the complexity of their experience when facing unique and compounding intersectional inequality. I know that, even if we break the glass ceiling and step into positions of influence, we then face glass walls. We continue to encounter prejudice, to not have our voices heard and to be overlooked when it comes to decisions that affect us.

In order to truly tackle structural inequality, therefore, gender inequality cannot be considered in isolation from other forms of discrimination. That is why we must ensure that intersectionality is at the heart of the feminist approach and that the voices that are amplified are as diverse as the communities that are impacted by our interventions.

By investing in women's organisations, feminist networks and grass-roots movements, as advocates for human rights, we can support those who are speaking out for structural change and amplify the voices that are too rarely heard.

I am clear that inspiring inclusion requires a participatory feminist approach that invests in women and girls in the pursuit of transformed national and international systems that work for people and place.

I am pleased to move,

That the Parliament welcomes the 2024 International Women's Day theme of "Inspire Inclusion", which recognises that, when people understand and value women's inclusion, they forge a better world; acknowledges that, at a time of increasing conflict affecting civilians around the world, the specific impact on women and girls can be profound; recognises that achieving gender equality is more vital than ever and remains one of the greatest

human rights challenges globally; marks International Women's Day and the second anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, and welcomes the efforts of organisations and communities working tirelessly in pursuit of peace, inspiring inclusion, pushing forward on gender equality and amplifying the voices of women and marginalised groups, and notes the Scottish Government's investment in women as advocates for human rights, and initiatives such as the Warm Scots Future, Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship and Human Rights Defender Fellowship, and its commitment to a feminist approach to international relations.

15:46

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I take the opportunity to welcome Kaukab Stewart to her post as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. We have worked together on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, and I look forward to our exchanges in the chamber from now on.

International women's day is an opportunity to reset our focus on what we can do to improve the lives of women in the United Kingdom and around the world, but why do we need to mark this day in our diaries? UN Women explains that, globally, women are paid less than men. They are less likely to work, and more likely to work in informal and vulnerable employments. They are more likely to take on a higher proportion of unpaid care and to take on the majority of caring responsibilities, and they are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse. In addition, as the minister pointed out, we have less rights than our male counterparts worldwide.

That is why we mark international women's day: not only to celebrate those who have been leading the charge to improve the lives of women globally, but to raise awareness of the inequalities that women face daily. We heard from the minister about the impact that recent conflicts have had, especially on women, and I am certain that we will hear more, as the debate progresses, on the many issues that women face when they are confronted with the brutality of war.

I have spoken in previous debates in the chamber on the illegal invasion of Ukraine. I will never forget the bombing of a hospital in Mariupol that claimed the life of a pregnant woman and her baby. I have also spoken on the Gaza-Israel conflict. I think that we will all remember 7 October 2023 as the day on which Hamas weaponised sexual violence. We saw videos of naked and bloodied women defiled by Hamas on the day of the attack; it emerged on social media for the whole world to see and watch on in horror.

We have heard witnesses sharing their trauma of seeing women raped before they were dead, with some raped while they were injured and some while they were already dead, when terrorists

raped their lifeless bodies. We also saw the video of a pregnant woman who had her womb ripped open while she was still alive and saw her unborn baby stabbed before being murdered herself. Gang rape, mutilation and execution—that is what happened to innocent women who were enjoying a rave that was designed to promote peace.

Now, we have to watch on while the women and children of Gaza are trapped in a state of conflict, with shortages of food, shelter and hope. As the minister highlighted, they are in dire situations, praying that the fighting will stop to prevent further innocent people from dying.

That might be graphic detail to share during a debate on international women's day, but I believe that it has to be shared to make sure that we are looking at this from a global perspective. Each of those women was someone's mother, daughter, niece, cousin or friend, but they were also the women who paid a heavy price in war, and women will continue to do so while those conflicts are on-going.

As the Parliament continues to look at the global perspective of international women's day, we must also look at the other issues that are experienced by women globally. Female genital mutilation became illegal in the UK in 1985. However, on Friday 16 February this year, Amina Noor, who is 40, was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for assisting in FGM against a young woman while in Kenya. Metropolitan Police detectives secured the conviction after a complex and sensitive investigation, which began after the victim confided in a teacher about the abuse that had taken place nearly 12 years previously. Since the conviction, the Met has encouraged more victims to come forward to seek support from organisations and the police. I hope that the Scottish Government will echo those calls here, in Scotland, because it shocks me that, in 2024, we still have cases of FGM in the UK.

Amina Noor was the reason for my including the part of my amendment that is on FGM, because those who inflict pain and suffering on innocent people should never be able to get away with those heinous crimes. Those cases might be rare, but I do not think that we know the true extent of FGM or the number of perpetrators of those horrendous crimes against young women and girls. We must make sure that innocent women and girls are protected here in Scotland and, of course, in the rest of the UK.

Ruth Maguire: During consideration of the bill that became the Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020, in the previous parliamentary session, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee heard from ethnic minority women who had suffered from FGM about their challenges in accessing healthcare that

was suitable for them. Does the member agree that we absolutely have to address that issue?

Meghan Gallacher: We absolutely do. That issue has had cross-party support in the past, and we can continue that support across parties to ensure that women who have had horrendous crime inflicted on them get the healthcare and support that they need.

I have spent a lot of time in the debate talking about the heinous crimes that are committed against women globally. I turn my attention back to the UK, where I began my remarks. Although we need to speak about things that are happening right across the world, here, too, women need their Governments to work for them, to promote them, to encourage them, to give them opportunities and, most importantly, to protect them and their rights.

Whether it is fulfilling the Government's pledge to introduce free, funded childcare from nine months onwards; encouraging more girls to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects; protecting single-sex spaces; or introducing laws to protect women if they are victims of crime, women just want Governments to get on with it. That is a really important message that we can try to come together today to bring. Debates on those issues are for another day, because they belong in various portfolios and we do not have enough time to debate all of them in isolation.

I close by turning to all parents and carers who are bringing up, guiding, coaching and inspiring future generations of young women, in Scotland and beyond. I just want to say thank you. Thank you for everything that you do to raise the next generation of women who, I hope, will go on to be leaders in business, economics and academia, or—dare I say it?—a future First Minister or Prime Minister.

We, as parliamentarians, have so much to do to improve the lives of women, but it makes me proud to be an MSP on days like this, when we can all come together to celebrate international women's day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not sure that Ms Gallacher moved her amendment.

Meghan Gallacher: I move amendment S6M-12416.1, to insert after "profound;":

"expresses concern over the practice of female genital mutilation, which is still taking place in certain parts of the world; congratulates all parents and carers on raising the next generation of wonderful women;".

15:53

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, take the opportunity to welcome the minister to her role.

On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome the opportunity to have this debate and to welcome international women's day 2024 and its key theme of "Inspire Inclusion".

It is only right that, at the start of my contribution, I focus on the global context in which we have the debate. Around the world, women face significant challenges, and some of the examples of that this year feel particularly heinous. As is noted in the motion, just over two years ago, Russia began a violent full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the impacts of that on Ukrainian women have been devastating. We know the impact that that has had on the Ukrainian people, who continue to stand so strongly in the face of significant adversity.

We know that the impact on women, in particular, is disproportionate: Ukrainian women have been displaced internally and have had to seek refuge in countries such as our own to protect their, and, in many cases, their children's safety. These women will always be welcome here for as long as they wish to make Scotland their home, and I hope that, in good time, the option will be there for a safe return to Ukraine for those women who desire it. Scotland and the UK should always be ready to provide safe haven to those people who are fleeing horrific war.

That brings me to the suffering of women in Palestine and Israel. The attacks on 7 October and the reported treatment of Israeli women were deplorable and wholly unacceptable and have rightly been met with widespread condemnation across the world. Following that, we have witnessed all-out war on the Gaza strip and the mass killing of tens of thousands of people, with many more currently starving to death as a result of the bombardment and limited access to aid.

I have raised this many times previously—and the minister mentioned, too—that there are currently around 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza. Of that number, 40 per cent are considered to be at high risk, which is extremely concerning. Humanitarian aid must be allowed in to provide those women with the support that they so desperately need.

Just yesterday, MSPs and staff had the opportunity to hear from Medical Aid for Palestinians and Oxfam about their experiences from the ground. Of all the points that were raised, the most harrowing was that women in Gaza are giving birth in unsterile conditions, which is extremely dangerous for the mother and the baby. However, substantive issues do not seem to be

being taken on and work does not seem to be being done in that area. We must work harder to get women the aid that they need for childbirth. As we mark international women's day, we cannot forget those women, and we must redouble our efforts to ensure that they receive the support that they need before it is too late. At this stage, I fear that it might already be too late for so many women and their children.

Closer to home, I absolutely agree with the points that were set out in the motion about the fact that "achieving gender equality" is more important now than perhaps ever before. The challenges that we face remain significant. Violence against women and girls remains at a disturbingly high level, and we have seen in recent times how misogyny is ingrained in some of our largest public bodies. Our fight is by no means over, and we must continue to fight with determination to achieve the equality that we so deeply want.

Women who live in areas of higher levels of deprivation in Scotland perhaps experience inequality more than others, and that is particularly the case in the health sector. In women's health services, we have inequalities in the uptake of human papillomavirus vaccination and screening programmes. People live longer in good health in the most affluent areas of Scotland compared with those people who live in deprived areas—for women, that gap is quite stark, at 25.7 years. That is unacceptable, and we must all strive to change it.

There is undoubtedly a need for a global approach to protecting human rights, supporting marginalised groups and amplifying the voices of women. However, it would be wrong to have this debate without recognising the challenges that we face on our own doorstep, which we must always think of.

For far too long, women's health services have not delivered for those women in our most vulnerable communities. That creates inequality between women, which in itself is a challenge that we must work tirelessly to overcome. Without community-based provision of women's health services that go to the individual rather than depend on the individual going to them, we will never achieve the equality that we speak about today.

International women's day is an excellent opportunity to unite around a common purpose and to reiterate the calls that we have been making for so many years to encourage men to speak up, be accountable and be part of the fight. However, it also requires us, in this Parliament, to recognise how our decisions can impact equality and to be realistic about the experiences of people in our own country.

I look forward to listening to the contributions to the debate. There are many different angles from which we could all have approached the subject, but it is right that we take the opportunity to discuss the global context, given the extremely concerning events that are unfolding in Ukraine and the middle east.

It is important that we also look closer to home, to our more domestic position, and it is right that we look to progress as much as we can in this country in politics, in education, in the workplace and in other places. The fight ahead for women in Scotland and across the world is not an easy one. It requires the efforts of us all to achieve the equality that is so long overdue. I commit my party to doing what it can to play its role across Parliament to take that fight on.

16:00

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I, too, welcome the minister to her new role.

This international women's day, my thoughts are with the women around the world who are affected by conflict and violence. It is two years since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine—two years in which Ukrainian women's lives have been turned upside down. Many have been forced from their homes, 72 per cent of unemployed Ukrainians are women, and 8 million women and girls will need humanitarian assistance this year.

In Gaza, women are struggling to survive displacement, bereavement and lack of access to basic necessities. Women are giving birth without access to water, painkillers or anaesthesia for caesarean sections, and they are going without food to give what they can to their children. The stories that we are hearing are heartbreaking and remind us that violent conflict intensifies pre-existing gender inequalities and discrimination.

A United Nations report in 2022 showed that the number of women and girls living in conflict-affected areas had increased by 50 per cent since 2017. However, as the minister has highlighted, although women are disproportionately impacted by violent conflict, they are underrepresented in peace processes. Of the 18 peace agreements that were reached in 2022, only one was signed or witnessed by a representative of a women's group or organisation, and in recent years only between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of peace agreements include provisions that reference women, girls and gender, despite women having led successful negotiations at local levels to secure access to water and humanitarian aid, to prevent and resolve tribal conflicts and to mediate local ceasefires.

The sidelining of women in peace negotiations does everyone a disservice. This international

women's day theme is "Inspire Inclusion". Women's participation in peace processes makes agreements more durable and sustainable. I recognise the Scottish Government's work in that area, having previously corresponded with the previous equalities minister on the topic.

I am pleased that the women in conflict 1325 fellowship programme has continued this year. The need for humanitarian and development aid is clear, but a UK Government internal report last year warned that the cuts to its aid budget will result in hundreds of thousands of women facing unsafe abortions, thousands of deaths in childbirth and thousands more women being left without access to healthcare and health services. That is a stark reminder of the consequences of the cuts. The UK Government must reinstate the 0.7 per cent commitment.

The report also shows that budget decisions are not gender neutral. Gender-responsive budgeting is needed across all Government spending. It ensures that fiscal policies and budgets target gender inequalities and support inclusive development for all.

There is a need to consider how women's organisations in Scotland are funded. A model of funding through the Scottish Government, such that organisations can spend more of their time helping women than they do searching for funding, merits further exploration.

Another aspect of inclusion that is crucial for gender equality is education. Gender equality and education benefit every child. Girls and boys are empowered with life skills, skills gaps that perpetuate pay gaps are closed, and reductions are seen in gender-based violence, including child marriage. However, around the world, 129 million girls are out of school. The barriers to girls' inclusion in education are many. They include poverty, lack of safety, poor sanitation and hygiene for girls in schools, child marriage and boys being favoured for investment in education. Supporting girls not just to attend but to thrive at school is key.

In Afghanistan, where women are being denied rights to education, Scottish charity The Linda Norgrove Foundation has been working hard to sponsor 20 medical students to come to Scotland to complete their studies. I supported the campaign last year and look forward to hearing about the women's progress.

Women make up 51 per cent of Scotland's population, but figures from Engender show that there is a clear imbalance in women's inclusion in leadership and decision making. Forty-five per cent of MSPs are women, but only 35 per cent of local councillors are women. Just over a fifth of sheriffs and senior police officers, and 35 per cent

of public body chief executives, are women. That raises important questions for us to consider. How are women involved in designing policies and programmes? Do we ask ourselves how policies can tackle discrimination? Do we identify and prevent the unintended consequences of reinforcing inequalities?

In Shetland, all three council leadership positions—leader, convener and chief executive—are currently held by women, and with me as the MSP, this is the first time that four women have held those posts at the same time. However, there is much more to be done at home and globally.

16:05

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome and celebrate seeing Kaukab Stewart in her new role as minister.

Reflecting on international women's day, with the theme this year being "Inspire Inclusion", I think about how ensuring full female participation could be boundless. With women playing equal roles in leadership, innovation and decision-making processes, societies around the world stand to benefit from diverse perspectives that lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions to global challenges.

Inclusion of women in the workforce and in leadership roles has been shown to enhance organisational performance, drive economic growth and foster more equitable distribution of resources.

On a global scale, embracing gender equality and women's empowerment can lead to more stable and just societies in which human rights are upheld and everyone has the opportunity to thrive—unlike in the horror of war, as has been described to us in the debate.

Inspiring inclusion through international women's day sends a powerful message to future generations about the value of diversity and equality. It lays the groundwork for a world in which every young girl can dream without limitations, pursue her aspirations and contribute to her community without facing gender-based barriers. The celebration of the day reaffirms our commitment to building inclusive societies in which the voices of women and girls are heard, respected and integrated into the fabric of our collective future.

The fight for female emancipation still goes on. A definition of female emancipation is that it is

"Process, strategy and myriad efforts by which women have been striving to liberate themselves from the authority and control of men and traditional power structures, as well as to secure equal rights for women, remove gender discrimination from laws, institutions and behavioural

patterns, and set legal standards that shall promote their full equality with men."

Intersectionality is a vital aspect of our fight in this area. When I look across the chamber, I do not see it reflecting the Scotland that I see outside. Proportionally, we do not fully represent women relative to the population demographic, but that should be the goal. In that intersectionality, we must include women who have been minoritised as a result of their ethnicity, disability or LGBT identity.

I recognise the work of the Parliament in its gender-sensitive audit board, in which I am honoured to have played a part. I acknowledge political parties such as mine that ensure that there are mechanisms to achieve representation by women. Unfortunately, however, such mechanisms are still controversial to some people, and we hear one comment at a time, from "What about international men's day?" to "But we had a female First Minister." We still battle ignorance on the road to full female participation.

It is not just about participation, and it is not just about getting women in here and in other traditionally male-dominated spaces. It is about what we do to make those places fit for female purpose. In institutions that have been led by men for so long, we find that there is an exhausting amount of work to do when we get there. In order to ensure that we truly inspire inclusion on a global stage, we must first ensure that we stand in inspiring spaces and that we get our own house in order.

This week, I had an interview with a university student, in which we spoke about the role that the media have to play in women's participation in politics. It was grim to go over the old ground of what I have faced, but when I look around this chamber, I see many women across all parties who have been subjected to the most horrific online abuse. Oftentimes, our appearance and our delivery are criticised and considered over the content of what we say. The misogyny that many of us face in broad daylight will not inspire anyone to join us.

I think about all the women whom I have spoken to about getting involved in decision-making roles, whether in a council or in Parliament, but their reasons for not doing so are pretty compelling. I know that because I remember having such reservations. Many women say things such as, "With all my caring responsibilities, I don't have the time," or "I don't think I'd be good enough." Women have often said to me, "I see what you go through in the media. There's no way I'd put myself up for that."

So, when I think about what "Inspire Inclusion" means to me and how I, or we, can do that, I think

first about how far we have come as women, with the fight for representation and suffrage, and the movement from being told what our roles were to being able to define what roles we want—being able to choose. I reflect on how I was inspired to be who I chose to be, without fear or favour.

In my speech today, I want to inspire. It is hard to do that given the reality around us, but fighting for our place was never going to be easy, and while we women in the chamber stand our ground, I want to remind women of all parties—I might also remind myself of this—that there are so many women out there who are rooting for us and seeing examples that they might follow.

16:11

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate ahead of international women's day. It is important that we recognise the progress that has been made on gender equality in recent years. Women are now more likely to be in positions of responsibility than they were even just a few years ago, but there is still an incredibly long way to go.

Progress in Scotland and across the UK has been slow. Women continue to be underrepresented in almost every area of public life and the gender pay gap has barely moved. The Poverty Alliance says that women are more likely to be living in poverty. Women's safety is threatened far too often. Our rights can often be put at risk—even, I am sad to say, in this very Parliament, on occasion. That is just the picture here at home.

The Government's motion focuses on global issues that women face. Internationally, in many places, there are very few signs of positive steps forward. In many parts of the world, women are still treated as second-class citizens. We will all have watched in horror as women's rights have been ripped up in Afghanistan since the return to power of the Taliban. The tragic loss of basic standards of respect for women in that country is heartbreaking. The stories of violence are a dreadful reminder of how lowly women are still viewed in some countries. Almost as hard to listen to are the stories of the many young women who are now denied the chance to be educated and to better themselves. That is a terrible shame, and it will hold back generations of girls who have done nothing wrong. Their only offence—if we can call it that—is to have been born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sadly, that situation is not an isolated example. In Iran, although initially it seemed that minor improvements might happen as a result of the widespread protests over Mahsa Amini's death, things appear to be as bad as ever. Police target

women solely because of what they wear, and women's freedom continues to be brutally restricted.

As we have seen in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, too often it is women who bear the brunt of horrific violence against innocent people. Others have highlighted similar situations in other countries. We could all cite many more examples that should appal and dismay us, but today, as the shadow minister for justice, I want to focus my comments on violence against women here in Scotland. In this country, too, women face the threat of violence all the time. I am sure that, at one time or another, every woman in this chamber will have felt the need to alter their behaviour to keep themselves safe. I am sure that we have all been threatened and abused online and even in person.

The statistics are shocking. Police Scotland records more than 170 incidents of domestic abuse every single day and almost 65,000 instances of domestic abuse were recorded in the most recent year for which we have data. I appeal to the Government to act decisively in making the necessary changes, here, at home in Scotland, to prevent violence against women. It is a global problem, but we can make a difference by acting locally.

As colleagues have noted, the theme for this year's international women's day is "Inspire Inclusion". In that spirit, I think that the most inspiring thing that the Government could do here to encourage women's inclusion would be to prevent the violence that too often derails and destroys lives.

Today's debate is welcome and worth while, but actions speak louder than words and women in this country need action from the Government. Scotland's justice system is too often stacked against victims. The Government could put more victims on the Scottish Sentencing Council, thereby giving them a voice in any new proposals. Domestic abuse in Scotland is at near-record levels. The Government could agree to the proposal by my colleague, Pam Gosal MSP, for a domestic abuse prevention bill that would give survivors more support and give the police more powers to prevent assault.

Women are underrepresented in our justice system. Only one in five sheriffs, one in four judges and one in three police officers are women. The Government could act to make those professions more attractive to women and to encourage more girls to consider those occupations as future careers.

Those are just a few examples of actions that the Government could take immediately to make Scotland a better place for women.

I fully support the Government's motion and the minister's comments. I have already welcomed her to her role; it is good to see her here. It is right that we constantly promote gender equality internationally, that we champion women's rights and that we look at how to make life better for women across the globe, but on international women's day we should also urgently examine what we can do in this country to make Scotland a safer place. We should overhaul the justice system and ensure that victims' voices are heard. We should seek to prevent violence against women and we should inspire inclusion by ensuring that every woman feels safe and secure.

On international women's day, it is right to speak about rights for women globally, but we must be prepared to act to improve the same rights for women locally.

16:17

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I, too, take the opportunity to welcome the minister to her role.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on international women's day. The theme this year is "Inspire Inclusion", which recognises that, when people understand and value women's inclusion, they forge a better world.

Standing in this Parliament, I feel proud to recognise that our Scottish Cabinet is a testament to that, with more women than men in the top roles. It shows our young women that reaching the top positions in politics can be an achievable goal. That is something that we should never give up on. It is something to protect and should be the norm. Studies show that that also makes us truly better off. States where women hold more political power are less likely to go to war or to be weak on human rights. That is significant and highlights the practical importance of having women in positions of power.

Of course, much more must be done on representation. According to Engender's report "Sex & Power in Scotland 2023", women account for only 27 per cent of council leaders, 26 per cent of university principals and 7 per cent of chief executive officers of Scotland's top businesses. Although the report notes improvements in some areas, such as political institutions and the health sector, the figures show that women are still missing from key roles. When the burdens of childcare, household labour and care for relatives still rest firmly on women's shoulders, it can feel more difficult for women to progress. That is not how it should be, but studies have found that women undertake three times more of the world's care and domestic work than men. That is why it is so important to celebrate how far the Scottish

Government has gone to alleviate some of that burden and to ensure that women here are not forced out of their jobs or of public life.

The Poverty Alliance correctly asserts that women's poverty is completely interlinked with child poverty. That is why the Scottish child payment is so important and welcome, along with the expansion of free childcare, which has made 1,140 hours a year available to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. The introduction of carers allowance supplement corrected a wrong that was created and maintained by successive Westminster Governments, and other measures that ensure that women are treated as equals include the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021, which, following collaborative work, enshrined free access to period products in law. Although more can be done, those measures are significant and they make an impact on women's lives.

When we reflect on international women's day, it is important that we look more widely and take a global perspective rather than focusing only on our country, and doing so highlights the discrepancies in women's equality and inclusion in public life across different countries. There is no escaping the fact that conflict always has a gendered nature. In the second year of the invasion of Ukraine, that is very clear. Women are giving birth in basements and in high-stress conditions, and men were forced to remain behind while women and children migrated out of Ukraine to neighbouring countries. In Gaza, women and children are expected to be hardest hit as women tend to vastly deprioritise their food intake when access to food is restricted and they face even higher health and malnutrition risks, not only for themselves but for their babies. Overcrowding and a lack of privacy in temporary shelters, coupled with scarce resources, can lead to disputes and violence, including gender-based violence. The lack of access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities for menstruation hygiene management affects women's and girls' dignity as well as their mental and physical health.

That is why the Scottish Government's investment in women as advocates for human rights and initiatives such as the warm Scots future, the women in conflict 1325 fellowship, the human rights defender fellowship and the commitment to the feminist approach to international relationships are so important in the long term, as the minister mentioned.

International women's day is also a time to recognise the work of local groups in our community and to thank them for everything that they do to support women. My sincere and eternal thanks go to Clydebank Women's Aid and East

Dunbartonshire Women's Aid, which provide support, information and refuge to women. They are quite literally lifelines to many women out there.

Today also serves as a call to action for our leaders to redouble their efforts to create a world where women are included. We must work to dismantle systems that hold women back. Importantly, we must take an intersectional approach when we consider women's inclusion to ensure that women of colour, disabled women, refugee women, women of minority faith communities, LGBTI women, older and younger women, women from deprived areas and women from other minority groups are deeply involved in their communities and feel included.

I welcome all the contributions to today's debate. Let us collectively forge a more inclusive world for the women out there.

16:23

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I apologise to members that I will have to leave before the end of the debate and I thank you for your understanding in that regard.

I am pleased to lend my voice in this debate in support of the continuing work that we must do to realise equality for women and girls, not just at home but around the world. I acknowledge the many powerful contributions that we have heard from my colleagues on the Labour benches and the leadership that women in my party and across the Parliament have shown in working to break down barriers, smash glass ceilings and staircases and support other women to become engaged and involved in politics and public life. On that note, I welcome the minister to her place in her first debate in her new role.

However, we know that we have so much more to do, and it is clear to me that men have so much more to do. In contributing to previous debates on these issues, such as the debate in November on the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, I have focused largely on the role that men must play in bringing about change and equality, and I intend to do that again in the time that I have today. The theme of this year's international women's day, which is "Inspire Inclusion", is critical to changing men's attitudes to women in all aspects of life.

As the UN's IWD campaign organisation notes, when women are not present, all of us, but men in particular, need to ask why they are not. What could we change to make spaces more accessible to women? What could we change in our own behaviour, or call out in the behaviour of others, to ensure that all spaces are inclusive? What do we need to change in our systems to ensure that we

actively encourage more women into those spaces, to promote equality?

I am proud of the work that my political party and movement has done in playing such a large part in advancing gender equality over many years. A previous Labour UK Government passed the Equality Act 2010, and Scottish Labour MSPs have been ferocious campaigners on ending period poverty, increasing women's representation in politics and tackling the on-going problem of gender-based violence. However, we know that, across this Parliament and other legislatures, there is much more work to do towards achieving equality and inclusion.

As we have heard during the debate, we need to face up to the challenges that we, in Scotland, continue to see in our systems, and, in particular, in our workplaces. In workforces in which the majority of workers are women, we must properly value and develop roles and pay structures so that we can support women to get out of poverty and into long-term sustainable work that pays them not just to get by but to get on. We must continue to examine the issue of institutionalised sexism in the social security system and the unfairness that is embedded in some of its payments. In our justice system, too many women are failed, ignored, sidelined or treated with appalling misogyny. On today of all days, that should be at the forefront of all our minds. In healthcare, we must move forward with purpose—for example, on the creation of buffer zones so that women can access their right to healthcare free of harassment.

As legislators, we have an important role to play in all that work. On wider social and cultural levels, men have a similarly important role in ensuring that the burden of opening up spaces to make them more inclusive and to make society more respectful does not fall on women. Instead, the burden should fall on men to listen, change their behaviour and proactively take steps forward, rather than just expect someone else to take responsibility.

I am therefore pleased to support campaign groups such as White Ribbon Scotland, which does vital work in challenging pervasive and persistent misogyny, which is so often the root cause of enduring inequality and exclusion. I am also pleased to work with organisations such as Close the Gap, which works to close the economic gap that remains a barrier to women's inclusion in the labour market and other places. It is crucial that we educate men, in particular, about such on-going work.

Domestic issues and work to change approaches remain a priority but, as we have heard, the issue is about more than just the problems here at home. Right across the globe,

women and girls find themselves facing violence, oppression and misogyny every day. In the face of war and state violence, women stand up for their rights and, in many cases, their lives with incredible bravery. In Iran, women and girls risked everything to protest against the death of Mahsa Amini and the actions of the hardline regime's morality police. In Afghanistan, women are fighting to retain their freedom and their lives following the Taliban's return to power. In conflict zones from Ukraine to Africa, women's rights organisations lead efforts to ensure the upholding of international law and to stop sexual violence being used as a tool of war. Our thoughts turn to the experiences of the women in Israel who were taken hostage by Hamas on 7 October and who have still not returned to their families, and to those in Palestine who, as many members have already referenced, are suffering unimaginable horrors in the most desperate of situations. Tomorrow, on international women's day, we should all redouble our calls for an immediate ceasefire in that war—an end to rocket fire in and out of Gaza, the return of hostages and an end to violence and bloodshed—as we aspire to a two-state solution where no woman has to live in fear.

It is incumbent on us all to play whatever small part we can to support and stand with women, to ensure that they are empowered as agents of change, to call out and hold accountable the perpetrators of violence against them, and to ensure that men change and regulate their behaviour and the behaviour of others. We must all work together to make the change that we want to see in the world.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I advise members that there is no time in hand, so they will need to stick to their time allocations.

16:29

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, welcome the minister to her new role.

I am pleased to be able to speak in today's international women's day debate. For more than a century, this event has recognised the remarkable achievements of women and girls around the world. This year's theme of "Inspire Inclusion" resonates deeply with our commitment to fostering a more equitable world by championing the inclusion of women in all aspects of society.

It is right, however, that, as we come together to celebrate the undoubted progress that has been made, we also confront the persistent challenges that women and girls face, both here, in Scotland, and globally. Around the world, we witness grave

injustices: the regressive measures enforced by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including the denial of education; the subjugation of women in Iran, highlighted by their restrictive dress codes and treatment, including the killing of women who so bravely stand against it; and, most recently and most shockingly, the appalling weaponisation of sexual violence against women and girls by groups such as Hamas, and in Ukraine by Russian forces. As horrific as those examples are, they are just the tip of the iceberg that is the daily mistreatment of women and girls. Those may be the most high-profile examples—those that gain the most headlines—but, every day across the world, women and girls are denied education, forced into underage marriages and female genital mutilation or exploited by people traffickers into modern slavery. They are denied opportunities solely because of their sex.

Those realities underline the on-going struggle for gender equality and security on a global scale. They remind us—if we needed reminding—that we can never afford to be complacent. While the UK and Scotland have seen progress, we cannot ignore the many challenges that women and girls here continue to face. There has been an alarming rise in violence against women in Scotland, and it is our duty to address the issue with urgency and determination. As others have highlighted, in Scotland, domestic abuse incidents are close to their highest level on record. There were nearly 65,000 recorded incidents of domestic abuse in 2021-22; only the previous year was worse. Seven domestic abuse-related killings were reported last year, and there were nearly 500 charges of attempted murder and serious assault related to domestic abuse.

As others have done, I welcome my colleague Pam Gosal's efforts in drafting a domestic abuse register bill, which would require those placed on it to report changes in their circumstances to the police. The bill would ensure that rehabilitation was mandatory for those convicted under the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018.

As someone from an island community who represents the vast Highlands and Islands region and its many dispersed communities, I would also like to speak briefly about the impact that rurality can have. Many women and girls in my region live further from the vital support that those living in urban areas take for granted. Even when services are accessible, they can be limited. When a victim of domestic violence in a remote community is brave enough to call for help, that help can take longer to arrive. When someone suffers a sexual assault, medical and emotional support can take longer to be given. That can, too often, prolong or even increase the suffering of victims, who in some cases are then expected to continue to live in small communities, with their abusers living

nearby. That can make many women and girls feel isolated and alone, and more must be done to ensure that that is not the case. I take this opportunity to commend all the organisations, and those in my region in particular, that work so hard in doing their best to ensure that women and girls in such situations are provided with the help and support that they need as speedily and comprehensively as possible.

A female colleague of mine said to me only yesterday that women's rights are like a pendulum, warning that that can easily swing back as it has swung forward over the past few years, that hard-earned gains can be lost and that the progress that has been made is not irreversible. I have real fear for the next generation, given the challenges that they face. Only yesterday we debated violence in schools, and I know of many incidents in which young girls have been targeted, their suffering often being filmed and then shared on social media. Incidents of explicit image sharing and revenge porn are increasing. Cases of drink spiking have become more frequent. The number of sexual crimes in Scotland rose to nearly 14,900 in 2023.

The growth of artificial intelligence only creates more challenges, which I do not think society or any Government is close to addressing or even understanding. Added to that, we have the rise of incel culture and those who promote it, and the latent toxic masculinity that society has ignored for too long.

Before I conclude, I will turn briefly to our profession. Although I recognise what Karen Adam said, there has been some positive change. Three women have now led the UK Government, the Scottish Parliament has had a female First Minister, and all three major parties in the chamber have been led by a woman. In local government, the leaders of three of the six councils in my Highlands and Islands region are women: Kathleen Robertson in Moray Council, Emma Macdonald in Shetland Islands Council and, most recently, Heather Woodbridge in Orkney Islands Council, which is my home council. That is progress. I commend the efforts of those in all political parties and communities who are working to ensure better representation for women and other groups. However, we all know that we can and must do more.

I will never be able to put myself in the position of women—to be overlooked or feel undervalued because I am a woman; to feel unsafe in places where I should be able to feel safe because I am a woman; or to face barriers because I am a woman. However, I am a son, a brother and a friend, and I will always fight for my family, my friends and my female colleagues to have the opportunities that they should have by right.

Ahead of international women's day tomorrow, I reaffirm my commitment to celebrate women's achievements, to raise awareness of discrimination, and to take action to drive gender parity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I reinforce the fact that members will need to stick to their speaking allocation. I call Maggie Chapman. You have up to six minutes, Ms Chapman.

16:36

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): International women's day is a day for solidarity—a day to stand with women all over the world. It is a chance to reflect on the achievements and victories of past campaigns and to acknowledge how far we still have to go.

We know that women bear the brunt of social injustice and economic and environmental inequalities in Scotland and globally. Women live with the consequences of those inequalities every day. Women die because of the consequences of those inequalities every day.

It is right and appropriate that the motion recognises the impact of conflict on women and girls. We are all acutely aware that it does so in the context of not only the invasion of Ukraine, but the bitter genocide in Gaza, the on-going devastation of Yemen, and the often-forgotten refugee and humanitarian crisis in South Sudan.

There is much in the motion that deserves discussion, but I want to focus on two related issues: the Scottish Government's commitment to a feminist approach to international relations and the need to amplify the voices of women and marginalised groups.

When we commit ourselves to a feminist approach, we also commit ourselves to asking exactly what that means in specific situations—especially situations of conflict. A feminist policy is, of course, an ethical policy, but it goes beyond that. It means being critical in the best sense of the word, asking difficult questions, developing rather than inheriting positions, and always being open to challenge. That challenge comes first and foremost from the experiences of those whose lives, hopes, homes and futures are directly affected by our actions and omissions.

A genuinely feminist foreign policy has particularly difficult questions to ask in relation to conflict. How far are political rather than solely military solutions being sought and progressive voices on all sides being supported? What role are women playing in peace negotiations? How effectively are combatants and civilians being distinguished, recalling not only the horrors of collective punishment but the dangers of forced

universal conscription in creating and reinforcing gender binaries and prioritising technical competence over the minimisation of harm? Are we resisting the glorification of the military, including mobilised children? Are we exploring the ethical dilemmas of arms provision, sanctions and increasing military expenditure? How far is our policy mindful of the particular needs, rights and vulnerabilities of women and children, especially those who face intersecting oppressions and challenges? While showing solidarity with all victims of war, are we acknowledging colonial and political histories in which our own traditions may be complicit? Why are those considerations so often afterthoughts and luxuries, seemingly irrelevant to the important business of war?

Svetlana Alexievich, the Nobel prize-winning oral historian and activist, wrote in “The Unwomanly Face of War”:

“Everything we know about war we know with ‘a man’s voice.’ ... When women speak, they have nothing or almost nothing of what we are used to reading and hearing about: how certain people heroically killed other people and won. Or lost. What equipment there was and which generals.

Women’s stories are different and about different things. ‘Women’s war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things.’”

Women’s stories are of people doing human things. So, we come to my second focus, which is on amplifying voices—listening to those who can speak with truth but who may not be heard. I am conscious that, even in here, some voices are easier to hear than others—and that those who reach us at all are, to some extent, privileged. However, that is a reason not to close our ears but to listen more deeply—to understand more and understand better.

I will end by reading from the work of two contemporary women poets. The first piece, by Threa Almontaser, from “Operation Restoring Hope”, in “The Wild Fox of Yemen”, is:

“Death doesn’t choose who it favors. A missile does.

It might go for the last field of melons.
Or a front gate the uncles just painted, white
as bonefish, its tips reaching the lowest

heaven. It can choose the funeral, kill one hundred forty,
wound five hundred more.

There is no time for mourning. The people of Yemen are
tossed
back into the cage, without ceremony.

It might choose the mountain
girl, a break in her brother’s shepherd stick
where the corpse fell.

Now she is the sister of ruin, knows what an eyeball
does
when dazed, full of exile.”

The next, from “The State of —” by Lena Khalaf Tuffaha, part of a collection of Palestinian poetry in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, is:

“Noun gerund of the verb (to journey)
A setting out, a departure
A boy’s voice calls out from beneath what used to be
the second story of a house
I am here he cries *can anyone hear me?*
I am here and the night sky is sleeping on my chest

Noun gerund of the verb (to leave)
An exodus, a detachment
A father has gone in search of bread
A baker has gone in search of flour
A mother has gone in search of a cloud
A people have gone
A world in each of them

Noun gerund of the verb (to travel)
A parting, a demise
A girl steps on top of the walls of what used to be
the third story of a house
I am searching for the sea she cries
Has anyone seen it? It used to live in my window.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rhoda Grant.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have Ms Grant’s microphone, please?

Rhoda Grant: [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that we are not hearing you, Ms Grant.

I call Ruth Maguire and will come back to Ms Grant when her audio has been sorted out.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have Ms Maguire’s microphone?

16:43

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The Scottish Government motion acknowledges that women’s equality has not yet been achieved and that it remains one of the greatest human rights challenges that we face. Although, fittingly, we take a global perspective today, we should be under no illusion that the root causes of the immense challenges that are faced by women and girls across the world are the same as they are here. The root causes of inequality and violence are the same. There is much work to be done in Scotland. Our previous item of business and the systematic misogyny that was highlighted during it lay that out starkly.

On that note, I will talk briefly on something that I have raised on a number of occasions and often in a half-empty chamber—I will keep doing so nonetheless—which is the frankly irrational

position in our law as it relates to prostitution. Pimping websites operate free from criminal sanctions and men who exploit women by paying for sex enjoy impunity, while women who are abused through prostitution face penalties for soliciting. The Scottish Government's decades-old position is that prostitution is violence, yet our legal system criminalises the victims of that violence—not the websites that are profiting, nor the men who are perpetrating the violence, but the female victims of it. It is illogical and unjust, and we need to move on from that.

No matter where we are in the world, peace and stability are precarious. Safety and security are about more than the absence of violence and war. Women's experiences of peace and security in peacetime and wartime are deeply interconnected in a world that is marked by male violence and rising militarism. Globally, conflict and violence are on the rise. The accompanying human suffering is horrific, as we are witnessing in Ukraine, Yemen and Gaza. We know that women and children often bear the brunt of that suffering. I will speak about Gaza. In highlighting that, I acknowledge that colleagues have spoken about violence elsewhere. I have no hesitation in condemning violence, wherever it happens and whoever is perpetrating it.

Speaking about the situation in Gaza for women and children, Save the Children's CEO, Inger Ashing, said that she was

"running out of words to describe the horror unfolding".

I was struck by an article by Nesrine Malik entitled "In Gaza, there's a war on women. Will the west really ignore it because 'they're not like us'?" She describes how the healthcare system there has been all but obliterated.

The charity Care International UK states that there are no doctors, midwives or nurses to support women during labour. There is no pain medication, anaesthesia or hygiene material when women give birth. Babies are born outside, umbilical cords are cut with whatever sharp object there is to hand and tins are filled with hot water to keep newborns warm. Caesarean sections, which are painful in their aftermath even when there are drugs, are being performed without any anaesthesia by surgeons who do not have water to wash their hands, let alone to sterilise them, and there are no antibiotics for any resulting infections. In some cases, according to the Washington Post, C sections were performed on women post-mortem.

If women and children do manage to prevail in those impossible circumstances, they are faced with displacement and hunger while nursing painful tears, wounds and malnourished babies. Pregnant women will have had to have made a

20-mile journey from the north to the south in Gaza, and they will arrive in circumstances that UNICEF describes as breaching famine thresholds. That is particularly concerning when it comes to the fate of tens of thousands of pregnant and breastfeeding women, the majority of whom can consume only one or two types of food. Mothers cannot access sufficient food or clean water to produce milk for their babies.

It is hard to find words to describe that horror. I am at the point where I am not sure how many more pictures of dead babies, women and children I can look at. I wondered if it might be helpful to share some things that people can do and some actions that they can take if they are feeling helpless. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom provides some suggestions for immediate action. Those are to write to the UK Government and demand that it uphold its obligation, under common article 1 to the Geneva conventions, to ensure that all parties to conflict follow international law, which should include calling for a ceasefire. You can lobby your Government for concrete actions such as sanctions to be taken against Israel if it does not comply with the United Nations Security Council resolutions. You can demand that your country cut off diplomatic relations with Israel if it does not immediately end its bombardment and siege of Gaza and start abiding by international law. On an individual front, you can also participate in a sanctions campaign. I urge people to find out about boycott, divestment and sanctions, which are legitimate and peaceful methods for tackling rogue apartheid states that have worked in the past and can work again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Maguire. We now move to the final speaker in the open debate, which will be Rhoda Grant.

Rhoda Grant: Can you hear me now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are coming through loud and clear, Ms Grant.

16:49

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): During the debate on international women's day, I will speak again about commercial sexual exploitation, which is an issue on which we have made very little progress on tackling since last year.

The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation published a report on international insights and how Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation, and Ruth Maguire held a members' business debate on the report's findings, which were clear. Demand to purchase sex fuels commercial sexual exploitation. Countries that

have challenged demand have cut commercial sexual exploitation and they have also cut human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Sweden was one of the first to criminalise demand. That resulted in a fairer and more equal society, equality in pay and equality in caring responsibilities.

The Scottish Government has recently published “Scotland’s strategic approach to challenging and deterring men’s demand for prostitution and supporting the recovery and sustainable exit of those involved in prostitution”. It is disappointing that that document brings forward no new policy for tackling men’s demand for prostitution. It recognises that those who are involved in selling or exchanging sex are victims of exploitation—that is not new—but it does absolutely nothing to rebalance criminality. Women selling sex will still be breaking the law, while men buying it will get away scot free.

The document summarises action to date. Like many Scottish Government strategies that are being published at present, it rehashes history and shows no vision and no ambition to tackle the problem. The CPG report quotes Tsitsi Matekaire, who summed up the situation perfectly by saying:

“Without the demand of those that are buying, the sex trade would not exist and thrive. So in order to end ... sexual exploitation it really becomes imperative to address the demand, and addressing demand in law means criminalising those who buy sex.”

Sadly, we heard in Parliament today about and recently saw Iain Packer’s conviction for the murder of Emma Caldwell and the abuse of at least 22 other women. If those women had not been at risk of being criminalised and if Iain Packer had been at that risk, would the police attitude have been different? Sadly, men are allowed to continue to abuse women because of our law in Scotland, which blames and criminalises women for men’s abuse.

After Ireland criminalised the purchase of sex, analysis by University College Dublin’s sexual exploitation research programme found that

“the 2017 Act has already increased the likelihood that women in prostitution will report violence committed against them without fear of being criminalised themselves”.

Our approach must be to deal with demand while supporting women who are exploited. If we cut demand, fewer and fewer women will be exploited. By only helping women in prostitution and not dealing with demand, we create a system of unmet demand that goes to even greater lengths to meet that demand. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation grows to meet that demand. In addition, the UK Government has passed laws on immigration that impact on those who are trafficked and will make it more difficult for trafficked people to seek help.

Every step that we take to provide more cover to exploiters leaves more women vulnerable. We need to learn from international experience. The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation carried out an inquiry into pimping websites, which provide even greater cover to people who would exploit and even less protection to the exploited. Within 48 hours of the USA banning pimping websites, all the major websites had stopped hosting prostitution adverts.

For decades, the Scottish Government has recognised prostitution as violence against women. It creates inequality. How can women be equal if they are commodities to be bought and sold?

Bringing in a ban is not easy; every country that has challenged demand for sex buying has faced pushback. Internationally, every change in the law to tackle demand has been backed by strong political leadership. The Scottish Government must therefore go back to the drawing board and come forward with policies that tackle demand. Government members must become leaders who are willing to take on entitlement, social norms and vested interests and take a stand for the exploited. We need that kind of leadership in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:55

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The Scottish Parliament has a strong record in our commitment to improving the lives of women and exposing what sexism and discrimination look like in our daily lives. Crucially, in today’s debate, we are highlighting that the liberation of women from violence and discrimination is a global fight. I have enjoyed all the speeches this afternoon, and I am pleased that some men are still joining us to speak, because it is important to all women that men speak in such debates.

I also congratulate Kaukab Stewart, the first woman of colour in her post. As members can see, she is already getting under way with very serious work, and I fully support the programmes that the minister outlined today, which are working with African nations such as Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia.

New research suggests that boys and men from younger generations are more likely than older baby boomers to believe that feminism has done more harm than good and that women’s equality has gone far enough. I could not believe that when I saw it, but I have seen the figures, even if other members have not. The idea that women’s equality has gone far enough means that today’s debate is a testimony to the fact that we still have much further to go. As another member said, it is

clear that women are still overlooked in everyday life and that we are still not represented in our full strength of being half the population in virtually every part of society, public or private.

Recognising the complex nature of intersectional feminism and the diversity of women and having different experiences is also important and worthy of further work.

Worryingly, a fifth of men between the ages of 16 and 29 also look favourably on social media influencers and self-proclaimed misogynists who have said that women should bear responsibility for being sexually assaulted.

Today, I raised with the First Minister the important issue of image-based abuse, which Jamie Halcro Johnston referred to in his speech, and I welcome the work that Siobhian Brown and Jenny Gilruth are doing in that regard. Girls are subjected to huge pressure from boys, and boys seem locked into stereotypes—somehow, they believe that they will gain respect from their peers if they participate in such action. Releasing intimate images without consent is a form of violence against women and can be damaging to girls' lives in the long term.

The prevalence of easily accessible pornography is part of the picture. I raised the issue, as many other members did, in one of the previous debates. I mentioned the OnlyFans site in the most recent debate and raised my concerns about the safety and exploitation of women online. They need protection because men do not always stick to the rules. I met OnlyFans representatives, because they pursued me to meet them, and I pressed them on some of those points about women's safety online.

Today, many of us have had the opportunity to meet the Caldwell family, who campaigned for almost 20 years for justice for Emma Caldwell. It is not only about the horror of her murder. The man at the centre of that had violated and committed crimes against other women, and, when I was looking at the issue over the past few months, what spoke to me was the justice agencies' treatment—certainly 20 years ago—of women. Somehow, because of the lives that they led and the danger that they were exposed to, they were not taken seriously if they reported that they had been raped. Perhaps some things have changed, but a lot more needs to change.

Ruth Maguire: Does Pauline McNeill share my opinion that the fact that those women could be charged is totally unjust? The law as it stands says that some of those women could still be charged with soliciting.

Pauline McNeill: Yes—I think that that is completely wrong. I agree with Ruth Maguire on that and with what Rhoda Grant had to say about

commercial sexual exploitation of women, and I have believed that for a long time.

Many members have talked about women bearing the brunt of war. In every conflict, women face sexual violence and daily suffering. Maggie Chapman made the point that women are often very remote from any of the decisions that are made about war. Sexual violence against Israeli women and against Palestinian women is equally unacceptable.

I cannot speak without addressing—as other members have mentioned—what has happened in the Gaza strip in the past 150 days. Women in Gaza are steps away from famine and complete catastrophe, with no escape. I am grateful to my colleague Carol Mochan, who yesterday confronted us all with the reality of the 50,000 women in Gaza who are pregnant. Many of those women are malnourished and unable to breastfeed, and many of those pregnancies will not reach full term. There is no baby formula, and not enough aid is reaching the Gaza strip in order to give them a chance.

There are also women in the occupied west bank of Palestine who are forced to give birth, or who miscarry, at checkpoints. Some cannot get to their health appointments, and there are mothers who see their sons imprisoned under occupation and shot in the street. A resolution of the Palestinian conflict is long overdue. As Paul O'Kane rightly said, the only way to give all women, and men, in that region peace is by seeking a two-state solution.

Yemen, too, is a very poor country—in fact, it is the poorest country in the middle east. It is another country that is worth mentioning because it has the highest maternal death rates in the world: one Yemeni woman dies in childbirth every two hours from preventable causes. Child marriage is a coping mechanism that many Yemeni parents turn to as they deal with the precarious situation in which they are living. Families face not only mass displacement but devastating economic crisis and the collapse of many vital social services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Pauline McNeill: It is estimated that more than 7 million women throughout Yemen require urgent access to services that address gender-based violence, yet such services are extremely limited or completely absent.

In conclusion, I return to the global picture. The World Bank report that was recently published states that the gender gap for women in the workplace is even wider than previously thought, so it is clear that we have a lot to do in order to hand on a future to the next generations of

women, so that they can hope for something much better.

17:02

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. As we have heard, not only was the first female member of Parliament a Conservative; the first three, and only, female Prime Ministers to lead the UK Government were Conservative. We will always stand up for the rights of women and girls.

Today, however, is about talking about inspiring inclusion, so let us do some of that. The UK Government has passed the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which covers England and Wales. I am proud to be in the same political party as my colleague Pam Gosal, who is bringing forward a similar bill on a domestic abuse register in Scotland.

I will swing back to talking about the global perspective. We have heard a significant amount about that today from colleagues on all sides of the chamber. Jamie Halcro Johnston spoke about how we must confront the persistent challenges that women face both in Scotland and globally, and the grave injustices around the world. Meghan Gallacher quite graphically described some of the images to which we were exposed following the atrocious terrorist attack on 7 October.

We also heard about the repressive measures that are enforced by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including the denial of education to women. However, I was delighted to hear from Beatrice Wishart about the Linda Norgrove Foundation, which is bringing Afghan women to study medicine in my home city of Edinburgh.

International women's day celebrates the achievements of women and has done so for more than 100 years. As I said, this year's theme is to inspire inclusion and create a better world by promoting the inclusion of women. We have heard at length today about the struggles that women face in accessing health services, particularly in those areas where there is global conflict and particularly if they are pregnant, given some of the horrific challenges—which we have heard about today—that arise from giving birth without proper medical supervision and without a sterile environment in which to do so.

Women bear more of the impact of global conflict than men do. Since 2017, there has been an increase of 50 per cent in the number of women who are living in areas of global conflict. Basically, women bear the brunt of war, and that should be a wake-up call for us all.

I want to pivot to more home-inspired things. Ruth Maguire said that the root causes of inequality across the world are the same ones that we face closer to home. Maybe it says something about my choice of television, but we have been exposed to some high-profile TV documentaries of late about women who have tragically lost their lives in the UK, including close to home. We heard about Emma Caldwell in the statement prior to this debate. We have heard about Fawziyah Javed, who lost her life very close to here when she was pushed off a cliff in what can only be classed as horrific domestic violence. Then there is Sarah Everard. We have to think about things that are going on close to home as well as globally when it comes to violence against women.

No one has spoken about the following yet, so I will try my best to do so—I promise that I have my eye on the clock, Presiding Officer. Having women in science, and all STEM fields, is a way to drive equality, give women a place on the global stage in terms of innovation and make changes to our own lives. That subject is important to me, given my background in medicine and healthcare and my degree in biochemistry from the University of Edinburgh. Despite significant strides, women remain underrepresented in those fields, facing barriers ranging from societal stereotypes to systemic biases—as members can hear, when you have to speed up to finish your speech in seven minutes, you can stumble over your words.

However, countless pioneering women have defied the obstacles and serve as role models for future generations—from Marie Curie, whose groundbreaking research earned her two Nobel prizes, to Dr Frances Arnold, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, for her work on the directed evolution of enzymes. Those trailblazers exemplify the immense contributions that women make to scientific discovery and technological advancement, which can help every single person in the world, including, most importantly, women. By celebrating their achievements, fostering mentorship opportunities and advocating for inclusive policies, we can inspire women to pursue careers in science and STEM, ensuring that their voices and talents continue to shape the future of innovation and exploration.

From a personal perspective, I was delighted to see that Caritas Science Solutions, a business in my region, recently won the small business of the year award at the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce annual business awards. It is a clinical research organisation that puts people before profit, with a fantastic female chief executive officer, Leigh Fell, who I am unashamedly proud to call one of my very good friends.

However, work must still be done to ensure equality. We have heard the troubling statistics

that Jamie Halcro Johnston and Sharon Dowe spoke of when they highlighted the violence that we face across Scotland and mentioned a justice system that is stacked against victims.

I want to say something else briefly. The minister mentioned Ukraine and the Ukrainian families that we have taken in in Scotland, and she said that we need a national system that works for everyone. I would like to bring it to the minister's attention—it is convenient that the housing minister is in the chamber, too—that the system is not quite working right now. Fifty Ukrainian families and households are now being assessed as homeless in our capital city. We have had a slashing of budgets, and the City of Edinburgh Council faces considerable financial risks in helping our Ukrainian families live their lives well in Edinburgh. I would like to hear some comments on that.

Even though the status of women in Scotland and in the rest of the UK has generally improved, it is clear that more work needs to be done to achieve absolute equality across the sexes. We are calling on the UK and Scottish Governments to work together to support women's rights in Scotland, the rest of the UK and abroad. International women's day 2024 provides an opportunity to raise awareness and promote an inclusive and equitable society. It is a time to celebrate the achievements of women while also recognising the work that needs to be done to achieve greater gender equality. Whether it is through advocacy, activism or simple acts of kindness and support, we can all contribute to a world in which every person has equal opportunities to thrive and succeed, regardless of their gender.

17:09

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I welcome the general consensus on the need to come together around what Carol Mochan described as “a common purpose”—achieving gender equality at home and globally. Those two aims are not separate, not only because—as Sue Webber and others have pointed out—their root causes are the same, but because we know that gender equality, by definition, will not exist until it exists for everyone.

Leaving any group behind—whether they are women of colour, displaced women or women living in the global south—is not an option. We understand that and we want to take action on gender equality across the board. Every portfolio in Government is tasked with considering the realisation of human rights and tackling inequality when making decisions.

Today, we focus on the work that is being done on a global approach and taking a feminist approach to international relations and international development. In doing that, we are proving ourselves to be a Government and a country that act on their principles and are effective and progressive voices on the world stage.

We recognise that gender inequality exists at home and across the world, so we want to play our part in protecting women and girls and in empowering them, no matter where they live, to tackle it. That is why, alongside extensive domestic work to break structural inequalities and to support women in Scotland with the distinct challenges that we face, we are taking steps to support women and girls across the world. We are doing our bit to empower and work with the women who stand the greatest chance—with a bit of support and solidarity and a platform—of progressing equality where they are, be they in Malawi, Rwanda or Zambia. That is what we are doing now as a nation with a devolved Government, and that is the tone in which we would, if we were a normal independent country, set out our principles and engage with nations across the world.

The theme of this year's international women's day is, of course, “Inspire Inclusion”. That is important because lack of inclusion, especially in decision making and prioritisation, means that people get left behind or forgotten. We know that climate change impacts women and girls more than it does men and boys. We know that women and girls are often impacted by sexual violence during war or are subject to escalating healthcare inequalities such as those that were described by Ruth Maguire.

We know that we can make change and influence progress by taking a feminist approach to international relations, from considering the impact on women and girls of trade decisions and arms exports, to sharing among ourselves and other nations experiences and best practice in achieving gender equality.

Meghan Gallacher, Carol Mochan and others all talked about the situations that many women and girls have been put in due to current conflicts, which have cost them their safety, their families and their lives. Scotland stands ready to support those who are fleeing war and persecution, and we will do all that we can to play our part in preventing such horrific harm and deaths by progressing gender equality globally. That will not be successful without the voices and experiences of women. We will not achieve gender equality without inclusion—intersectional inclusion, as was described by Marie McNair.

We want our international development work to be impactful on gender equality, and we want to recognise the need to decolonise the process—to remove the white gaze and ensure that everything is inclusive.

We must recognise the need to amplify voices, not speak for others; to actively question the expertise that we value; and to listen to those who have not been heard before and ensure that their views influence change. That is what we are doing through the new women and girls fund. We are engaging meaningfully with those who can effect change, supporting their work financially and enabling them to identify and meet their own priorities, thereby equalising power.

Karen Adam was right to talk about the need to continue making progress. She is right that this chamber is missing voices. There are intersectional inequalities at play that prevent many women from being active in public life. She was spot on in saying that, once we get here, we are often made to do extra work just to get on an equal footing. We must often force ourselves into a system that is not designed for us, and we must use the time and energy that male colleagues get to use in doing their jobs to make adjustments for ourselves. It was reassuring to hear Paul O’Kane reflecting on the need for him and other men here to do that work as well.

With the women and girls fund, we are trying to do that work with women who need the wider system to change to recognise their value, rather than making them do it all themselves. Karen Adam is right that we have to get our house in order. That applies whether our house refers to this chamber, this country or this planet.

As Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, I will continue to work with Karen Adam and any other member in the chamber who wants to make things better and has ideas on how to move us forward.

Ruth Maguire was right to outline suggestions of what individuals can do, while recognising that the responsibility is on states to take ethical decisions about their international work. It is easy to feel helpless when one is standing against something as strong and large as global gender inequality, and historical sexism and misogyny, but there are things that we can all do—even things that are as simple as keeping up pressure on those who have access to the most power to make the changes.

I want to talk a little more about intersectionality and the importance of considering how intersecting inequalities require us to change our approach and remember those who are furthest from power or are unable to access the support and services that already exist.

Jamie Halcro Johnston touched on rurality. Although geography is not a protected characteristic, I see it as an equalities issue. I know that, like barriers such as disability, age, ethnicity and faith, geographical barriers can compound gender inequality. When I spoke with ORSAS—Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service—I heard about situations that exist on Orkney. The myths there around gender-based violence and inequality are very different from what we would hear if we spoke to RSASH—Rape and Sexual Abuse Service Highland—about the challenges with transport and other services that survivors face in rural areas.

The deeply embedded networks of power that protect perpetrators in those communities present differently from those in other communities. Tackling those issues as if the solution that succeeds in Wick or Glasgow will succeed in Kirkwall will not work. That should tell us a lot about the value of wider inclusion in the fight for gender equality. My experience of gender inequality has shaped me, but it is vastly different from the experience of other women in the chamber who have spoken in the debate. Their experiences, again, will be very different from the experiences of women across the world who are not engaged in politics. However, we all have valuable contributions to make in identifying the issues and undoing them. Missing out the voices of women in and from the global south is damaging not just to those women, but to the whole cause of gender equality.

I recently spoke to a constituent who is a poet, a feminist and a worker against sexual violence in the Highlands and Islands and beyond. Her name is Myra Ross and her poetry is on a window in my office, and it is garnering significant attention from passers-by, including other MSPs. I mention that because I want to quote a line from her poem “Imagine”. The poem imagines a world without sexual violence. It is a challenging piece and I wish I had time to share it all, but I will stick to these two lines:

“Imagine that with just one stroke their pain was wiped away
Imagine just imagine can we start that change today”.

We know that gender equality will not happen overnight and that we cannot wipe the pain away at just one stroke, but we can today make progress, make a difference to women and girls, no matter where they live, and start that change today.

Decision Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

17:18

Meeting closed at 17:18.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-12416.1, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12416, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on international women's day—global perspective, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S6M-12416, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, as amended, on international women's day—global perspective, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the 2024 International Women's Day theme of "Inspire Inclusion", which recognises that, when people understand and value women's inclusion, they forge a better world; acknowledges that, at a time of increasing conflict affecting civilians around the world, the specific impact on women and girls can be profound; expresses concern over the practice of female genital mutilation, which is still taking place in certain parts of the world; congratulates all parents and carers on raising the next generation of wonderful women; recognises that achieving gender equality is more vital than ever and remains one of the greatest human rights challenges globally; marks International Women's Day and the second anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, and welcomes the efforts of organisations and communities working tirelessly in pursuit of peace, inspiring inclusion, pushing forward on gender equality and amplifying the voices of women and marginalised groups, and notes the Scottish Government's investment in women as advocates for human rights, and initiatives such as the Warm Scots Future, Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship and Human Rights Defender Fellowship, and its commitment to a feminist approach to international relations.

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