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Thursday 5 December 2024

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Scottish Parliament

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[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.

Pet Services (Regulations)

1. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to introduce regulation for pet groomers, animal boarders and dog walkers, in light of the results of the public consultation from earlier this year that showed a high level of support for such measures. (S6O-04073)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Although the consultation that was undertaken last year demonstrated support for licensing, concerns were expressed about the proportionality and cost of statutory licensing and about the capacity of local authorities to absorb and meaningfully enforce additional licensing requirements when budgets are already stretched. We are therefore assessing whether less onerous and more proportionate approaches, such as registration schemes linked to codes of conduct, could deliver similar outcomes to licensing.

In the meantime, our immediate focus is to deliver on the proposal to regulate canine fertility businesses, due to the significant animal welfare concerns that are associated with that sector.

Stuart McMillan: Those of us who have pets recognise that they are treated as one of the family, and it is reasonable for pet owners to want reassurance that any services that they access are insured and that staff are appropriately qualified, which, as the minister will know, has not always been the case.

Will the minister commit to consulting the sector more widely to understand the scale of growth in pet services in Scotland, with the intention of developing a proportionate yet robust regulatory framework covering the sector to protect pets from harm?

Jim Fairlie: I agree whole-heartedly with the member's point that pet owners need to be reassured that persons who provide pet services are suitably insured and qualified. I therefore encourage any pet owner who accesses such services to undertake due diligence and to confirm

with the service provider that they are insured and qualified.

We do not propose to take forward further consultation at this time, but the Government will continue to engage with stakeholders in order to develop proportionate controls for pet service providers.

Safer Speed Limit (20mph)

2. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it will ensure that all appropriate roads have a safer speed limit of 20mph by 2025. (S6O-04074)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is firmly committed to reducing road casualties and creating safer streets for everyone. Evidence shows that a person is seven times more likely to survive if hit at 20mph than at 30mph.

All local authorities are committed to meeting the 2025 deadline and have developed their plans to designate their streets, and £4 million has been provided to 21 local authorities this financial year to aid implementation. Transport Scotland has issued national guidance to support local authorities with the roll-out of 20mph speed limits on appropriate roads.

Early feedback from Scottish Borders Council and Highland Council, as early adopters, has been positive, with a recognition from local communities that the initiative can significantly reduce road casualties, encourage sustainable travel and foster safer, more vibrant communities.

Mark Ruskell: It is clear that every council in Scotland is ready to roll out 20mph, which is remarkable. That means that, by the end of next year, every child in every community could be living on a safer street. Local implementation, alongside a national programme, will help to drive forward the national road safety messages that have been so successful in driving down casualty rates in Wales. However, when I speak to councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, there is uncertainty about what funds will be available to get the job done in the next 12 months, particularly in relation to staff resources in councils. How will the budget that was announced yesterday enable each and every one of those 32 councils to deliver implementation plans in the next year, as it is clear that that will cost more than £4 million?

Fiona Hyslop: Council road authorities had to submit the expected expenditure to deliver their plans to achieve the 20mph limits on the roads that they have chosen in their areas. However, we know that early adopters have spent significantly under those estimates—in one case, by 62 per

cent. Therefore, we are confident that there are sufficient funds in the 2025-26 budget to meet the needs. That funding can be found in the road safety line in the roads budget that was published yesterday.

The Presiding Officer: There is a brief supplementary question from Sue Webber.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Bus passengers in Edinburgh face longer journeys under the council's plans to cut speed limits from 60mph to 20mph. The proposed changes are expected to cost £850,000 and would affect 66 roads in Edinburgh. Lothian Buses has raised concerns that the slower traffic will affect journey times for passengers, adding to the misery that commuters face across our capital. Only 18 fines for breaching the 20mph speed limit in Edinburgh have been issued since 2020-21. Without enforcement, it is nothing more than an expensive box-ticking exercise. Does the cabinet secretary agree that introducing more 20mph limits will increase congestion and journey times and do nothing to encourage people to use public transport?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not sure whether the Conservative Party is aware of the data that shows that there are significant reductions in the numbers of casualties on affected roads. That is the driver for that change and improvement. I know that the member is a former Edinburgh councillor, so she will be aware of the powers that local authorities have on enforcement. She makes a valid point about whether the 20mph limit slows traffic and whether there is an issue around congestion affecting bus travel times. However, again, that is an issue that the City of Edinburgh Council, which owns the buses in Edinburgh—

Sue Webber: It does not own the buses.

Fiona Hyslop: Well, it runs a publicly—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Ms Webber, will you allow the cabinet secretary to respond?

Fiona Hyslop: Lothian Buses has shareholders. A very small number of shares are held by West Lothian Council; shares are also held by the City of Edinburgh Council. I would have thought that the transport spokesperson for the Conservatives might have known that. In putting forward a reasonable case for how we make sure that we get the benefits of increased bus use as well as safer streets, I refer the member to her former colleagues in the City of Edinburgh Council on that Edinburgh-specific issue.

Supported Businesses

3. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is

taking to maintain and grow supported businesses. (S6O-04075)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government values the role of supported businesses and is committed to helping them to achieve commercial sustainability. In Scotland, we pride ourselves on leading in that area with legislation and systems that support that. Legislation such as the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 contains a number of provisions to support supported businesses. The multi-supplier dynamic purchasing system for requirements reserved for supported businesses describes a range of products and services that supported businesses can provide to the public sector.

Recent data shows that almost £28 million of public sector spend was spent by public bodies with supported businesses in the previous year. Supported businesses are also included in the recently published social enterprise action plan. We are now working with officials to provide further guidance to public bodies and to set guidelines on how much they should seek to spend with supported businesses across the country.

Richard Leonard: I thank the minister for that answer. Haven Products in Larbert, with nine out of 10 of its workforce disabled, is facing closure. I have been pressing the Government to act to save those jobs for more than six months. As of today, neither the Government nor its short-life working group has come up with a plan to save the factory. This week, the board of Haven Products confirmed that, unless the situation is resolved, redundancy consultations will begin in early January. Does the minister agree that the time for words has long passed? Those workers need action. Will he give an undertaking today that a rescue plan will be put in place before Christmas to save those vital jobs?

Ivan McKee: I absolutely agree with the member, and I genuinely thank him for bringing the issue to the chamber. I have met the chief executive of Haven Products, who I believe will be visiting the Parliament in the next few days, at the request of Mr Leonard.

I have been working tirelessly on the matter to support Haven Products and other supported businesses, because we recognise that it is not only the right thing to do but, frankly, more cost effective to support such businesses than it is for them to close and for the individuals concerned to have to be supported, with costs to wider public services. I am absolutely committed to doing that.

Richard Leonard will be aware that we work within a regime on what we can and cannot do with specific procurement requirements, but I have told officials that we need to deliver on this and

ensure that Haven Products and other supported businesses are supported. Officials have identified opportunities in the medium term, which is welcome, but, as Richard Leonard rightly identifies, we need the delivery of orders and financial support in the immediate term. He can rest assured that we are working to ensure that that happens.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations has estimated that Labour's national insurance hike will cost the sector £75 million, with Edinburgh social enterprise Four Square warning that, after Labour's tax hike, it has "nowhere left to cut". What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact on the third sector of the changes? Will the minister outline how the Scottish budget, which was announced yesterday, is supporting third sector organisations, including social enterprises?

Ivan McKee: Colin Beattie raises an important point. The measures that have been taken in the United Kingdom budget have a significant impact on the sector. We are working with the sector and others to understand the full impact, and we are holding negotiations with the UK Government to secure funding for all the organisations that are impacted in Scotland as a consequence of those actions. Colin Beattie will know that the Scottish budget, which was published yesterday, contains a range of measures to support those enterprises.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

NHS Dental Services (Dumfries and Galloway)

4. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Public Health Scotland's recent national health service dental monitoring report, which indicates that almost 40 per cent of adults in Dumfries and Galloway are not registered with an NHS dentist. (S6O-04076)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government has made available tailored grant funding, and NHS Dumfries and Galloway recently held a successful Scottish dental access initiative application, which will result in 2,000 new NHS registrations in Moffat. We are also funding dental emergency evening clinics for unregistered patients, which have been in operation for almost 18 months.

Officials are working closely with the board to ensure that measures are in place for appropriate staffing of the Gardenhill practice in Castle Douglas to support the provision of emergency and urgent care to unregistered patients and to

provide routine dental care to a number of registered patients in priority groups.

Colin Smyth: It is not just about adults; more than 20 per cent of children in Dumfries and Galloway are not registered with an NHS dentist, which are the worst figures in Scotland. The actions that the minister has outlined are clearly not working, because the problem has been getting worse. Why is the crisis so bad in Dumfries and Galloway? Why is the action not making a difference? More important, what more will the Government do to tackle the crisis, before NHS dentistry becomes a thing of the past for far too many of my constituents?

Jenni Minto: Colin Smyth will recognise that, prior to Brexit, a large proportion of the dentists in Dumfries and Galloway and in other rural areas of Scotland came from European countries. I recently met the Minister of State for Care, Stephen Kinnock, as well as my counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland, to talk specifically about how we can improve the recruitment of dentists in the United Kingdom—this is an issue not just in Scotland.

Colin Smyth will be pleased to recognise the important investment in dentistry that the Scottish Government has put into the budget for next year. I suggest that he supports the Scottish budget, so that we can continue the improvement.

Battery Energy Storage (Guidance)

5. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to update planning guidance for battery energy storage systems. (S6O-04077)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Where new development proposals come forward, our fourth national planning framework, which was published and adopted in 2023, ensures that the impacts of proposals on communities and nature are important considerations in the decision-making process.

On 5 November, the National Energy System Operator published advice to the United Kingdom Government on how to achieve clean power by 2030. At the same time, NESO also published a consultation on connections queue reform, and the UK Government is due to publish a clean power action plan. The outputs of that work will be considered in due course.

Douglas Lumsden: At present, 18 battery sites are operational and a further 18 are under construction. Planning permission has been granted for 132 sites, where construction is awaited, and applications for planning permission have been submitted for a further 136 sites. The situation is completely out of control. One

developer told us that there is a gold rush to get applications for battery sites into the planning process before the Scottish National Party Government puts controls in place.

Will the Government consider a moratorium on new applications until we have an energy strategy and can evaluate how many battery sites are required and where?

Alasdair Allan: It is important to say that there is a statutory structure that must be followed in all decision making in the planning system. Section 25 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 requires that decisions must be made in accordance with the development plan.

I understand the point that the member makes about cumulative impacts. The cumulative impacts of development, including landscape, visual and amenity impacts, are important considerations in the determination of applications, where such impacts are identified.

Rail Services (Mid Scotland and Fife)

6. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to improve rail services for passengers in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-04078)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I appreciate that services in Fife have been affected by overcrowding for some time. ScotRail is working hard to increase capacity and to improve the resilience of services, and it has recruited more maintenance and engineering staff, as well as train drivers.

Newly recruited engineering staff will allow for two high-speed trains to be returned to service between Glasgow and Aberdeen from the December timetable change, which will release diesel trains for other parts of the network, and additional stops will continue to be made at Dalmeny and Burntisland to reduce pressure on busy morning and evening Leven services.

The electrification work between Edinburgh and Dalmeny has started. That is the first step towards electrification of the Fife routes.

In Mid Scotland and Fife, which has a reliable service, ScotRail is adding longer trains for Saturday services on the Glasgow to Alloa line to meet the growing passenger demand.

Claire Baker: The cabinet secretary has identified a number of issues with the trains in my region, but I want to ask about ScotRail's proposals to close—sorry, to adjust the hours of—54 station ticket offices. That conceals the fact that 47 stations across my region will change their hours. I feel that there is a lack of transparency around those plans and that they are not being clearly communicated to the public. The 2022

consultation showed that passengers did not support changes to ticket offices, and the Government's own report on the safety of women and girls emphasised the importance of having visible station staff.

The on-going consultation does not include members of the public, so how will the cabinet secretary ensure that the needs of all passengers are heard? Can she confirm that ScotRail will provide an up-to-date equality impact assessment?

Fiona Hyslop: With regard to that latter point, yes, I can. That point has already been made to a number of members.

Claire Baker will know that ticket office opening hours have not been adjusted for 30 years. The proportion of tickets that are sold at ticket offices has reduced from 78 per cent to 14 per cent. I am glad that she corrected herself: no ticket offices are closing; their hours are being adjusted.

In Claire Baker's region, the ticket office at Cowdenbeath station will have its opening times reduced, but staffing hours will remain unchanged. Opening hours at Cupar will increase, and although opening times at Dalmeny will be reduced, staffing hours will remain unchanged on that line. Opening hours at Dunfermline city will be increased, and although opening times at Leuchars will be reduced, staffing hours will remain unchanged.

Visibility on platforms and in stations is important, as Claire Baker has stressed, and that is the focus of the adjustments that are being made, which are currently being consulted on with staff.

NHS Grampian Winter Preparedness

7. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting NHS Grampian with its winter preparedness. (S6O-04079)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Earlier this year, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities jointly published a plan setting out how we will address the exceptional pressures that our health and care services face over winter. Building on previous experience, we are supporting local systems, including NHS Grampian, with a comprehensive, whole-system range of effective measures. That includes preventative action such as vaccination programmes; ensuring that people receive the right care in the right place and at the right time through measures such as hospital at home and public messaging campaigns; maximising capacity and capability in the system; and focusing on the wellbeing of our workforce.

Jackie Dunbar: Following the critical incident that was declared in NHS Grampian last week, will the cabinet secretary speak about the actions that the Scottish Government will take to alleviate pressure on accident and emergency services in the winter months and to ensure the most effective possible care for patients?

Neil Gray: I again place on record my thanks to the staff in NHS Grampian and other health boards who were involved in responding to the critical incident. I recognise the clear relationship between long waits and overcrowding in A and E and the increased risk of harm, which is why the budget for next year is investing in action on waiting times and will address capacity in primary and social care. Clearly, those things can happen only if members vote for the budget.

We also continue working with health boards and the national centre for sustainable delivery to enhance patient flow at acute sites, improve discharge planning and hospital-at-home services and reduce the conveyance of people from care homes, where that is clinically appropriate. All of that will, in turn, reduce pressures on A and E.

Finally, officials continue to meet regularly with NHS Grampian specifically to discuss the improvement activity that is under way within the board and any challenges that it faces.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Taxation

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I begin on a positive note, by welcoming something that the Scottish National Party Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government did yesterday—not announcing the disastrous SNP budget, of course, but holding up my letter to John Swinney for all of Scotland to see, which I thank her for. That letter set out how my party is proudly on the side of Scotland's hard-working taxpayers and businesses, and I brought my own copy here today.

Instead of reducing tax, the SNP has dragged more Scots into paying higher income tax. Every worker here who earns more than £30,000 a year will be forced to pay more than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. How can the SNP boast about always taking more for public services that only ever get worse?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I reassure you, Presiding Officer, that, unlike Mr Findlay, I will not be using props in the course of my answer.

Mr Findlay helpfully reminds the public of the problem with the letter that he sent me the other week. His letter discloses a £950 million gaping hole at the very heart of Conservative taxation proposals to this Parliament. That reeks of economic incompetence, and that economic incompetence is a consistent approach for the Scottish Conservatives.

Russell Findlay: Because I know how much John Swinney appreciated my first letter, I sent him a second one this morning, which set out the savings that we would make. Our plans are reasonable, affordable, fully costed and fully funded and would deliver fairness for Scotland's taxpayers, but the SNP proudly boasts that it will make Scottish workers pay £1.7 billion more next year than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK.

The finance secretary even had the audacity to shout about reducing bills for lower earners, but the SNP's con trick is worth, at most, £1 a month to people who earn less than £30,000—£1. What are people supposed to do with that? Buy a selection box from Poundland?

The First Minister: I think that Mr Findlay will have to practise his gags a little more after that one.

I have not seen Mr Findlay's letter yet, because I was at an early learning centre this morning explaining the importance of the Government's

commitment to lift the two-child cap that the Conservatives imposed, which is sending children in our country into poverty.

I will have a good look at the letter when I get back upstairs, but I will tell Mr Findlay two things. First, if we look at tax alone, more than 50 per cent of taxpayers in Scotland are better off than those in the rest of the United Kingdom, as a consequence of the tax decisions that we have made. When we take tax and social security together, 60 per cent of taxpayers in Scotland are better off than they would be if they lived in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is what I call delivering for Scotland.

Russell Findlay: I hope that John Swinney learned something from the children at the early learning centre.

We know that public services never improve under the SNP. More taxpayers' money is going to the national health service, but the SNP has no plans to reduce waiting lists or bureaucracy. This week, Scotland's independent Auditor General said that the Government has no vision for our health service and that changes are "urgently needed". Hospitals across Scotland are already in crisis, and while the SNP health secretary takes taxpayer-funded limos to Pittodrie, ambulances are being sent away from Aberdeen royal infirmary, yet the SNP Government makes only a rehashed pledge to reduce waiting times. That same promise was supposed to have been delivered by September—three months ago. Why would anyone believe that the SNP will keep its word this time?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay made the point that there is apparently no enhancement of public services in Scotland, but the early learning and childcare centre that I visited this morning is part of a network around the country that is supported by £1 billion of early learning and childcare investment. That has meant that, in this country, three and four-year-olds—and many two-year-olds—have access to 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare. That promise was made by the Scottish Government and delivered by this SNP Government.

Mr Findlay talks about efficiency in government. The Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee, who is sitting in the chamber, was referenced by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government yesterday as having a remit to address the issues of productivity and performance in public services. He is devoting his energy to doing that as part of the plans that the health secretary and other ministers are taking forward in our public services.

For Mr Findlay's benefit, I say that this Government is absolutely determined to improve

the performance of our public services. There are challenges in our public services that arise out of the disruptive effects of Covid, but this Government is 100 per cent focused on making sure—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: This Government is 100 per cent focused on ensuring that the resources that we have decided to allocate to our public services have the effect of meeting the needs of the people of Scotland. That will happen only if this Parliament supports the Government's budget. I invite Mr Findlay to do so.

Russell Findlay: I, for one, am delighted to hear that John Swinney is going to fix the mess that he has made over the past 17 years. He is going to begin fixing the mess that he has made over 17 long, miserable years.

The budget perfectly illustrates what a John Swinney Government looks like, with broken promises rehashed, no plans to fix the NHS, benefits rising out of control, bigger bills for businesses, higher taxes on workers and more waste on ferries and nonsense projects. People have had enough of taxes going up while public services decline. The budget might work inside the left-wing Holyrood bubble, but how does it help workers and businesses in the real world?

The First Minister: I suspect that businesses around the country will welcome the tripling of investment—*[Interruption.]* Mr Burnett is laughing and Mr Lumsden, as usual, is out of his seat shouting and bawling. Maybe—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us settle.

The First Minister: Maybe Mr Lumsden and Mr Burnett can find it in themselves to welcome the tripling of investment in offshore renewables that the Government has put in place. Maybe they could welcome the £768 million investment in housing to boost affordable housing expenditure in Scotland. Perhaps they could welcome the £200 million refuelling of the Scottish National Investment Bank to strengthen the Scottish economy. That is this Government delivering to strengthen the economy in Scotland.

National Health Service

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government laid out the Scottish National Party Government's budget for the upcoming year. Thanks to a United Kingdom Labour Government getting rid of the Tories and ending the era of austerity, the Scottish Government has an additional £5.2 billion to spend. That was an opportunity to confront the challenges that our

country faces and take us in a new direction—an opportunity that was, clearly, missed. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Anas Sarwar: Nowhere is that more important or clearer than in our national health service. Given that one in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list, why is it the height of John Swinney’s ambition that, by March 2026, Scots will not have to wait for more than a year just for an appointment?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I explained to Russell Findlay, the Government is absolutely focused on improving waiting times, and the record financial settlement for the health service of £21 billion is a very significant contribution to enabling that to happen. Ministers will work with health boards, as I saw when I visited Forth Valley royal hospital on Monday, on initiatives to practically improve waiting times in our hospitals. Anas Sarwar has my commitment that the Government will do that.

I am interested in Mr Sarwar’s language about a “new direction”. If Mr Sarwar does not like the direction that we are taking on health service expenditure, shall I take that to mean that he does not support the increase to £21 billion? Does he want less than that? Is that the new direction that Mr Sarwar wants, with less investment in the national health service? [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I say simply to Mr Sarwar that I welcome the investments that are being made in our public services and public finances as a consequence of the United Kingdom Government’s decisions. That is welcome. I have made that clear before.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Your MPs voted against it.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson!

The First Minister: What now matters is whether the Labour Party will support the Government by making sure that those numbers can be put into practical reality. Will the Labour Party support the Government’s budget to make sure that we can invest £21 billion in the national health service?

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney has forgotten that he is not a bank manager and is meant to be running a country and delivering positive outcomes for it. All he does is what he normally does: the SNP Government focuses on the inputs, not on the outcomes for patients across the country.

Within the past week, we have had damning reports from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and

Audit Scotland. According to the IFS, despite having proportionally higher spending and more staff, Scotland’s NHS is “lagging behind England’s”; on almost every measure, performance is worse; and there are poorer outcomes for Scots. According to Audit Scotland, despite higher funding and more staff, fewer patients are being seen, there is no clear plan for reform, there is no delivery plan, and “greater leadership” is needed.

However, yet again, those warnings have been ignored. Why is the SNP Government squandering the opportunity of £5.2 billion of additional money and record levels of spending, which could take our NHS in that new direction?

The First Minister: On performance, there have been increases—for example, in the number of operations that have been performed in the national health service over the past 12 months and in the performance on waiting times in a number of disciplines. In cancer care, there have been improvements in performance in relation to the 31-day standard, so that more patients are being treated and are treated within a quicker timescale.

Mr Sarwar asked about the “squandering” of the opportunity. The only squandering of the opportunity will be if the Government is unable on 1 April to put the practical proposals in the budget into practice. That means that the Parliament has to pass the Government’s budget. We are very open to constructive discussion with political parties about the contents of the budget. However, Mr Sarwar will—to use his word—squander the possibility of strengthening our public services if he does not vote for the Government’s budget.

Anas Sarwar: I remind John Swinney that SNP MPs voted against £5.2 billion of additional money coming to the Scottish Government.

John Swinney did what he always does: he read out a long list of inputs and did not address the issues that would improve outcomes for patients. That is the usual sticky-plaster approach, which is all about inputs and not about outcomes. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: I can understand why his blood pressure is high. Do not worry, Presiding Officer.

It is not just about how much we spend; it is about the quality of care that patients receive and the health of our nation. It is not just about how much we spend; it is about supporting businesses to thrive and grow. It is not just about how much we spend, it is about our children leaving school with the skills that they need.

On all measures, John Swinney and the SNP have failed. They just hope that they can spend

more money in the same way and get a different result. Is it not clear that the Government has no plan, no leadership and no vision for Scotland?

The First Minister: I think that there is a big problem if an Opposition leader in the Parliament cannot change his script to adjust to the answers that I give. In a very basic exchange, Mr Sarwar said that I have talked only about inputs, but I have talked about the outcomes and performance of the national health service. It is not good enough, if Mr Sarwar cannot even step up to be a decent leader of an Opposition party, for him to aspire to do anything else. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another!

The First Minister: If Mr Sarwar is concerned about business, he should be concerned about the impact of the changes to employer national insurance contributions. He need only look at his UK Government's data on that—the changes to employer national insurance contributions will not improve the standard of living of people in the United Kingdom over a five-year period. That is a rather gloomy outlook that Mr Sarwar has attached himself to.

I simply say to Mr Sarwar that I am interested in making progress for Scotland—it is what I have been about all my political life—and we have delivered big progress. I told Mr Findlay about the progress on early learning and childcare. Economic performance in Scotland has improved faster than it has in the rest of the United Kingdom. I want to build on that, but it will happen only if Mr Sarwar and his colleagues support the Scottish Government's budget, which will repair the damage from the Labour Government's winter fuel payment cuts and erase the two-child limit. Mr Sarwar should support the Government's budget and deliver a good outcome for the people of Scotland.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-03599)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet will next meet on Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Rural healthcare is a key priority for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. The Government listened to some of our demands by including in the draft budget yesterday provisions for a long-overdue replacement for the Belford hospital in Fort William. Now, we need shovels in the ground. However, the Government stopped short of replacing the Gilbert Bain hospital in Lerwick or ensuring 24/7 access to emergency care at Portree hospital.

I will remind the First Minister about what is going on in the far north. Mothers are forced to travel 100 miles through snow and ice to give birth in Inverness. An investigation by the Scottish Human Rights Commission received testimony that the situation was “barbaric”. Women have been left terrified by four-hour drives in the dark, with deer on the road. Some women have even lost their fertility because of delays in accessing Raigmore hospital in emergencies. No wonder people are moving away or choosing not to have any more children.

Liberal Democrats have repeatedly asked for midwife-led maternity care in the far north. What is the First Minister going to do about it? Those mums are still in danger.

The First Minister: Mr Cole-Hamilton has raised a number of issues with us, both in our discussions and in the points that he has put to me today. We have set out in the budget a number of steps that will address some of the issues with access to general practice services. We will look further at the issues relating to Portree that Mr Cole-Hamilton mentioned. I am glad that we have made progress on the Belford hospital, and my colleague the Deputy First Minister is delighted with that announcement, too.

The Caithness situation is slightly different, because it is informed by assessments of patient safety, given the volume of maternity cases that can be dealt with at Caithness general hospital. It is a question not of investment but of the clinical safety of the service that is involved. I totally understand the challenges and difficulties with that journey that Mr Cole-Hamilton narrated to me—it is a long and difficult journey. However, when ministers receive advice on clinical safety, we have to have very strong reasons for not following that advice.

I will happily engage with Mr Cole-Hamilton and his colleagues, as will the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, on this important question to try to address the concerns that I know exist in Caithness about that issue and to find a way of reassuring the individuals on whose behalf Mr Cole-Hamilton asked the question.

Social Care Providers (National Insurance Contributions)

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the reported concerns of not-for-profit social care providers regarding the impact of increased employer national insurance contributions on the sector in Scotland. (S6F-03615)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Not-for-profit social care providers play a vital role in

delivering care across Scotland, and I am grateful for the hard work and dedication of everyone working in the sector. The Scottish Government firmly shares the concerns about the profound impact that the increase in national insurance will have in Scotland, which is estimated to cost the adult care sector at least £85 million per year. We have outlined that to the United Kingdom Government and asked it to reimburse the national insurance increase for charities and social care providers in Scotland. We will continue to press the UK Government to do the right thing and reimburse that cost, and I ask all other parties in Parliament to do the same.

Marie McNair: The increase to contributions has been described as “catastrophic” for Scotland’s social care sector. Will the First Minister join me in calling on Anas Sarwar’s Labour colleagues in Westminster to fully reimburse costs to the Scottish Government for Labour’s short-sighted plans to increase employer national insurance contributions in order to enable us to protect our social care services across the country?

The First Minister: I certainly make that call. We have made that point to the United Kingdom Government, because Scotland’s care providers will face a significant increase in the cost of their operations as a consequence of that activity, and we depend on those individual organisations to contribute to the delivery of social care in Scotland.

The danger of the increase in employer national insurance contributions is that it is, essentially, ushering in austerity by the back door. Although there is a welcome increase in investment in public expenditure, there is also a commensurate increase in costs in the delivery of public services. I ask the United Kingdom Government to recognise that, so that we can take forward the effective investment in the care services on which our public depend.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Labour has let down the Scottish social care sector with its tax on jobs, but does the blame for the worsening crisis in care not rest with John Swinney just as much as it does with Keir Starmer? Since 2021, the care sector has been in limbo, waiting for the national care service, which has swallowed up £30 million that could have been spent to mitigate Labour’s national insurance hikes.

Will the First Minister now take this opportunity to confirm that the national care service is dead and buried, and allow ministers, councils and care providers to focus all their attention and money on the worsening crisis in Scotland’s social care?

The First Minister: I assure Mr Hoy that there is no lack of focus in my Government on addressing the challenges around delayed discharge and social care. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I spend a great deal of time on that question, and it has been a substantial issue for discussion with our local authority colleagues as we have undertaken the budget dialogue that I promised would be undertaken.

There are conclusions to be arrived at about the national care service but, fundamentally, what the national care service is designed to do—this is an important point that Mr Hoy cannot ignore—is address the fact that there is huge variation in the availability of social care services in different parts of the country. In some parts of the country, the availability is absolutely first class, and in other parts of the country it is poor. That is not good enough for the citizens of Scotland, and I intend to fix that.

Peat Removal (Environmental Risk)

5. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s position is regarding any potential risk to the environment of excessive removal of peat during excavation projects. (S6F-03603)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Scotland’s peatlands are critical to mitigating and adapting to the climate and nature emergencies. They store carbon, support biodiversity, control flooding and improve river quality. Excavation of peat during development can increase emissions and damage nature. Our fourth national planning framework includes policies to protect carbon-rich soils, restore peatlands and minimise disturbance to soils from development.

Sharon Dowey: We pay grants for peatland restoration but, at the same time, allow peatland to be ripped up. Constituents at Barrhill in South Ayrshire are concerned about the significant removal of peat to make way for the construction of a battery storage facility. They are concerned about lorries making hundreds of journeys along dangerous and unsuitable roads to facilitate that. Currently, there are 50 lorry loads a day, but it has been suggested to Barrhill and Pinwherry villagers that that number would rise to 200 per day from January.

South Scotland residents are worried about the overindustrialisation of their part of the countryside. What guarantees can the First Minister give to people in South Ayrshire that their lives will not be adversely impacted by another controversial energy project?

The First Minister: The development that Sharon Dowey raises with me is a live planning

application, so I cannot make any specific comment about it. What I can say, however—*[Interruption.]* I am simply pointing out that I would be breaching the ministerial code if I commented on a live planning application. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Where development is proposed on peatland and carbon-rich soils or on priority peatland habitat, a detailed, site-specific assessment will be required to identify effects on peatland quality, habitats and emissions, so that mitigation can be built into project design and subsequent management. That is the obligation contained within national planning framework 4, and I would expect that to be applied by all planning authorities.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The Scottish Government has invested heavily in nature-based solutions to climate change, including by doubling the rate of peatland restoration over the past two years to reach record levels. Can the First Minister outline how yesterday's Scottish budget will continue to support our efforts to reduce emissions and tackle the climate crisis?

The Presiding Officer: Please respond with reference to the substantive question, First Minister.

The First Minister: On the question of peatland restoration, which is implicit in the question that has been raised, the Government allocated additional resources to strengthen the work that is being undertaken to improve the quality of Scotland's peatland resource. It is a huge asset for Scotland in dealing with the climate and nature emergencies, and I am glad that we are able to secure the necessary investment to support that development within the Scottish Government's budget that was announced yesterday.

Green Hydrogen

6. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what progress is being made with the Scottish Government's efforts to establish the country as a world leader in the green hydrogen sector. (S6F-03607)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Scotland has the potential to be a world-leading hydrogen nation, and the Scottish Government is committed to helping the Scottish hydrogen sector to develop and grow. The publication last week of Scotland's first hydrogen export plan marks a milestone in the country's journey to becoming a hydrogen-exporting nation. The plan sets out the key steps required to establish large-scale hydrogen production domestically, strengthen existing

international partnerships and build new ones to enable exports and investment.

Audrey Nicoll: The Scottish Government has an international vision for the hydrogen economy in Scotland. Indeed, research from PwC confirmed that Scotland is leading the United Kingdom in the creation of green jobs. Given that the establishment of Scotland's hydrogen sector has the potential to become a key driver of green growth and prosperity, can the First Minister say more about how the Scottish Government's budget will further invest in a managed just transition and about the benefits that that will bring to Scotland?

The First Minister: One of the fundamental points in the budget statement yesterday was the commitment to invest in Scotland's journey to net zero and to achieve the objectives that Audrey Nicoll has talked about. The utilisation of ScotWind resources for long-term investment is a significant strength in the budget. We have successfully avoided the use of ScotWind resources to support day-to-day expenditure, which I know members of the Parliament wanted us to avoid. We are committed to taking forward the proposals in our green industrial strategy, which will help us to take forward investment in the hydrogen sector. That will only be supported, of course, if the Government's budget passes and we are able to deploy that expenditure in the next financial year.

The Presiding Officer: We move to open and constituency supplementaries.

Fuel Prices (Greenock and Inverclyde)

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of my long-standing campaign to lower petrol pump prices in my constituency. He will also know that, in 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority launched an investigation into road fuel prices and concluded that action was needed to "improve competition" and, ultimately, to stop fuel retailers from ripping off drivers. An update from the CMA last week indicates that

"While fuel prices have fallen since July",

drivers are still paying over the odds for fuel, and that has a knock-on effect on other living costs such as food. Will the First Minister therefore join me today in urging the new United Kingdom Labour Government to speed up progress on the CMA's recommendations, so that weak competition can be addressed and fuel retailers held to account?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very much aware of the tenacious campaign that Stuart McMillan has led on the issue on behalf of his constituents. Fuel costs can make a significant contribution to the pressure that households and

businesses wrestle with on an on-going basis. I welcome the UK Government's plan to implement the CMA's recommendations on the fuel price market, and I urge it is to speed up progress where possible. Given the CMA's comments on current fuel prices, we urge the United Kingdom Government to use the CMA's new fuel price monitoring function, which will commence in January next year, to scrutinise the market and take action where necessary to keep the prices that drivers pay at the lowest rate possible.

Alistair Wilson Investigation

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Last week marked two decades since Alistair Wilson was fatally shot on the doorstep of his family home in Nairn, while his wife Veronica and his two young sons were upstairs. Two decades on, his killer continues to evade justice. Throughout that time, Veronica and her family have shown great strength and dignity, but it has been very clear that they are now critical of elements of Police Scotland's investigation, as well as of the chief constable, who repeatedly refuses to meet them. I have urged Chief Constable Farrell to reconsider her position. Although I acknowledge that the First Minister cannot comment on a live police investigation, will he meet Veronica and her family to listen to what they have endured for the past 20 years, and to what they continue to go through as they fight to see the killer of their husband and father finally brought to justice?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I have said to Mr Ross when he has raised the issue in the Parliament before, I have every sympathy with Mrs Wilson and her family for the unbearable loss that they have suffered, and the trauma that they have experienced because of the fact that the perpetrators of the attack have not been brought to justice. The framing of Mr Ross's question recognises that it is a live police investigation and it is an operational matter for the chief constable to take forward. Subject to the caveat that Mr Ross had in his question, which is that I cannot engage in a live police investigation, I would be prepared to meet Mrs Wilson and her family to hear of their anguish. There will be limits to what I can do, but if it provides any assistance and support to the family that the First Minister is prepared to listen to their concerns, then I am prepared to meet them.

Torness Nuclear Power Station

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of EDF Energy's decision to extend the life of Torness nuclear power station until 2030, which will secure hundreds of jobs, boost the economy of East Lothian and South Scotland, and provide crucial support to Scotland's energy grid. Torness has

been Scotland's most productive clean energy asset, cutting 100 million tonnes of CO₂, reducing the risk of blackouts, and saving consumers up to £75 annually on their energy bills. Will the First Minister warmly welcome the extension?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has made it clear that we welcome stability in energy supplies. The developments that EDF has taken forward support that objective. Of course, we will have to make a transition to lower-cost energy products and prices, and that will be best secured through investment in renewable energy. I hope that GB energy will help us to speed up the approach that has been taken, particularly regarding the developments on the grid, which are the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. I hope that the incoming United Kingdom Government is able to improve the performance in grid connection so that Scotland can realise its energy potential. If it does not improve that, we will not be able to realise the opportunities for low energy prices, which everyone wants in Scotland.

Affordable Housing

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I welcome the announcement by the Scottish National Party Government of £768 million for affordable housing, which will deliver 8,000 new homes for social rent, mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership, some of which will be in my constituency. I understand that the money will be available only if the Parliament votes for the budget. Does the First Minister agree that, if MSPs want to tackle the housing emergency, they need to back the budget that releases the money to do that?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Coffey is 100 per cent correct.

Members: Oh!

The First Minister: I will say it again, as it went down so well. Mr Coffey is 100 per cent correct.

Let me share an—*[Interruption.]* Let me share an observation with Parliament. If we want to spend the resources that the Government allocated yesterday on delivering outcomes such as 8,000 more affordable homes—I think that that constitutes an outcome in Mr Sarwar's definition—Parliament has to be prepared to vote for the Government's budget. The time for posturing will be over soon—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Continue, First Minister.

The First Minister: Oh yes, the time for posturing will be over soon. The time to vote for the Government's budget is coming, and if members want investment in housing, they have to vote for the Government's budget.

Female Life Expectancy (Glasgow)

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising national health service general practitioner.

According to the latest data from the Office for National Statistics, female life expectancy in Glasgow remains the lowest in Britain, and seven of the 10 areas of the United Kingdom where it is lowest are in Scotland. Males do not fare much better. That all points to the Scottish National Party failing women—failing to protect safe spaces, failing to provide adequate housing for single mothers and failing to tackle women's health inequalities. Is the First Minister concerned by those consistently woeful statistics? What is he going to do about it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I certainly am concerned about those issues. That is why the Government is taking forward a specific women's health plan to address many of the issues that Dr Gulhane puts to me.

However, there is another important factor, and that is the persistence of poverty in our society. I appreciate Dr Gulhane's commitment to the national health service, but his party presided over 14 years of punishing austerity, which has increased poverty levels in our country. To be fair, when the Labour Government left office in 2010, poverty rates were falling. They have gone up over the past 14 years—why? It is because of austerity from the Conservatives. Dr Gulhane has no strength to put those points to me. The Tories have inflicted misery and poverty on people in Scotland, and this Government is trying to repair the damage.

Sutherland Spaceport

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Yesterday, we heard that Sutherland spaceport has been mothballed by Orbex. The spaceport was a positive development for the Sutherland community, bringing 40 jobs and economic benefits to a part of the Highlands that has suffered from depopulation. Orbex has received £14.6 million of public investment for the spaceport. Will the First Minister intervene to ensure that the development continues? If that is not possible, will he ensure that the public investment can be recouped and used to bring jobs and an economic boost to that part of the Highlands?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand entirely the concern that Rhoda Grant puts to me. My understanding is that the decision has been arrived at in order to concentrate on the proposed spaceport development in Shetland.

Rhoda Grant raises two issues with me. The first is whether I will intervene to see whether there

is an alternative; I give her an assurance that ministers will do so to see whether there is any other way in which the development can be taken forward.

Rhoda Grant also raises a completely reasonable question about the public investment that has been either spent or committed to the development, and how that stands. Contractual arrangements will have been put in place in the provision of grant funding. I will explore those issues and reply in writing to Rhoda Grant about what steps can be taken to address what I recognise to be a legitimate issue that she has raised with me today.

Creative Industries (Funding)

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Scotland's cultural sector is the beating heart of our country, with considerable cross-policy impact, including in health and wellbeing. I warmly welcome the fact that the Government has committed a record increase of £34 million to the culture budget, which will facilitate the provision of multiyear funding, despite a single-year fixed budget from Westminster. Does the First Minister agree that, given that Labour's ambition was for £25 million—£9 million less than is going to be delivered—it is incumbent on all Labour MSPs to back the budget and support our creative industries?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Clare Adamson makes a very reasonable point to Parliament today. I am very proud of many commitments in the budget, and I am particularly proud that the Government is fulfilling its commitments to the artistic and creative community. As I have said in my responses to First Minister's questions before, it is a community that is precious to me. It is vital that Scotland has a vibrant arts and culture sector, and I am delighted that the Government has been able to make such a formidable financial contribution to the future of the sector.

Of course, Clare Adamson is also absolutely correct that that money will be able to be spent only if the Government budget passes. I remind Parliament that the Government does not have enough support—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: The Government does not have enough support on its own to pass the budget, so we are doing our best to reach agreement with other parties. I encourage other parties, especially the Labour Party, which is making a call for increased expenditure on arts and culture, to recognise that as being one of the commitments that can be supported by the delivery of the Government's budget.

Active and Sustainable Transport Funding

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The Scottish Greens certainly welcome progressive measures in the budget, including the acceptance of Green proposals for free ferry travel for young islanders and free bus travel for asylum seekers. However, peak rail fares, which were removed by the Greens last year, have returned, and the cap on the price of bus fares that we proposed is not there. Funding to make walking and cycling safer has been cut, and it does not appear that there is any funding for the integrated ticketing system that the Government announced in April. However, there is plenty for climate-wrecking motorway expansion. Does the First Minister recognise that far more is needed to make public transport cheaper, to make cycling safer and to reduce transport emissions to protect our planet?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise that there is a lot to be done to ensure that we all play our part in tackling the climate emergency, which is why I am pleased that the Government has increased the amount of climate-positive expenditure in the budget from the planned £4.7 billion to £4.9 billion.

In addition, resources have been introduced into the budget for the nature restoration fund. We have delivered on our commitment to implement free bus travel for asylum seekers and we have put in place £188 million for active and sustainable travel. We have delivered on other measures that the Scottish Green Party put to us, such as a real-terms uplift to local government spending, and the investment in housing programmes, at a total of £768 million.

Of course, I would love to do more. Mr Greer and I agree very much on the aspirations of ensuring that Scotland succeeds in our journey to net zero. However, I can allocate only the resources that the Government has at its disposal, and we have done that formidably to support action on the climate. I look forward to further dialogue to address the issues that Mr Greer has raised with me today.

Domestic Abuse (Support for Children)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Across my region, a surge in the number of children who are experiencing domestic abuse is deeply concerning. Charities and third sector organisations are having to contend with record levels of children who are seeking support. What measures can the Scottish Government put in place to ensure that those children receive the support that they need, especially heading into the festive season?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I acknowledge the importance of the issue that Mr

Stewart raises with me. Domestic abuse is abhorrent. Mr Stewart represents the region of which my constituency is a part and, in Perth concert hall a week past Friday, I had the privilege of launching the 16 days of activism on gender-based violence against women and girls. It was an important event, and Mr Stewart will be familiar with it from his membership of Perth and Kinross Council.

We all have to take action. The Government has legislated to outlaw domestic abuse and, as a consequence, more cases are now being pursued through the courts. As I said in my response to Pam Gosal the other week, although there is an increase in the recording of domestic abuse, it is recognised that more women and girls are coming forward to report that horror, and those who are responsible should be brought to justice.

We all, particularly men, have to exercise leadership on this question. For that reason, I have decided that I will participate in this afternoon's debate on violence against women and girls. I will close the debate for the Government in order to make it clear, from a leadership position, how intolerable I consider domestic abuse to be.

Two-child Benefit Cap

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish National Party's Government's decision to scrap the hated two-child cap, a policy that was started by the Tories and continued by Labour. I understand that Keir Starmer said this morning that the scrapping of the two-child cap is not a "silver bullet". However, I believe that it is a major step in tackling child poverty. Does the First Minister share my view that it is time for Keir Starmer to follow the principled lead that the Scottish Government has taken and scrap the cap? What will the First Minister do to persuade the Prime Minister to see sense on the issue?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has announced its proposals to end the heinous two-child limit that is causing misery for children and families in Scotland. We will take that action because the United Kingdom Labour Government has, to date, failed to do so.

I am grateful for the support of a range of organisations that welcomed the steps that were announced by the finance secretary yesterday. I will certainly use every opportunity that I have to persuade the Prime Minister to take similar action to relieve the burden of this particularly pernicious part of the welfare system and to stop it inflicting poverty on children and families in the United Kingdom.

Psychiatry Services

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The locum psychiatrist survey, which was published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, found that the number of whole-time equivalent general psychiatrists has not changed in a decade. That stagnation has contributed to a loss of permanent staff, jeopardised patient treatment and safety, and led to millions of pounds being excessively spent on locum psychiatrist rates. Does the First Minister accept that the problem needs sustained investment, not short-term fixes, not in-year budget raids and certainly not a £20 million cut to the mental health services budget?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is no such thing in relation to the mental health budget. The Government is investing substantively in mental health services to improve performance, and we are already seeing significant improvements in waiting times in the child and adolescent mental health services system. I agree with Mr Sweeney about the importance of sustained investment. That is what the Government is committed to and that is what the Government will deliver.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I ask people who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible as we resume business.

Our next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15411, in the name of Paul Sweeney, on the publication of the Marie Curie report "Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024". The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Marie Curie report, *Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024*; understands that the report is taken from research carried out by Marie Curie and Loughborough University; notes that the report has found that one in four working age people and one in six pension age people in Scotland face poverty at the end of life; understands that terminal illness exacerbates existing inequality; notes the report's findings that symptoms of terminal illness can result in higher energy costs, costs for housing adaptations and force people to leave the labour market and rely on social security support; considers that these challenges are not confined to the dying person, but also affect family and unpaid carers who, it believes, are too often left to carry out the bulk of caring duties due to what it sees as inadequate support; notes the belief that more must be done to target support to those who are facing dying, death and bereavement, and further notes the calls for governments to consider the report and work with Marie Curie to prevent people in Scotland, including those in the Glasgow region, from dying in poverty.

12:49

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I extend my sincere thanks to colleagues across the chamber who supported the motion for members' business and helped to secure valuable time for the Parliament to consider what is a crucial new piece of research by Marie Curie.

The "Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024" report, which is based on research that Marie Curie and Loughborough University carried out on the extent of end-of-life poverty in Scotland, lays bare the prevalence of deaths in poverty in Scotland, with 10,400 people dying in poverty, which equates to one in four working-age people and one in six pensioners, with working-age people with dependent children being most at risk of end-of-life poverty.

The Parliament often discusses the plight of health inequalities—and rightly so—but progress

in reducing the disparity in outcomes across health and social care is stagnant and, sadly, the report further highlights that reality on multiple fronts. Indeed, it states that

“more working-age people of a minoritised ethnicity die in poverty in their last year of life, including 47 per cent of Black people”

compared to 25 per cent of white people, and that women are overall more likely to die in poverty than men.

In recent weeks, debate around assisted dying has often referenced the notion of dignity in dying. However, looking at the report and considering the stark figures that I have just mentioned, I think that we can all agree that a dignified death is not a guarantee for many people approaching the end of their lives.

Members might be familiar with an earlier work by Marie Curie and the University of Glasgow—the dying in the margins exhibition, which was shown in the Parliament building last year and documented the impact of poverty on the end-of-life experience of people with a terminal illness. The research in that exhibition captured the reality of the home environment and the barriers that participants experienced as they approached the end of their lives in poverty.

One example that has stayed with me is that of a patient who lived in a housing association home that no longer met their accessibility needs as they got more poorly and infirm. As the tenant was approaching the end of his life, the housing association was not willing to make the necessary investment in adjustments to make the home more suitable and comfortable. That meant that the gentleman could not die as he wanted—in his own home, in a familiar setting—but ended his life in hospital. Any of us with a loved one in that situation would be deeply distressed by such a situation.

It is not good enough. It is important that people at the end of their lives have agency, choice and control, but research for the dying in the margins exhibition in 2023 and the “Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024” report found that that is not the reality for too many people in Scotland—they do not have that agency, choice and control.

The report recommends that the Scottish Government consider specific support for terminally ill people with dependent children under 16, as well as support for all terminally ill people with energy costs. I would be grateful if the Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health could set out in her remarks what assessment the Government has made of the report and what steps it will take to realise those recommendations. I note that the Consumer Scotland report that was published last week also

recommended targeted financial support for those who are terminally ill.

I have now proudly brought two debates to the Parliament relating to the work of Marie Curie. That is for two reasons. First, I have been familiar with its exceptional work from a young age, since I helped to fundraise for the new hospice in the grounds of the Stobhill hospital when I was a pupil at nearby Turnbull high school more than 17 years ago. Secondly, I was fortunate to visit the new hospice at Stobhill last year and to meet several constituents who were nearing the end of their lives. Their experiences and stories have had a lasting impact on me.

One patient comes to mind, whose story I have previously shared in the Parliament. She lived in Bridgeton, which is a deprived area of Glasgow, and was only in her early forties. She approached her general practitioner multiple times to complain of pain that she thought was tonsillitis but was dismissed and repeatedly sent home with painkillers. She had a difficult upbringing and a fairly chaotic lifestyle but felt that she was getting her life back on track when she was struck down by the chronic condition for which she was struggling to get support.

By the time that she was listened to, referred on and diagnosed with neck cancer, it was terminal and too late to treat. She spoke to me through a tube in her throat, in the final stages of her life, and relayed to me her distress at being robbed of her future. She had two young children—it was a very difficult conversation to have with a young mother in that situation. Having overcome so much adversity, she was then robbed of her life at what she felt was a turning point. We talk about the Glasgow effect and poverty and inequality, but it sometimes hits you really starkly, and that was certainly a very moving experience for me.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Paul Sweeney has made a very powerful contribution on what is a massively important issue. Is it not right that society should reflect on how it cares for those at the very start of life—babies and children—but also for those at the end of life? The member has adequately shown that we are not addressing that sufficiently and in the right way at this time and in this place.

Paul Sweeney: I thank my friend for making that great observation. What struck me from the experience of the discussion with that lady, who sadly passed away just the day after I visited, is that from the very early stages of someone’s life they are doomed in many ways to an early death—a premature death. That is the nature of inequality in Scotland today. The social determinants of health at the very early stages of infancy and childhood are critical. We need to

understand that if we are to truly solve the ingrained issues of inequality in our society.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful to my colleague Paul Sweeney for securing this important debate. I pay tribute to him for all his support for Marie Curie. Recently, 2,500 people in Central Scotland have emailed me to stand up for hospice care, and I know that colleagues have had many similar emails. Does he share those people's fear and mine that, if the Scottish Government does not do more to fund and support our amazing hospices, it will be the poorest people in Scotland who suffer the most?

Paul Sweeney: I completely agree with my colleague. We often underestimate that issue, because the dead have no agency. People in the final stage of their life are just dealing with the immediate trauma and effects of that, so their capacity to reflect and advocate is limited. Monica Lennon makes an important point in that respect, which is why the studies that I have mentioned are so critical. It is also critical that we get hospice care right. When I visited the Prince and Princess of Wales hospice, a third of its beds were unusable because of a lack of nursing staff, due to the differentials in national health service pay rates.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I commend Mr Sweeney on his excellent speech and agree with the points that he makes. Does he agree that we could organise the NHS much better, and that it could support Marie Curie, Macmillan Cancer Support nurses and hospices much more effectively and practically, at much less expense and far quicker for those who require end-of-life care? That can be done without necessarily increasing the overall amount of money that is provided, by getting the public sector to work more effectively with those marvellous charitable institutions in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please begin winding up, Mr Sweeney.

Paul Sweeney: I completely agree with Mr Ewing's observation—that is absolutely critical. It is a universal truth that we will all face the end of our lives at some point, and most of us will rely on palliative care or hospice care of some kind. Therefore, it is important that we better integrate that. That is the essence of what was aspired to in the national care service, and we should consider how we can better do that. In doing so, we would release capacity in acute hospitals and thus create a virtuous cycle of efficient healthcare expenditure.

The Marie Curie report rightly references the practical financial difficulties that terminally ill people in poverty face but, as evidenced by the constituent who I spoke about, regrettably, that group of people often have less agency and have

to advocate more and push harder for answers than their less deprived counterparts. For my constituent and others in Scotland like her, I commend the motion in my name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you Mr Sweeney. We move to the open debate. There is quite a bit of interest. I am intending to get everybody in, but I am also conscious that we begin afternoon business at 2 pm, so we will need to leave enough time for the chamber to be prepared for that.

12:59

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this hugely important report to the attention of the chamber. I also extend my sincere thanks to Marie Curie and Loughborough University for researching this urgent issue and bringing the reality faced by those dying in poverty to our attention. I commend him for the way in which he narrated the experiences of his constituent—none of us can fail to be touched by what he put to us.

We rightly spend a lot of our energy and resources in the Parliament combating the scourge of child poverty and doing all that we can to ensure that, from the very beginning of life, this nation nurtures our youngest. Despite all the challenges, we are making good progress in that regard.

However, what we do not talk enough about in the Parliament, in our communities and in our homes is dying. As a nation, we find it too difficult, too awkward and too upsetting to speak to one another about the reality of death, dying and terminal illness.

In addition, when we are creating policies and strategies to eradicate poverty, what we do not think about enough in the Parliament is how poverty manifests itself for people who have a terminal illness and their families. No one who is dealing with a terminal prognosis should be worrying about ensuring that they are warm enough, can run any specialist equipment that they rely on and have enough money to get the nutrition that they need to be as well as they can be.

Dying from a terminal illness will always be the most difficult thing that we might face as human beings, and Paul Sweeney outlined how that affected that young mum. It is an existential crisis. However, as a nation, we cannot thole the reality that is faced by too many who simply do not have enough money to live their last moments in comfort and, instead, live in cold surroundings with mounting debt and ever-increasing worry about what they are leaving behind for their loved ones. That anxiety alone is a heavy burden to bear.

In East Ayrshire, which forms part of my Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley constituency, 28 per cent of people with a terminal illness die in end-of-life poverty and 23 per cent die in fuel poverty. Far too many of my constituents in rural areas who are reliant on an oil heating system face the most horrendous fuel poverty when dying.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will Elena Whitham give way?

Elena Whitham: Yes, in two seconds.

Rates of fuel poverty when dying are also higher for people in older socially rented homes.

Finlay Carson: Will Elena Whitham reflect on the comments that we have heard about the lack of a budget for aids and adaptations? For example, a housing association in my area needed £3 million but only got £700,000. Although there is an increase in the budget for that this year, it still falls way short of what is needed. Do you share my disappointment that the Government is not stepping up to the mark and delivering the funds that are needed?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Elena Whitham: I recognise the issue that Finlay Carson has put to me. I have made representations to the Government on that on several occasions, and have gone back and forth between the health and social care partnership and registered social landlords. I absolutely get the point that Finlay Carson raises, and I will continue to challenge the issue.

Paul Sweeney set out that 10,400 people die in poverty in Scotland—there has been an increase of 27 per cent from 2019. As we have heard, the figure is even higher—one in four—for people who are of working age. In Scotland, one in five people die in fuel poverty in their last year of life.

The report identified particular groups that are at risk of dying in poverty, including working-age parents with dependent children, women and people from minoritised backgrounds. That is why collecting and collating disaggregated data is essential in understanding the issues across groups. As Paul Sweeney outlined, 25 per cent of those from a white ethnicity die in poverty when they face a terminal illness, but a staggering 47 per cent from a black background with a terminal illness die in poverty. We need to understand all the drivers behind that so that we can make coherent policy.

There are steps that the Scottish Government can take that will make an impact, and I ask the minister to reflect on them. We should extend the eligibility for the Scottish child payment to parents living with a terminal illness with dependent children under 16 on the presentation of a benefits

assessment under special rules in Scotland—BASRIS—form that confirms that they are eligible under the special rules on terminal illness situations. We should provide extra financial support for terminally ill people with their energy bills, which could include extending eligibility for the winter heating payment to all terminally ill people and reinvesting in the fuel insecurity fund. We should bring forward a minimum income guarantee and work even harder towards eradicating the gender pay gap, which has an impact on women who are dying in poverty.

We urgently need a social tariff for energy to prevent fuel poverty at the end of life, and I urge the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments to make that a reality.

I also support the calls for the UK Government to unlock pensions for people who are close to pension age who have a terminal diagnosis. For those who have not paid enough national insurance contributions at that point, the Government should ensure that they have a pension-level payment. That feels like the right thing to do.

13:04

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I say well done to Paul Sweeney, not only for bringing the debate to Parliament but for the speech that he delivered, which was very moving.

Paul Sweeney was quite right to say that Marie Curie's "Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024" report is a crucial piece of research, and it is incumbent on all of us—as Elena Whitham rightly spelled out—to take notice of it. The issue is particularly important and topical at the moment, given the assisted dying debates that are on-going north and south of the border. Those debates have raised critical issues in relation not only to that particular ethical decision that we have to make, but to how compassionate our palliative care system is. For that reason alone, I find those debates incredibly interesting. They are also extremely important, because they raise the whole issue of palliative care.

I am glad that it is clear from what we have heard in recent weeks that there is cross-party agreement on how significant this issue is. There is clear acknowledgement that the report's findings paint a disturbing picture of the lack of support that is available to some of the most disadvantaged in our society in their final moments of terminal illness.

The scale of the numbers is stark. The report found that, in parts of the Mid Scotland and Fife region, around one in five people died in end-of-life poverty. The fact that such a large proportion of people are not receiving support is a matter of

concern to us all. I pay tribute to Fergus Ewing, who made an important point about how we might better address that. The report goes into considerable detail—forensic detail, in fact—on the wide variations between different demographic groups. The proportion of single parents of working age who die in end-of-life poverty is as high as four in 10.

As we are all aware, palliative care is predominantly administered by the charitable sector. I pay tribute to the work of the charities Marie Curie and Cancer Care, which provide such a comprehensive service that is so admired by the public to so many people in giving them peace of mind at the end of their lives.

Fergus Ewing: I thoroughly endorse what Liz Smith has said, and I appreciate the way in which she has said it. This is one of the most pressing problems in Scotland right now. Is she aware that, in Highland, one in three acute hospital beds at Raigmore hospital are believed to be occupied by people at the end of life? Highland Hospice believes that at least 40 per cent of those people could receive better care where they wish to be cared for—in their own homes, in the community. Frankly, Raigmore, which provides an excellent service to those who need to be fixed, is in danger of becoming a care home rather than an acute hospital.

Liz Smith: I was aware of that statistic, but only because Mr Ewing raised the issue earlier this week when I was in the chamber. I was taken aback by that statistic, because it is very serious. It is one that should make us think very carefully about the way forward. As Mr Ewing has rightly pointed out, we cannot have that circumstance, because hospitals have to get on with so many other things. We must address the issue by ensuring that people who are at the end of their lives get better care than that which it is possible for them to get in hospitals. I am not taking anything away from the care that is provided in hospitals, but I think that we can do things better.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee, of which I am a member, has been looking closely at the economic consequences of Scotland's ageing population, but the report that we are discussing today highlights the social challenges of the current situation. I pay tribute to my colleague Miles Briggs, who, with his proposed member's bill on a right to palliative care, is trying to address a lot of the questions that Mr Sweeney flagged up. It is essential that we do something about that issue, and I give my full support to Miles Briggs. We must do this better. I am sure that the Deputy Presiding Officer, of all people, is conscious of that, as the member who introduced the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill.

I thank both Paul Sweeney and you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I might not always agree on some aspects of the debate, but I think that you have done a wonderful job in bringing that bill to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Ms Smith.

13:09

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my party colleague Paul Sweeney for bringing this important debate to the chamber and everyone at Marie Curie and its partners for producing their vital report.

Everyone deserves as pain-free and peaceful a death as possible, surrounded by those who love them, in a place that comforts them and where they can make choices. However, as with so many things across the course of our lives, the process of death is influenced by the poverty and inequality experienced by so many.

That poverty is the root of the injustice that permeates our society and that is sustained by so many from cradle to grave. I simply cannot accept that, which is what has driven me to speak in today's debate and in others on the subject. We must do more to end the situation in which so many people have so little while a few have so much. With the inequalities surrounding death so prominent in our national debate, there has never been a better time for the report, or for this debate.

At every stage of a person's life, including death, poverty is an anchor on their ability to live as others do. I have met constituents who spend much of their final years of life worrying about how they can afford to leave their families behind or even about whether they can afford the care required to sustain a moderate quality of life until the end. The truth is that some in our society are worried about avoiding paying tax on second homes that they want to pass on to their children while others are worried about whether they can afford even the cost of a funeral. That is not a just or fair society.

According to the report, 17 per cent of those who died in 2023 in my home area of East Ayrshire did so in poverty, with 23 per cent dying in fuel poverty. Figures vary across my South Scotland region, but are not drastically different, which means that almost one in five people are struggling to heat their home or to put food on their table. Those people are often aware that, sadly, they are soon to pass. Can members imagine the mental and physical strain that that sort of pressure puts on a person and on their family? I think that we can all agree that nothing could be worse.

We have heard today that simple things, such as needing to make adaptations to a house, can be a luxury for people who are unsure if they can even afford to feed their own family. That is simply unacceptable. I will be clear: I believe that we need not have an economy that works only for the rich; rather, we should have one that ensures that everyone in society has the means to live and die in dignity.

We live in one of the richest countries in the world, but, in 2024, many among us experience constant poverty. From the cradle to the grave, that is all that they have known or will ever know. We must all accept that truth, although it is as unacceptable today as it was many decades ago when the welfare state was transformed by serious Government intervention. I believe that we require a similar revolution in practice and in thinking to address the problems that I, and many others in the chamber, have highlighted today. I call on everyone to think of that and I call on the Scottish Government to respond to the points raised by my colleague Paul Sweeney and others. We must look to ensure that we eradicate poverty in this country, which, as I stated, is one of the richest in the world.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris, who is joining us remotely. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Mr Doris, but your microphone does not appear to be working. Can you start again? [*Interruption.*] I am afraid that we still cannot hear you.

I will call Rhoda Grant first while we sort out the issue. We will try to come back to you, Mr Doris.

13:14

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, thank Paul Sweeney for securing this debate on palliative care. I commend Marie Curie for its report “Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024”, which shines a light on the very difficult situations that many people find themselves in at the end of life. People who are facing terminal illness often lose their incomes and move on to benefits. That can be difficult when someone is facing the end of life, and more so if English is not their first language.

There are many excellent support services out there that help people—Marie Curie, Macmillan Cancer Support and the like—and there are also small local charities that provide support. An example is Western Isles Cancer Care Initiative. WICCI advocates for all people with cancer—something that is even more important for those with a terminal diagnosis—provides small grants and helps people to access support. However, not everyone is lucky enough to be able to access such excellent services.

For people who live in the Highlands and Islands, fuel poverty is also an issue. When people are unwell, they need to be warm, and if there are concerns about the cost of heating that simply adds to the stress. We can only imagine the stress of dying. We will all face it, but it is difficult to imagine. I am sure that we have all faced the stress of losing someone close to us—worrying about their wellbeing and trying to make sure that their last precious days are comfortable and free from worry and that they can live them well. If financial constraints prevent families from ensuring a good death, that adds to their distress and the grief that they have to deal with.

Hospices are crying out for funding, and hospice-at-home services are desperately needed. Most people want to die at home, yet 70 per cent of us will end up in hospital towards the end of our lives, and many who go to hospital will die there because of a lack of hospice care in the community. Such people make up much of the delayed discharge figures, as we have heard. In Highland, £45 million is spent yearly on end-of-life care in hospital, while only just over £11 million is spent on end-of-life care elsewhere. I support Miles Briggs’s proposed member’s bill to improve end-of-life care in Scotland.

Paul Sweeney: I thank my friend for giving way. She made a powerful point about the numbers of people who are dying in hospital at the end of their lives. The position is particularly egregious in rural settings. When I recently had the opportunity to visit Skye with the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, a number of people there expressed their fear that they would end their lives potentially hundreds of miles from home and far removed from their friends and family, with all the stress that that might place on their relatives who would try to visit them in their final days. Does my friend recognise that the problem is particularly egregious in rural and remote settings that are further afield than the central belt?

Rhoda Grant: Yes, indeed. That is a common situation in the Highlands and Islands, where it is very difficult for families who want to spend time with loved ones.

Highland Hospice knows that and it is leading the charge in Highland. It has formed partnerships with services and the third sector and delivered a 24/7 helpline for people with palliative end-of-life care needs. That alone has saved NHS Highland £2.3 million, while providing support for 415 people in just six months. Kenny Steele, who is the chief executive officer at Highland Hospice, says that delivering better planned and co-ordinated care towards the end of life will result in less unscheduled care in hospital and deliver better value and high-quality care.

However, we need the statutory services to be on board to make sure that that model works. It saves money but, most important, it allows families to enrich the final days of their loved ones, who can live their lives to the end. When days are few, life is precious.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member take an intervention?

Rhoda Grant: I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be very brief, Mr Ewing.

Fergus Ewing: Having met Kenny Steele recently, does Rhoda Grant agree that, although the Government works with all hospices throughout the country, Highland Hospice's funding from the Government amounts to only 25 per cent—£2 million—of its £8 million running costs, whereas many other hospices are fully funded?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Rhoda Grant to conclude.

Rhoda Grant: I agree that that is a huge problem for Highland Hospice. I commend its fundraising effort and the communities that support it, but things should not be that way, and I hope that they will not be in the future if statutory services help the hospice.

Wasting days in hospital really helps nobody, and especially not those who are in their final moments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am going to give Mr Doris a little more time to get the audio sorted out. I call Miles Briggs.

13:19

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. My mic is working, which is good.

I pay tribute to Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to the chamber. I also pay tribute to Marie Curie for the amazing work that it does in all our communities to support people who are at the end of life and for the research partnership that it has developed with Loughborough University. We know the stark figures that that work has presented. It suggests that, in my region, 20 per cent of working-age people with a terminal illness are dying in fuel poverty.

The statistics in the report are human beings—they are people who are dying. We need to remember that when we throw the statistics around in the chamber. However, we can do something about it. That is why I want to introduce a right to palliative care bill, which a number of members have mentioned.

I launched the consultation on my proposals back in March and received substantial feedback from many organisations and very much so from the hospice sector. The national health service, which was established some 76 years ago, and the founding principle of that service—providing care from the cradle to the grave—underpin the social fabric of our society. However, a number of members, including Fergus Ewing, have highlighted the unrecognised reality that palliative and end-of-life care are predominantly provided by the charitable sector. That is right in many cases, because it provides the quality of care and the wraparound care for family and friends that we want.

We do not have a legal right to palliative care; that does not currently exist. Under current contracts, GPs are obliged to support patients with generalist palliative care. However, far too many patients do not receive such care and do not have their needs met. As we all know, GP resources are completely overstretched. The integration of health and social care, which the Parliament passed legislation on, has not corrected that and has not delivered the change that we all want. Marie Curie's dying in the margins research brings to light the financial hardship that many people from the most deprived communities in our country face, especially those who face terminal illness.

My proposed bill would establish a legal right to palliative care, but we also need to have conversations about wraparound support. Debates are progressing through Parliament on the national care service. The proposed human rights bill could have been an opportunity to take forward some such debates. The Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is before the Parliament, provides that opportunity, too. However, we need to look towards a better opportunity to solve some of those problems and find solutions that the Government, business and industry can be part of.

I mentioned business and industry. Later today, I will meet Alasdair Allan, the Acting Minister for Climate Action, alongside the fuel poverty campaigner Carolynne Hunter, to discuss progress on the development, along with industry, of a social tariff. The First Minister announced that the Scottish Government is looking to take that forward. I hope that it can be progressed UK-wide and that industry will be part of ensuring that that happens. We would all welcome that, because it is beyond time that a social tariff was developed, and it could present a solution for many individuals in our country.

In its briefing ahead of the debate, Marie Curie made a number of positive suggestions about how terminally ill people could be directly supported with their energy bills. The suggestions included extending eligibility for the winter heating payment

to terminally ill people and reinvesting in the fuel insecurity fund. Together, the UK and Scottish Governments can take forward opportunities for us to find solutions that can turn the situation around.

No one should die in fuel poverty—no one in the chamber has raised any question about that—but we need to deliver workable solutions. Early intervention is one of the keys. Many people are not aware of the support that is available and do not seek it when they are at their lowest ebb and are dying. We need to ensure that our systems, especially our welfare systems, can work to change that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris, to be followed by Richard Leonard. Mr Doris, you have around four minutes.

Even with the headset off, Mr Doris, I am afraid that we cannot hear you. We will try to rectify that. I will go to Richard Leonard and, in around four minutes, we will come back to you.

13:24

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Paul Sweeney for leading this debate.

The figures produced, and the human face of what they mean described by Marie Curie in its report, are startling. In Falkirk, one in seven people dies in poverty, in North Lanarkshire it is one in six, and they are not just dying in poverty—they are dying of poverty.

There are other dimensions, too. If a person living in Scotland is black, Asian or from a minority ethnic background, they are twice as likely to die poor than they are if they are white, and while we learned yesterday that men living in Glasgow no longer have the lowest life expectancy in the UK, Scotland still has the lowest life expectancy of all the UK nations.

The gap between the life expectancy of the richest and the poorest is wide, and it gets wider every year. According to the National Records of Scotland, women living in the most-deprived areas are, on average, expected to live 25 fewer years in good health than those in the least-deprived areas. For men, it is 26 years. That is a public health issue. It is also a class issue. It is a political issue.

We are witnessing an immiseration of the poor and rising indebtedness, but it is not just grinding poverty—it is rampant inequality. Spiralling wealth, affluence and greed have come together with this plague of impoverishment.

Finlay Carson: Does Richard Leonard recognise the huge inequalities that exist in rural Scotland? In Dumfries and Galloway, there is no hospice. We have just seen the integration joint

board decide to close beds in our cottage hospitals, which means that people who need care at the end of life often have no choice but to stay in an acute hospital, where the facilities are far from adequate.

Richard Leonard: I am happy to agree with the Conservative member on the importance of inequality in looking at all those issues.

We hear the voices of the rich and the wealthy in this Parliament, whether they are the landlord or the landowner, and we hear the voices of financial capital and the banker of the corporation and the super-rich, but we hear far too rarely the voices of the disinherited and the dispossessed—those who are bearing the brunt of this immoral injustice.

Poverty is not solely a lack of wealth: it comes with a self-reinforcing lack of power. We know that poverty, low pay, unemployment, poor housing and run-down public services invariably go together, and that hopelessness and powerlessness breed a crisis of confidence that leads to demoralisation, then to alienation and then to acquiescence. As Steve Biko attested:

“The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

If we want people to realise all their potential, and not to spend their entire lives—still less their dying days—imprisoned in poverty, and if we want people to be freed from this and to be literate, passionate and fulfilled in all their diversity, then it is clear that we need radical social change.

That change cannot be left to the market and the nostrums of neoliberal economics, which simply fuel inequality. We cannot leave it to short-term mitigations, ameliorations or palliatives. To my own party, I say in all honesty that neither can we leave it to modest reform, to more efficient economic management or to the improved administration of the state. It was John Smith who said that the job of the Labour Party was to

“persuade millions of the strength of our vision, the relevance of our policies and the urgency of our demand for change”.

That is the radical tradition that all of us who want to change the outcomes that are set out in the report must return to—a “slow revolution”, in Danny Dorling’s words, a “long revolution”, perhaps, in the words of Raymond Williams, but a revolution nonetheless.

Too many people are dying in poverty and too many are living and dying in fear, so we must use all the powers that we have—parliamentary and extra-parliamentary—to bring about change. That is our job—to lift people’s horizons out of the hardship of the present by putting forward a vision of the better life, the better death and the better society.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris again.

13:29

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I very much hope that you can hear me, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Third time lucky, Mr Doris—on you go.

Bob Doris: Thank you for your patience.

As the convener of the Scottish Parliament cross-party group on palliative care, I welcome the opportunity to discuss once more the issues that relate to tackling poverty for people with terminal conditions and those who are approaching the end of life, as well as their families and carers.

I thank Paul Sweeney for securing the debate, which allows us to consider the thoughtful and, frankly, the rightly fundamentally challenging Marie Curie report, “Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024”. That challenge provides an imperative for the UK Labour Government and the SNP Scottish Government to work together. No one should be living in poverty, let alone as they approach the end of life. The dying in the margins study by Marie Curie set out the unvarnished reality of living in poverty with a terminal illness. We must all work together to do more.

At the heart of the recommendations from Marie Curie is a direct challenge to the UK Government to use the UK benefits system to tackle poverty at its source by allowing those of working age who have less than 12 months to live to access their state pension if they have sufficient national insurance contributions. The recommendation also says that those who do not have sufficient contributions should be able to access pension credit. I am inclined to support that call and would welcome a meeting with Marie Curie to see how we can progress that, and ask the UK Government to consider the recommendation. I am not suggesting that it will be easy—it will present complexities and financial challenges—but we must try.

A key recommendation for the Scottish Government is to consider whether to enshrine in law an explicit right to palliative care. Mr Briggs, who we have heard from in the debate, is consulting on a member’s bill on that, and I wish him well with it. I have stated in the chamber that I support that right, and I have said that we must not only enshrine that right in law but ensure that it can be exercised in an effective, equitable and consistent way. That does not necessarily require legislation, because we already have in Scotland a palliative care system with some wonderful practice. However, the system is under pressure, it

needs to be expanded and it requires innovation. Enshrining that right in law can drive some of that change.

The Scottish Government is consulting on a new draft palliative care strategy. Getting the strategy and future strategies right is key, as is how integration joint boards and others fund, finance and commission services. That sits at the heart of the exercise of any right. Yes—the sector needs more financial support, but the cross-party group also heard that innovation, service redesign and a meaningful partnership with the third sector can improve service and save money.

The additional £4 million for hospices that was announced in Scotland’s budget yesterday will help, as will the Scottish Government’s guarantee that future NHS agenda for change pay awards in Scotland will trigger commensurate uplifts to fund the required pay increases in hospices. I have been calling consistently for that for some time—it will make a real difference. It would also make a real difference to lift the £2.5 million bombshell that UK national insurance increases will inflict on the sector.

I am also attracted to the recommendations to extend the Scottish child payment and winter heating payments to families or individuals in cases where someone is terminally ill, perhaps within the last year of life. That is similar to the calls on the UK Government in relation to pensions. Again, I would welcome a meeting with Marie Curie to discuss that further. I would also welcome a meeting with the minister, along with Marie Curie, to discuss not only those proposals but the on-going challenges that hospices face.

I again thank Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for persevering, Mr Doris.

I call the Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health, Jenni Minto.

13:34

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): I extend my thanks to Paul Sweeney for bringing this incredibly important and relevant motion to Parliament. The dying in the margins exhibition and research have remained with me, as they have with him, and I reference them very often in my role.

I put on the record my heartfelt thanks to every member of Marie Curie staff and every volunteer across Scotland for everything that they do, day in, day out, to support people who are terminally ill, their families and loved ones. There will be few—if any—in the chamber whose lives have not been touched at some point and in some way by the

issues that Marie Curie does such remarkable work to tackle. It is right that we all acknowledge that work, and I thank all members for their contributions.

Elena Whitham mentioned the importance of talking about the reality of death and dying. I agree whole-heartedly with her point, and I do that as a constituency MSP whenever I get the opportunity.

Liz Smith, as always, made a thoughtful and practical contribution. I recognise a lot of the points that she raised.

Carol Mochan, your description of poverty being an anchor was resounding and I thank you for that. I will remind myself of that, because you are right that it is the people who are impacted, and it is the people we need to think about. I cannot disagree with any of the sentiments that you or your colleague Richard Leonard expressed in your contributions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, minister.

Jenni Minto: My apologies, Presiding Officer.

As Miles Briggs said, raising awareness of the issue is so important.

Bob Doris talked about the actions proposed in the Marie Curie report on social tariffs to protect people who are living with terminal illness from spiralling energy bills and to address recent real-terms cuts and freezes in working-age benefits. I note the atmosphere in the chamber and would very much like to work with members across the chamber to have a discussion to see how we can influence the choices and decisions of the UK Government.

The Scottish Government is assessing the report and looking at where we can make changes. I will touch first on the social tariff mechanism. We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to introduce a social tariff, and we have been working with the current UK Government on that. We have convened a working group made up of energy suppliers and consumer organisations, chaired by my colleague Dr Allan, to establish how a social tariff could operate. We have had a positive meeting with the UK Government and we will share the outputs of that. That is an example of Governments working together, which Bob Doris and Paul Sweeney spoke about.

Paul Sweeney: The minister is making a series of helpful suggestions, which are welcome. Will she consider looking at forthcoming legislation and the Housing (Scotland) Bill, in discussion with her colleague the Minister for Housing, to place more obligations on landlords to make necessary adaptations for people who are facing a terminal

illness, so that they are more likely to stay in their own home?

Jenni Minto: I thank Paul Sweeney for that intervention. I am sure that Mr McLennan will be listening to the debate and taking heed of the points that are being raised.

A number of members have mentioned the situation with ethnic minorities and actions to access equitable healthcare. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has called out racism as a major public health issue, and we are working closely with health boards across Scotland to improve access to and experiences of healthcare, taking a proactive anti-racism approach. I recognise the concerns that members have raised.

On fuel poverty, the warmer homes Scotland scheme has been allocated £65 million this financial year—its highest budget to date—and we are now increasing that by a further £20 million to support even more households.

In recognition of the pressure on household budgets, our winter heating payment was uprated by 10.1 per cent for winter 2023-24 and a further 6.7 per cent for winter 2024-25. Just last Thursday, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Shirley-Anne Somerville, announced that we will be bringing forward regulations for next winter to introduce a universal pension age winter heating payment. All pensioner households, including those with a person of pension age who is terminally ill, will get support with their heating costs. That is not available elsewhere.

Elena Whitham mentioned the Scottish child payment. It is not possible to pay the Scottish child payment to families with dependent children under 16 on presentation of a BASRIS form, because that does not relate to entitlement to a qualifying reserved benefit. However, the Scottish child payment is just one part of our radically different Scottish social security system, in which we fast track disability assistance applications from terminally ill people, and in which terminally ill people automatically receive the highest rates of disability assistance that they are entitled to. Importantly, there are no time limits on the definition of terminal illness. That decision is made by clinicians.

As Elena Whitham also mentioned, a minimum income guarantee has the potential to deliver transformational change and reduce poverty and equality. We are looking forward to receiving the final report from our minimum income guarantee expert group, which is likely to be early in the new year.

As part of the record spending that was announced in yesterday's budget, we are supporting the delivery of the highest standards of

palliative care and are strongly committed to equitable access to it. As other members have noted, that is why we published our draft palliative care strategy for consultation, which I believe closes on 10 January—it is certainly early in the new year. That is an absolutely important piece of work, and I encourage everyone in the chamber and more widely to contribute to it, because, as Elena Whitham said, we need to ensure that we are thinking about the best deaths for people.

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is just winding up.

Jenni Minto: I absolutely reflect on what Fergus Ewing has been saying about the fantastic work that Highland Hospice does. As the cabinet secretary said earlier in the week, we need to ensure that partnership work with NHS Highland is strengthened. That is an important way to work. We also have important connections with the Scottish Ambulance Service, which provides home support with Macmillan Cancer Support.

On Miles Briggs's potential member's bill, I will meet him and Marie Curie early in the new year. On Bob Doris's point, I am very happy to meet members who have contributed to the debate, because I believe that we have to approach the issue from a very non-political perspective and work together to get the best results for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:43

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-15758, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a change to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 5 December 2024—

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Empowering Young People's Voices in
Tackling Violence Against Women and
Girls

insert

followed by Financial Resolution: Scottish
Languages Bill—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:00

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

Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Learning Hours

2. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an update regarding its consideration of whether to legislate to prescribe the number of learning hours. (S6O-04082)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government is continuing to work with local government and its representatives, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, on how we can best protect the learning hours that pupils in Scottish schools receive, including through budget discussions in recent weeks. The budget, which was published yesterday by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, sets out a funding package that, we believe, will enable all councils to maintain learning hours at current levels, and we very much hope that COSLA leaders will endorse that package when they meet tomorrow.

Michelle Thomson: Next week, Falkirk Council will consider a report that asks for a decision on proposals to cut learning hours in primary and secondary schools from the start of the next academic session. The proposals, which are intended to address the budget gap, are estimated to save about £6 million annually by cutting 91 teaching posts over the next four years. With the enhanced funding settlement for local authorities, as detailed in yesterday's budget, what further assurances can the minister provide that the Government is providing every support to Falkirk Council in order to avoid it having to approve those cuts?

Natalie Don-Innes: The local government settlement for 2025-26 delivers more than £15 billion, which is an increase on last year's settlement. That includes an additional £289 million to support local priorities and full discretion on council tax rate setting. Falkirk Council's settlement will be published on 12 December, and I am confident that the council will be able to revisit those decisions off the back of a very strong local government settlement.

College Course Provision (Energy Transition)

3. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that college courses are being tailored to meet the needs of industries involved in energy efficiency, carbon reduction and the just transition. (S6O-04083)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Our colleges have an important role to play in developing the multiskilled workforce that will drive the just transition to net zero. Colleges are directly involved in the regions and communities that they serve, and our expectation is that they will work closely with employers to determine the shape of their curriculum in that area and others.

The Scottish Government actively supports such work. For instance, through the just transition fund, we have allocated £4.5 million over five years for the energy transition skills hub at North East Scotland College, which aims to support 1,000 people into energy transition roles.

Kevin Stewart: I welcome the work that is going on at NESCol, but some businesses continue to tell me that college courses need to change to meet the needs of today's ever-changing workplaces. How will the Government bring dynamism and flexibility into further education courses to meet the needs of companies?

Graeme Dey: I hear the same things as Kevin Stewart does, as he articulated. Colleges are responsible for determining their own operational decisions, including on course provision. We trust them to engage closely with employers and local partners to understand the skills needs and to routinely and continuously plan and adjust their core curriculum to meet the emerging needs of the economy. The post-school education and skills reform programme aims to make further improvements.

The Scottish Funding Council sets out expectations of colleges in return for the funding that they receive through outcomes, taking into consideration students, vocations, employers' needs, the Scottish Government's ambition and targets, and other stakeholder interests. For instance, NESCol co-developed a pre-apprenticeship welding course with direct industry input from the Energy Skills Partnership and Ocean Winds, in line with the needs of the offshore wind sector.

Good practice is out there, but we need that to be delivered more widely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary question from Pam Duncan-Glancy, who joins us remotely.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The ability of colleges to deliver is crucial if they are to meet the needs of the energy industry, but yesterday's budget included a real-terms cut for colleges. Colleges Scotland has said that the budget "undermines" colleges' ability to deliver and that

"leaving colleges millions of pounds short is unacceptable".

With regard to colleges, Audit Scotland has warned the Government of

"a risk to their ability to continue in their current form"

and has said that addressing colleges' funding challenges

"cannot be avoided or postponed".

Which is it? Is the minister postponing help for colleges or avoiding helping them altogether?

Graeme Dey: Colleges received a 1.8 per cent uplift in funding from the budget yesterday. Of course, if Labour or any other party wants the funding to be increased, it can engage in the budget negotiations process. I seem to remember Pam Duncan-Glancy also expressing the view yesterday that student support should be maintained at a level beyond demand, so there have already been two asks from her when the ink is barely dry on the budget. I should remind Labour that, if it wants to spend more in one or two areas, there will need to be cuts elsewhere in the budget.

I cannot let this opportunity pass without reminding Labour that a fresh and additional pressure on colleges will be the changes to employer national insurance contributions, which it is currently unwilling to fully mitigate.

Careers Advice (Future Roles and Skills)

4. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that students are supported throughout their educational journey with career advice that aligns with the future economic need for specific roles and skills. (S6O-04084)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Career support is informed by skills and labour market information, with businesses and employers providing intelligence on opportunities and skills needs. However, we recognise that we need to do a lot more, and ministers have set out their intentions to improve the current offer, including by working with the career services collaborative to ensure that students are more aware of the wide range of economic opportunities in Scotland, the skills that are required and the pathways that are available to achieve their goals.

Alongside that, we have committed to taking responsibility for national skills planning and to strengthening regional approaches by better aligning them with the career support system.

Brian Whittle: The careers advice that is given in schools does not reflect future opportunities in Scotland's green economy, in the blue economy, in the rural economy and—specifically in my area—in engineering. Ayrshire College provides fantastic engineering apprenticeships and has even opened its own aeronautical engineering apprenticeship facility at Prestwick airport.

We have the demand for and the capability to deliver apprenticeships. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that those opportunities are marketed in schools and that there is enough investment in our colleges to meet the demand for those highly paid, highly skilled and long-term jobs?

Graeme Dey: I suspect that this will worry Brian Whittle, but I genuinely agree with what he has said. We are actively working on an upgraded role for the career services collaborative, whose membership includes not just Skills Development Scotland and Developing the Young Workforce but colleges, universities and local authorities. Good work is being done in that space, but we need to pull all of it together to ensure that we have a fully cohesive and coherent careers offering for people of all ages.

I will pick up on Brian Whittle's specific point. Just this morning, I held an employers round-table meeting, where I spoke to a representative of the aerospace sector from Ayrshire. He made the same points as Brian Whittle has made about access to apprenticeships, but he recognised that it is not just about new recruits, because it is difficult to get the numbers that people are looking for. In all of this, we need to do a lot more to upskill and reskill the existing workforce.

I absolutely get the points that Brian Whittle has made. I give him the commitment that we are alive to all those issues and are working towards improving the situation.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The minister recognises the importance of the alignment of skills advice with the skills gaps that are found in some sectors, and the need to encourage young people into some of those professional groupings. I am aware that Skills Development Scotland recently completed a survey of young people on their career aspirations. Does the minister feel that the findings from that survey align with the approach that Skills Development Scotland has taken in working with young people to give them careers advice? If not, what action could be taken to ensure that that is the case?

Graeme Dey: I read the survey with interest and thought that there was some fascinating information in it about the aspirations of young people. As I said earlier, we aspire to improve the offering, and this is one area in which we need to better articulate to young people all the opportunities that are available to them, based on their interests, skills and performance in school. There is more that we can do, but I thought that the survey was a useful piece of work to inform our thinking.

To be frank with the member, one of the things that has informed my planning for improvements in this area has been the conversations that I have had directly with young people about their expectations and what they are looking for out of the system. That is why we are looking to make some of the changes.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Assessments (Delays)

5. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to the provision of support for children with additional support needs, what assessment it has made of any impact of the reported delays to ADHD assessments for children on their education. (S6O-04085)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government is aware that there has been a significant increase in children and families seeking a diagnosis and requiring support for their neurodivergence, which is creating challenges for a range of services. However, we are clear that support should be put in place to meet a child's requirements when they need it, rather than requiring support to be dependent on a formal diagnosis. That includes where additional support is needed for learning.

Local authorities have duties under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 to identify, provide for and review the additional needs of their pupils. Under the act, an additional support need can arise for any reason, and a diagnosis of ADHD is not required before support is put in place.

Christine Grahame: I note in the budget the reference to additional ASN teachers, which I welcome, and I acknowledge what the minister said in her answer with regard to ADHD. However, given the admitted delays for children, would she consider, with her health colleague, establishing a list of qualified private ADHD assessors whose diagnosis might be accepted by national health service practitioners, in order to facilitate shared care agreements across Scotland and assist in children's educational provision? ADHD is a wide

spectrum and the needs of each child will be different.

Natalie Don-Innes: We want all children to get the support that they need when they need it. I would be happy to speak to Ms Grahame about that proposal. Obviously, that would have to be discussed with my health colleagues as well, but I am absolutely happy to listen to that proposal further.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I also note the inclusion of the £29 million ASN plan in yesterday's draft budget. However, the scale of the challenge in relation to additional support needs such as ADHD is serious, with more than 37,000 children in Scotland having the condition—and that number is growing rapidly.

Children with ADHD are more likely to drop out of school and to have lower scores in reading and maths. It is, therefore, deeply concerning that NHS Tayside currently has a waiting time for children's referral to its neurodevelopmental service of 154 weeks—that is just short of three years

I note that the minister said that there should not be a delay in support, but there is a delay in diagnosis. That means that children are going without support and pressure is being put on our teachers. How will the £29 million fund in the budget help those students now, given that recruiting and training teachers will take years?

Natalie Don-Innes: It is concerning to hear what Roz McCall has said about the waiting times in that specific case. As I said in my previous answer, we want children to receive the support that they need when they need it.

Spending by authorities on additional support for learning has reached a record high, and our draft budget provides local government with an additional £41 million to support extra teachers and support staff, as well as that additional £29 million for additional support for learning services. I therefore encourage Roz McCall and her party to vote for the budget, if she wants to see further increases in support services for children with additional support needs.

Apprenticeships (Awareness)

6. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to raise awareness of apprenticeship opportunities and promote them as an attractive career path for young people. (S6O-04086)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Skills Development Scotland provides an all-age careers service in every local authority area, with an SDS careers adviser in each school in Scotland to highlight the available careers

options, including apprenticeships. SDS also works with partners and employers to highlight the importance of apprenticeships, particularly through Scottish apprenticeship week. We continue to work closely with SDS to support the promotion of apprenticeships throughout Scotland at all times.

As Mr Mason knows, we are actively progressing measures to build on the foundations that we already have in place, thanks to the endeavours of SDS.

John Mason: It concerns me that there are still a lot of gender stereotypes around apprenticeships. Does he think that schools can tackle that, or is it down to families and peer groups?

Graeme Dey: Mr Mason makes a very fair point, and there is not an easy answer. One helpful contribution has been the work of the gender commission and the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board. They produced a piece of work addressing all elements of gender prejudice and issues around certain careers right across the spectrum of the post-16 landscape, and I have committed to weaving that work into the wider reform agenda. If Mr Mason has the answer, I would love to hear it, as this is a long-standing problem. He is right about schools, because some of the problems start in schools, where youngsters are told, "That is a boys' career" or "That is a girls' career" when it is nothing of the sort. We require, collectively, to try to improve the situation, ensuring that all careers are open to all in our society, with no sort of prejudice against certain careers options depending on gender.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have received requests for supplementary questions from four members, and I intend to take all four.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): How is the Scottish Government working with the higher education sector on the development of graduate apprenticeships, which promote careers in the sectors that are most important for the Scottish economy?

Graeme Dey: We have established a graduate apprenticeship enhancement group, chaired by Professor Steve Decent, principal and vice-chancellor of Glasgow Caledonian University. The group has four workstreams, and a broad range of stakeholders is revisiting the purpose and objective of GAs. That will help to drive future policy, ensuring that the GA strategic direction is in line with wider skills reform and economic priorities.

Graduate apprenticeships have considerable potential for expansion to address skills shortages and to improve workforce retention. Numbers are increasing, but I think that we can increase them

further and move the GA offering into other disciplines. I will be guided in that by the export group.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): What proposed reforms will the Government seek to bring forward to support employers to develop part-time apprenticeship opportunities, especially given last year's budget, in which the Scottish Government removed the flexible workforce development fund, which provided £7 million for employers to develop such pathways?

Graeme Dey: I will commit to meet Miles Briggs to explore that further. I must confess that that is not an issue that I had considered, but I am happy to explore it with him as I think that it might have some merit.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Traditional skills such as stonemasonry are of vital importance across the south of Scotland. There are excellent examples of facilitators, such as the Ridge, a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation in Dunbar, East Lothian. Will the minister confirm that support for traditional apprenticeships, which frequently come at greater expense than other apprenticeships, will be both supported and championed by the Government?

Graeme Dey: I agree with Martin Whitfield on the important point that he makes. We tend to talk a lot about emerging job opportunities and future career opportunities for young people. There will always be a demand for traditional skills, and stonemasonry is a case in point. In fact, one might argue that stonemasonry sits in the green skills agenda, because we will need such skills to maintain older buildings. I wish to assure Martin Whitfield that we are absolutely committed to sustaining access to such types of courses and apprenticeships. They may develop or morph into a different offering in future, but that is something that we are absolutely alive to.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Not everyone at school wants to pursue an academic route, and many would thrive in vocational or technical education. Despite discussing that issue for decades, however, we have never really cracked it. I believe that the way that we measure success in schools is part of the reason for that, and I think that we should change the Insight programme. Can the minister set out what he is planning to do, so that we can finally crack the issue and get vocational education to the level that it deserves to be at?

Graeme Dey: That is a timely question. As Mr Rennie knows, I am committed to reviewing the foundation apprenticeship offering in schools across the whole of Scotland, as it is quite variable. We now intend to consider that alongside the vocational courses that are being offered in

some schools, so that we have a whole, complete picture and can take account of it. We can hopefully come up with a way forward that really delivers for young people for whom that is the best career path to move into. We are actively pursuing that at the moment.

School Curriculum (Practical Science)

7. Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working to ensure that pupils have access to practical science activities as part of the curriculum. (S6O-04087)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Practical science is part of the sciences curriculum. Work to improve the curriculum as part of the curriculum improvement cycle is now under way, led by Education Scotland. This financial year alone, we have invested more than £100,000 in the raising aspirations in science education programme, which is empowering primary school practitioners with the confidence and skills required to deliver engaging science, technology, engineering and mathematics learning. We have also provided more than £900,000 to SSERC, an organisation that delivers professional learning and training for STEM teachers and school technicians. That includes practical advice and guidance on reducing the costs of delivering practical science activities.

Foysoyl Choudhury: Science technicians are a key part of science departments in schools, supporting teachers with their work and practical lessons. However, the Royal Society of Chemistry's science teaching survey in 2024 noted that 39 per cent of respondents from mainstream and specialist schools stated that they are understaffed for science technicians. Can the minister advise how the Scottish Government is working to address the shortage of science technicians?

Natalie Don-Innes: The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the important role that school technicians can play in supporting science teachers in the delivery of engaging practical learning opportunities. Local authorities are responsible for the recruitment and deployment of their staff, including teachers and technicians, and we will continue to support them to maximise the number of jobs that are available in certain areas and in certain subjects. Nationally, the Scottish Government supports SSERC, as I mentioned in my previous response, which offers training for school technicians. It reached more than 320 science technicians and delivered more than 4,500 combined hours of professional learning last year.

University of Dundee (Discussions)

8. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the University of Dundee, in light of recent reports regarding its financial situation, senior management resignations and its failure to recruit enough Scottish students. (S6O-04088)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The University of Dundee wrote to me on 13 November to outline the current financial challenges that it is facing and, in broad terms, to outline the steps that are being taken to address that. As autonomous institutions, universities have a key role in mitigating financial pressures and external risks. However, both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council will continue to support individual universities, such as the University of Dundee, in developing their own strategies to minimise any negative impacts on short, medium and long-term financial sustainability. The need to ensure that universities are on a sustainable trajectory is at the heart of our considerations to reform the post-school education system, so that the very significant investment that we are making delivers the best outcomes for learners, the economy and society.

Maggie Chapman: The University of Dundee should not be in financial crisis. It generated a significant surplus in recent years and staff costs have fallen by 25 per cent since 2021. However, staff are now facing redundancies and the university has failed to fill its SFC-funded places for Scottish students. Given the public money that is rightly spent on higher education in Scotland, will the minister undertake to investigate why jobs are threatened, why recruitment of Scottish students is failing and why restructuring is planned, and whether all of that, in the words of the students association, is "papering over management failures"?

Graeme Dey: I hope that the member will recognise that it is not for ministers to become directly involved in operational issues in individual institutions. It is the role of the SFC to engage in that regard. I understand, however, that the announcements to staff at the University of Dundee came out of the blue and have caused considerable upset. In my response to the university's letter, I outlined my expectation that, at the very least, every effort was made to ensure that any redundancies were voluntary in nature. I hope that Maggie Chapman will welcome the uplift in university funding that was announced in yesterday's budget, and that she will share my hope that that will help to alleviate the situation at the University of Dundee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front bench teams to change positions, should they wish to do so.

Point of Order

14:24

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government said that the budget gave universities a 3.5 per cent uplift. Last night, Universities Scotland said that that was not the case. It said specifically that

“The overall resource budget for universities is not rising by 3.5%”

and that, instead, its budget allocation

“represents a 0.7% real terms cut in HE resource”.

After a decade of public funding decisions that have left the sector in a precarious state, that is an extremely difficult position for it to be in. Universities are integral to Scotland’s future, and it is crucial that they—and we in the chamber—can understand exactly what funding the Government is allocating to them.

On that basis, Deputy Presiding Officer, what mechanism is open to members to invite the Government to clarify the position that it set out on universities in the budget yesterday?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I thank Ms Duncan-Glancy for her contribution; it is not a point of order. The chair is not responsible, broadly speaking, for the content of members’ contributions. The member will be aware of the numerous ways in which she can pursue the issue further with Scottish Government ministers.

Veterans and the Armed Forces Community

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15734, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

14:26

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I am delighted to present the Government's eighth annual update to Parliament on support for Scotland's veterans and our armed forces community. These debates, as well as allowing us to celebrate our successes and those of our partners, offer members the chance to hold the Government to account and to bring forward ideas for improving Scotland's offering. I welcome that, and I look forward to an informed debate.

As ever, I begin by reiterating the Government's commitment to ensuring that our veterans and serving personnel and their families are not disadvantaged by their service, and that Scotland is their destination of choice when leaving the forces. Our commitment to those goals is absolute, and I know that members on all sides of the chamber share our dedication to the entire armed forces community.

Alongside the debate, as ever, we have published our annual report, which details fully what we and our partners have done throughout the past year. Some weeks ago, the Scottish veterans commissioner, who joins us in the public gallery today, published her progress report, in which she assessed the extent to which the Government and its partners are delivering the recommendations that have been made by her and her predecessors. I expect that colleagues will raise the content of that report during their contributions. I was pleased that Susie Hamilton referenced areas of notable progress, in particular around health and wellbeing and employability and skills. We should be proud of that work, and of the commissioner's recognition of the efforts that we continue to make in driving forward the recommendations that she and her predecessors have made.

Nevertheless, the commissioner highlighted two specific concerns: the veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway, and the veterans homelessness prevention pathway. I will address each of those in turn.

The Government remains committed to ensuring that veterans can access the right mental health support when they need it, and I share the desire of the commissioner—and, I am sure, of all members—to see a new veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway established as quickly as possible. The veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway advisory group held its first meeting in March, and has met four times since. I am confident that the new pathway will progress the principles of the mental health action plan to ensure that all veterans in all areas of Scotland will have access to high-quality, veteran-specific mental health services.

I also welcome the news that the advisory group has agreed a preferred mode of delivery, and that two subgroups have been established to ensure that there is full engagement and consultation throughout the process. The group aims to sign off on a finalised model of delivery at its next meeting this month, which will pave the way for an implementation timetable in 2025.

In addition, funds have been secured to carry out a test of change for a three-tier veterans support service in three health board areas where there is currently no Veterans First Point service. That will take place over the remainder of the financial year and will then be extended for nine months of 2025-26.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): In the light of what the minister says, does he share my disappointment that NHS Lothian is withdrawing its funding—a paltry £200,000 or thereabouts—to support the vital service that is provided by Veterans First Point Lothian? I know that the Scottish Government is still chipping in, but that funding was money well spent. Does the minister share my concerns about that?

Graeme Dey: I absolutely share Christine Grahame's concerns, which are held across the veterans sector in Lothian. I offer her the reassurance that the Government remains engaged in that issue, to the extent that the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and I will meet NHS Lothian next week.

As I said, the five remaining V1P services, local arrangements in place in NHS Highland and Shetland, and the delivery of an online clinical service by Combat Stress mean that veterans will have access to veteran-specific services across most of Scotland, but we want that to apply to all of Scotland.

I also note concerns about the pace of progress in implementing the pathway to prevent homelessness for veterans. I outline the positive work that has been progressed during a challenging time for the sector, and it is important

to acknowledge that the number of homeless veterans in Scotland remains low. They are a relatively small proportion—around 2 per cent—of homeless households. However, I recognise the concern in that area.

The broad action that the Scottish Government is taking in response to the housing emergency will serve veterans' housing interests as well as those of the wider population. Our Housing (Scotland) Bill includes new homelessness prevention duties that are designed to help people to get the support that they need earlier. That will help people to avoid the crisis of homelessness and the associated long-term harms.

The proposed new duties build on the existing rights for all those in housing need in Scotland, including veterans. We recognise that, when veterans become homeless, they might have particular needs. We will continue to work with partners, including the Veterans Scotland housing group, to prevent homelessness and improve outcomes for veterans. The Minister for Housing and I are considering what can be done, alongside the Government's wider work on housing and homelessness, to better support veterans' housing needs.

Despite those concerns, we have made progress in several areas, with dedicated partners from the public and third sectors. Collaboration remains at the heart of our approach, and I am grateful for the continuing work of our outstanding veterans sector.

This year, we have seen progress with obtaining data on veterans, particularly from the census. It is difficult to overstate the importance of that. The census told us, for example, that nearly 4 per cent of Scotland's over-16 population have previously served in the armed forces. We should now use that data to support our veterans and their families. I have written to local authority armed forces and veterans champions across the country, so that we can consider how we deploy that information to provide better support at a local level.

Recognising the experiences of underrepresented groups in the veterans community and ensuring that they can access the support and services that they need has been a priority this year. We continue to work with stakeholders to go beyond the suggestions that were made to the Scottish Government in Lord Etherton's "LGBT Veterans Independent Review" and ensure that the services that we fund are welcoming and inclusive to all.

I also met women veterans to understand their experiences and needs and how access to services can be improved for them. That meeting and what I heard there have stayed with me. I am

absolutely committed to doing all that this Government and I can to respond to those needs. We also worked closely with the previous UK Government during the initial development of its women veterans strategy and I credit it for bringing forward that strategy. In her report on community and relationships earlier this year, the veterans commissioner highlighted support for historically underrepresented groups, and we are looking at how we can take forward the report's recommendations.

In addition, the commissioner published a report on veterans and the law, to which I will provide a fuller response when the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I have considered the recommendations in more detail with partners in the justice sector.

Supporting veterans in both their physical and mental health remains a priority. In November last year, the general practice armed forces recognition scheme was launched. The scheme aims to raise awareness among all GP staff of some of the health challenges and impact of military service on the armed forces community, so that we can support the provision of appropriate healthcare. That was highlighted by the commissioner as a particularly welcome development, although she noted the low take-up of the scheme among GP practices, which I am personally exploring further. Let me be clear that I share entirely the commissioner's disappointment at the uptake. To have had only around 120 of an estimated 5,000 staff avail themselves of that training is not what we had envisaged when we launched the scheme.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased to hear that the minister is exploring the issue further, because I share his disappointment. What can we, as members across the chamber, do to help to rectify that situation?

Graeme Dey: My ask of members is the ask that I have heard from the veterans charitable community—to spread the word. If members can raise the issue with the GP practices in their constituencies and regions and encourage greater uptake, that would be all to the good, because it needs to improve.

This year marked the 80th anniversary of the D-day landings, and I was honoured to attend the national commemorative event at the Usher hall in Edinburgh. The First Minister represented the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland at the UK D-day commemorations in Portsmouth and Normandy, and I attended the Anzac and Gallipoli remembrance services this year, too.

Commemoration and remembrance are critical aspects of our visible support for veterans and the armed forces community, and an important way

for us to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms that we often take for granted and to protect the democracy that we observe in this chamber every day.

I remain committed to providing the very best support for our veterans, their families and service families. I give my personal thanks again to all the individuals and organisations who have contributed to our efforts during the past year, and to those who continue to work hard every day to support our veterans and the armed forces community. Collectively, we can always do more, and I look forward to hearing members' contributions and to responding to them when closing the debate and beyond.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises and acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that it continues to make to society; further recognises that the contribution of veterans and their families continues and grows as they move back into the communities that they served, with their experiences positively enriching society and providing a valuable talent pool for employers, and agrees that the Scottish Government, cognisant of the important ongoing work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I advise members that there is some time in hand, and therefore I can be generous with members' speaking times.

14:36

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer—your generosity is always appreciated. I am also delighted to participate in the debate, as an MSP whose region has a long and rich history with our armed forces, both current and past.

I lament the absence of my colleague Edward Mountain from today's debate—we all wish him well. It is a privilege to open the debate on his behalf, and I will try to cover some of the points that I think he would have wanted to make.

I say at the outset that, whatever our personal or political views on the many global conflicts that are occurring, I hope that we all agree about the courage and dedication of the members of our armed forces—those who are currently serving and our veterans. The motion recognises the sacrifice that is made for us and our country, as well as the contribution that our veterans continue to make in today's society.

The motion rightly calls on the Scottish Government to work with stakeholders to improve the lives of veterans, and so it should. That

includes the more than 50 veterans organisations that actively work in Scotland, many of which are in my region and many of which are under the umbrella of Veterans Scotland. There are too many for me to mention them all, but I commend in particular the work of Erskine, Poppyscotland, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, Veterans UK, Haig Housing Trust and Help for Heroes. There are too many others to mention, and I apologise to those that I have missed.

We have chosen, as is normal practice in such debates, not to amend the Government's motion today, but we will raise some of the important points that came out of the Scottish veterans commissioner's report.

Last March, I spoke in a Government debate on employment support for veterans. Members might recall that debate. I highlighted the story of a veteran of world war two, from Greenock, who came back a hero from battle and then went on to run a very successful local business until his sad death in 2002. He was a fine example of adapting and adjusting back into the local community.

In that debate 18 months ago, I reminded the Government of the very stark statistics. Back in 2021-22, an estimated 640 veterans were assessed as being homeless or as being threatened with homelessness. Today, the number is estimated to be more than 780: it is heading in the wrong direction. In fact, right across the UK, it is estimated that there are at least 2,000 homeless veterans. That is shocking by any measure. The minister talked about progress having been made, which is welcome, but in my view, it is shockingly poor that we see those statistics going in the wrong direction. My view is that the Government must accept some responsibility for that—that view is vindicated by the report.

We know that there are more than 175,000 veterans living in Scotland, but it is important to point out that there is no such thing as a typical veteran. Only half of them are over 65 years of age. There are around 7,000 of them in the Moray region—which I am sure we will hear a lot more about—17,000 in Fife and more than 10,000 in Glasgow and the West Scotland region that I live in. The majority of those veterans are male, of course, but more than 20,000 are female, and 43 per cent report having a disability or long-term health condition, and therefore a very specific set of needs.

However, that is where statistics end. It is good to see changes to the census data, but I do not know from it how many veterans are registered with their local general practitioner, how many are in meaningful employment and how many are engaged with addiction or mental health support services—or, indeed, how many are not.

Those three areas are relevant to veterans. I note from yesterday's budget announcements that the budget line for drug and alcohol policy is being increased by just £500,000 year on year, after a £13 million cut the previous year. I do not mention that to make any political points, but to say that renewed focus on mental health services and support for our veterans with addiction problems is hugely important.

We cannot forget that housing, health, skills, employability and addiction services are all devolved areas—they are focuses of the Scottish Government and Parliament. I know that data exists out there, but until we can see a bigger picture of what the veteran community looks like, I do not think that services can fully develop policies to support it.

As members would expect, I will, of course, plug our proposed armed forces and veterans bill, which would enshrine in law the armed forces covenant for devolved bodies—a covenant behind which I hope we can all unite.

I also associate myself with the comments by the minister on Lord Etherton's work in his independent review into the historical treatment of LGBT veterans, many of whom reside in or came from Scotland. Next week, the UK Parliament will hold a debate on the review, and I am sure that the veterans community will be watching with great interest. There are too many people to mention and thank in relation to that.

While we are on the subject of Westminster, I note that many veterans have contacted me ahead of today's debate and expressed concerns about the new Labour UK Government's approach to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, after the statement that was made in the House of Commons on that legislation. I hope that it will wish to reflect on those concerns.

I will conclude on a note of unity. The Parliament's steadfast support for our armed forces and veterans is not a partisan issue and should never be up for debate. It is our responsibility to support the people who protect us. They pay the ultimate price with their physical and mental health, and too many of them are still hidden from the eyes of policy makers, lawmakers and service providers.

It is all very well for us to talk from the chamber and its wood-lined panels—a luxury that our veterans never had when they went to fight on our behalf. We owe them. Although I support the motion in the Government's name, I do so while expecting much more progress to have been made when we meet again to discuss next year's report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul Sweeney to open on behalf of Scottish Labour, for a generous four minutes.

14:42

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I join the minister in welcoming to the gallery retired Lieutenant Commander Susie Hamilton, who is the Scottish veterans commissioner. We all agree that she does amazing work in public service of our country and the veterans community in Scotland, which, as Mr Greene mentioned, numbers 176,100 people, according to the last census. By my reckoning, that is a population that is about the equivalent of that of Scotland's fourth-largest city, just beating Dundee. It is a significant cohort of people, half of whom are, as has been mentioned, active working-age people who are very much contributing and dynamic citizens in our country. They are, indeed, some of our best citizens, as is typified by the veterans commissioner.

It is a privilege to open for the Labour Party in the debate on the motion of support for the veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland. I was pleased, too, to sign the motion, in the spirit of consensus on its sentiments. We must all, nonetheless, collaborate to ensure that we deliver the best possible public policy environment to support our veterans community.

The transition from service life to civilian life is not an easy one for many people. There is much work to be done to make that transition smoother and to tackle many of the prevalent issues that veterans come up against. I highlight that, in many conversations that I have had with serving members of the armed forces in recent years, many expressed feeling immense pressure to terminate their careers in the armed forces prematurely due to family pressures, issues around childcare and education or spouses seeking employment opportunities that they were not otherwise able to find. That came out loud and clear in conversations with members of the Army, whether at Glencorse in Midlothian or Lossiemouth in Moray.

It is important that, in considering the on-going strategic defence review, the Scottish Government takes an all-Government approach to ensuring that the resilience of our armed forces is sustained by public policy across all tiers of government, in order to support our armed forces personnel to sustain their careers until the point at which they wish to exit service.

It has been highlighted in the early stages of the strategic defence review that we are losing too many people from our armed forces. There is a real strategic challenge in recruitment and

retention. Given the on-going geopolitical situation, that is a major national security concern. We all have a responsibility to ensure total national resilience in that respect.

We also need to consider the significant cohort of working-age veterans in Scotland and how we might promote greater recruitment to the reserve forces. It is not simply about hot conflicts but about ensuring home resilience. Given the extreme weather events and other major risks that face the country, having greater depth in the armed forces in Scotland through the reserves would be welcome. Greater engagement from the Scottish Government in that respect, as part of the strategic defence review, would be welcome. I know that the Scottish Government has submitted a report with its feedback to the defence review. It would be welcome if the minister could comment on that in his closing remarks.

It continues to be the case that many veterans face trouble with accessing housing, employment and skills development when they leave the armed forces. No one should be forced to face homelessness or sleeping rough. Homelessness among the veterans community remains extremely high. The Scottish Government's slow progress towards delivery of the veterans homelessness prevention pathway is apparent, with a total of 935 homelessness applications having been submitted by veterans last year, which is the highest figure since 2018-19. That is not good enough, and there is no doubt that the Government's decision to slash the affordable housing budget last year will have had a particular knock-on effect on veterans. Without the fundamental security of having shelter and a roof over their heads, how are our veterans expected to adjust to their new lives in civilian environments?

Although it is welcome that priority has been given to the healthcare of veterans, the Government must not be complacent about the quality of the services that are provided—in particular, the quality and accessibility of mental health services. It was particularly disappointing to read in the detailed breakdown of the Scottish Government's draft budget publication yesterday that there is to be a real-terms cut in mental health funding. That will certainly not be helpful.

Veterans are especially vulnerable to mental health challenges. I know that from personal experience and that of my friends. It is no surprise, given the exposure to trauma that comes with military service, often with the loss of friends at a young age, that veterans are at increased risk of developing depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. In her recent annual progress report, which was published on 18 September, the Scottish veterans commissioner warned, for a

second year, about the delays in realisation of the veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan.

Glasgow's helping heroes service, which is supported by SSAFA, the armed forces charity, is just one of many veterans organisations that are providing much-needed support for veterans by providing a one-stop shop. The minister alluded to the need for greater dissemination and promotion of the services that are available. SSAFA's model stands up to scrutiny as one that is particularly effective, because it operates a one-stop shop that helps veterans to access all forms of practical support in housing, employment, benefits and healthcare, and it signposts them to organisations that can help them with mental health issues. The Scottish Government must prioritise veterans' mental health, so perhaps utilising those pathways and conduits would be a helpful means of doing so.

The new UK Government has taken steps to improve the lives of veterans, such as extending national insurance relief for employers that hire veterans. I had the opportunity to meet many of them last week at BAE Systems on the Clyde, at the steel-cutting ceremony for the new type 26 frigate, HMS Sheffield. I also met there the veterans commissioner, who served on a previous HMS Sheffield, which was a type 22 frigate—in its case, one that was built on Tyneside. It was a great moment to join veterans who were working on the ship and others who had served on previous HMS Sheffields, including the type 42 frigate that was lost in May 1982, with 20 lives having been lost in that tragic incident.

The Government has also introduced a digital veterans card that will, I hope, promote greater access to Government services. I hope that that is something that the Scottish Government will look into.

I cannot help but notice that we have the same debate yearly, with almost identical contributions. If the Government is serious about supporting the armed forces and veterans community in Scotland, we must have greater time in Parliament devoted to the issues. We are eager to work on a cross-party basis, and we hope that we will not divide the chamber on the matter, but we must do more for those who have done the most in public service of our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Maggie Chapman joins us remotely.

14:49

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I echo the minister's comments about the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner and the importance of providing support to prevent

homelessness and improve mental health services.

There is no one way of being a veteran. I have spoken in previous years' debates about the experiences of very young veterans created by the UK's recruitment policies and those of LGBTQIA+ people during and after their time in the armed forces, as Jamie Greene mentioned earlier. Today, I will speak specifically about veterans in the north-east of Scotland and initiatives that support them.

As with any other group of people, veterans are experts on their own experience and are best placed to understand their own needs, challenges and opportunities. The Veterans First Point network has been developed by veterans and has both veterans and clinicians on its staff. It has six locations across Scotland, including one in Dundee, where it works with statutory and third sector providers to meet the needs of veterans in and around the city. That work includes providing information, signposting to other resources, listening, promoting social networking and promoting and enabling good health and wellbeing.

Veterans First Point notes that nearly a third of its veterans have addresses in areas of the highest levels of social deprivation in Scotland, with only 7 per cent living in areas of least social deprivation. More than 7 per cent are currently homeless, living with friends or in homes of multiple occupancy, with 15 per cent describing their current living situation as unstable, and more than a third have experienced homelessness at some time in their lives.

The Aberdeen armed forces and veterans breakfast club is part of an international network of similar clubs, each run autonomously. They offer social connection, including respite from isolation, help with building and maintaining mental health and wellbeing, assistance with benefits, sharing of information and opportunities, and community engagement. Crucially, the club also provides peer support for veterans in navigating challenges that many share, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Dundee Therapy Garden is a local mental health charity that works with military veterans and personnel who are retired from uniformed services. Based on a dedicated site in Dudhope park, the charity provides therapies for people experiencing difficulties, aiming to improve veterans' resilience and to develop and maintain positive coping strategies. Veterans, along with volunteers and staff, spend time working in the garden growing flowers, fruit and vegetables.

Those three brief summaries tell us quite a lot about veterans in the north-east and the kinds of

support that they need. It is clear from the Veterans First Point figures that there is a substantial overlap between veterans and other communities of multiple deprivation and that they share many fundamental challenges in accessing basic human rights, especially those to health and adequate housing. There are also specific needs that arise out of military experience that relate to conflict, violence and the complexity of institutions.

There is no one way of being a veteran. For some, their time in the armed forces was one of fulfilment, camaraderie and the development of lifelong skills. For others, it was an experience of difficulty and trauma, leading to exclusion and poverty. For most, perhaps, it was a mixture of the two. Some veterans wish to identify as part of an armed forces community; some do not. Some wish to talk about their experiences; many do not. Veterans of whatever age are first and foremost human beings, with the fundamental human rights that we all share.

I pay tribute to all those organisations, especially those in the north-east, that support veterans and their families, whether that support is specific to them or extends to the wider community, because we all need one another.

14:54

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am pleased that we are having this debate and that we hold it annually, because it is important that we remember that, as the armed forces shrink over the decades, the number of members of the armed forces who have connections with their communities is decreasing. As our communities' connection with the institution becomes less strong, it is important that we understand veterans' needs.

Between 2006 and 2007, I was a member of the House of Commons Defence Committee. At that point, the committee was considering education and the fact that what was provided by the education system did not match the needs of service families. It was also considering mental health. At that time, it was viewed as an outrage that the provision on both those fronts was inadequate across the United Kingdom, and there was a response to that. Today, almost 20 years later, there is a certain mirroring of that debate.

However, there is a danger of us framing all ex-service personnel as being somehow hopeless and helpless. They are far from that. Their skills are rich and varied—they are talented people. Throughout their military service, they adopted a can-do approach in very difficult circumstances, including times of conflict. They made things happen, and those skills are incredibly valuable in today's workplace. Although we should be

debating the issues of mental health and education—and housing, which I will come on to—it is important to recognise that our veterans, as a group of people, are a great asset to our society.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I absolutely agree with what Mr Rennie is saying. Can he foresee us having a facility whereby some of the veterans who have the positive attitude that he described can help schools by inspiring that same positive attitude in many of our youngsters, who often find it difficult to know what their next step will be?

Willie Rennie: It is important that there is a wide and varied connection between that group of talented people and our education system and beyond. That is why I was pleased that Scottish Land & Estates said in the briefing that it gave us today that it would welcome those people working in its sector. SLE referred to skill shortages and said that it would love to benefit from veterans' can-do approach. SLE would like veterans to work on the land, because there is a huge skills shortage in that sector. That is the kind of message that I would like to hear from all sectors across the country.

I might regret saying this, but I want to pay tribute to the minister, because I think that he gets this. He probably chose to be the veterans minister because he has a long tradition in this area. He understands the intricacies of the debate and how important it is to reflect on the light and the dark, and the strengths and the weaknesses, of the sector. I am pleased that he recognises the work that needs to be done on the mental health and wellbeing pathway.

I have seen some fantastic work. When I visited Veterans First Point almost 20 years ago, it was encouraging that it was badged not as a mental health service but as a support service. Its approach was that a person could come in and be directed to wherever they needed to be directed to. Of course, many of the needs of the people who came in were mental health needs, but if it had been badged as a mental health service, those people might not even have come through the door. That was a really smart way of approaching the issue.

Combat Stress has a great, in-depth understanding of people who had great trauma in their service experience and of how to turn around their lives. Those former service personnel deserve great credit. They have seen what many of us will never see in our lives, and we should be grateful for the fact that they faced up and did that job on our behalf.

The homelessness prevention pathway is incredibly important, too. That process has taken an awful long time, and it needs to be sped up. I

hope that the message that comes out of today's debate encourages that. The transition from the institution of the armed forces to civilian life is a challenge, so we need to be there for people at that point of transition if they need support.

The final message that I want to send to the minister is about service children. Those children often go from one base to another on an almost yearly basis. I am pleased that, in England, that is recognised with a service pupil premium, which is like the pupil equity funding that we have here. In England, additional support is given to schools that have a high proportion of service children, who need a lot of extra support to ensure that they can get back into the rhythm of education. I have seen the challenges that that poses for schools with a high concentration of service children. They need that extra support.

I hope that the minister can take to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government the suggestion—it was one of our asks in the budget process—that there should be a service premium in Scotland, as there is in England. If we can provide such a premium here, we might help those children at an important stage in their lives.

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

14:59

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): When the business programme for this week was published, I asked my office manager whether he thought that I should put my name forward to speak in the veterans debate, given that I had spoken in previous years, and he suggested that it would be a great opportunity to talk about how wonderful he was. I should perhaps clarify that he is an Army reservist, not someone with an overinflated ego.

One of the first things that he did when he came to work with me was to encourage me to sign the armed forces covenant, in my role as an employer. I understand that there was some discussion about whether I could, in fact, sign it. I signed up as an employer, not as an elected representative, which is similar to the way that living wage accreditation works.

Once that was established, the process was easy to follow and I was helped along the way by Ray Watt from the Highland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. I even went a step further and applied to the defence employer recognition scheme, or ERS, with my office achieving a bronze award. It was an easy process that I would recommend to every one of my colleagues across the chamber. Highland RFCA was incredibly helpful throughout and I am sure that Lowland RFCA would offer just as much support. I am

happy to give folk a steer if they want to catch me after the debate. Just this afternoon, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body answered a question that I asked about what support would be given, telling me that the SPCB would be able to provide help to members.

The armed forces covenant benefits not just the wider armed forces family, as a lot of workplaces could benefit from it, too. My dad, my granda and my great granda all served in the Gordon Highlanders—at different times, obviously—and I have had the opportunity to work alongside a number of veterans and reservists over the years, so I know that those who have served are motivated and hard working and have experience of being able to work well under pressure. They are great folk to have in your team.

There was, for a while, an idea that veterans needed to be somehow rehabilitated or that it was an act of charity to employ them, but that is absolutely not the case: they are excellent employees. The person who gets the most from employing a veteran will be whoever employs them. That has become even more true in the past few decades. I understand that preparation for leaving the Army begins just about when someone joins. Soldiers, sailors and airmen are encouraged to get qualifications and are given learning credits to use. Many of the wide-ranging skills that they develop in their service are now matched to civilian qualifications, and advice is given throughout their service to help them plan what they will do when they leave the forces.

Overall, our veterans give a lot to our country, not only throughout their service but afterwards. However, there are times when support is needed. The demands of service life can cause difficulties for those who are serving or have left the forces, and for their families. Much of that can be, and is, addressed by the Ministry of Defence, which takes responsibility for many veterans issues. Sometimes, the MOD does not, or cannot, do that, but in any event, it is right that the Scottish Government and local authorities also play their part. It is also welcome that a wide range of charities and businesses add to that support.

I am pleased to support the motion and I agree that veterans and armed forces families should receive the best possible support and access to services.

15:04

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):

I begin by welcoming the debate. As convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community, I know that our veterans face many issues, which do not get the parliamentary time that they deserve. Today's debate has been

an opportunity to raise some of those issues and, on behalf of the group, I thank members for doing so.

The cross-party group has made positive progress over the past 10 years, particularly under the tutelage of Maurice Corry, and it has increased the number of organisations in its membership that support our armed forces personnel and veterans and their families. I pay tribute to both the minister and the veterans commissioner for their support and commitment not just to the cross-party group but to the community as a whole.

I agree with the sentiment of the motion, but sentiment alone will not deliver the improvements that our veterans need, so I am grateful to Jamie Greene for raising our proposal for an armed forces and veterans bill. Enshrining the armed forces covenant in law for public bodies would be both a big step forward and the right thing to do, because veterans are up against some very serious challenges. We have already heard about some of those struggles in the debate. Homelessness among veterans has been rising in recent years—more than 900 homelessness applications were made in the past financial year, the vast majority of which were from those who left the armed forces more than five years ago. That hints at the long-term nature of the challenges that veterans can face when they return to civilian life.

We also know that veterans are struggling with mental health issues. In relation to those who were assessed for homelessness in the previous financial year, the stand-out support issue was the need for help with mental health.

There has been some progress on addressing veterans issues, such as through the Scottish Government's support for the veterans treatment pathway and the NHS Scotland armed forces talent programme, which helps veterans to find employment in the health service. On employability support in general, there has been some important work on the military skills and qualifications discovery tool, the going forward into employment scheme and the civil service guaranteed interview scheme, all of which receive praise in the latest veterans commissioner's report.

However, I am concerned that the Scottish Government's commitment is struggling to meet demand. I note that the veterans commissioner's 2024 report points out the slow progress on delivering the veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway, alongside which the report says that the veterans homelessness prevention pathway has stalled.

There are more than 176,000 veterans in Scotland. Another 10,000 people are employed by the British Army and more than 8,000 will be

working at Faslane. Let us not forget veterans' families, either, who also require support and care, particularly where the veteran is facing challenging times. What are they to make of such setbacks, whether or not they eventually get reversed? They send a worrying signal to the armed forces community, and we need that to be tackled, because we know that almost two thirds of veterans feel undervalued. That is a concerning state of affairs for a group of people who have risked their lives for us. Those men and women have stepped up for their country, and it is time that their country stepped up for them.

15:08

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am privileged to have in my constituency Glencorse barracks, in Penicuik, which is the home of 2 Scots, the second battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, and across the road and up the hill at Milton Bridge there are Army family homes. I have visited both, and I know that the support of families is essential in sustaining the morale of those who are serving. However, partners and families need support, too, and I agree with Willie Rennie on the special circumstances for the children as they move often from place to place.

The first, obvious observation to make is that the term “veterans” embraces many different people, as Jamie Greene mentioned. There are those who have had a short service career; those who were long serving; those who have been on the front line in places of conflict, in combat or peacekeeping, and those who have not; those who live alone; those who live with parents or partners; those with parental responsibilities; those who have suffered life-changing injuries; and those with combat stress—and that list is not exhaustive. One size therefore does not fit all, but there are common experiences.

Our servicemen and women face particular challenges as they re-enter the civilian community. They have lived and worked in a culture of conformity, structure, obedience and rank; of service tours taking them away from family, partners and friends for months on end; of access to housing and health services being provided; and of a guaranteed income. That contrasts starkly with life in a civilian community—being at home in the world of the civilian in which decisions and choices have to be made that, perhaps, were previously made for them. Now they are at home most of the time. They have to make their own health provision, find work and fit in. The comradeship that came with the job may be distant, and they may have to make new social ties.

Often, that is hard not just for them but for their family. A household will have run without them for months on end. Their partner will have made all the day-to-day decisions, so, even when they are on leave, there have to be adjustments all round—which is also true for any children. They have to fit back into a domestic household that functioned well without them. If they have returned from some horror overseas, that must also be factored in.

Funding to provide routes to adjustment helps, as does all the person-to-person support. I note that, from 2021 to 2023, £750,000 was put into supporting work on health, wellbeing and quality of life that was expanded to include all veterans over 60 instead of 65.

I will focus on health, including the Scottish Government's commitment to better supporting access to and engagement with primary healthcare providers by veterans and their families. The general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme opened to GPs across Scotland in November 2023, providing easily accessible training materials. The scheme's aim was to raise awareness among general practice teams of some of the unique health challenges that veterans and armed forces families face as a result of military service. It is therefore disappointing to learn of the issues with uptake.

I said “unique”. That is a reference not simply to PTSD but to challenges that might seem mundane but are equally important. For example, on discharge, a home has to be found. We have heard of the difficulties of homelessness and GP registration, and the importance of the MOD ensuring prompt transfer of medical records for the veteran and their family,

Mental wellbeing was referenced by the minister. For some, the transition simply does not work. There can be marriage and relationship break-ups, with all the fallout that can be predicted. Some turn to alcohol and, indeed, drugs, which might lead in time to homelessness, criminal activity and even imprisonment.

That brings me to the withdrawal of NHS Lothian's financial support for Veterans First Point, to the tune of £200,000 or thereabouts. The Scottish Government remains committed to its 40 per cent share. I already raised the matter in an intervention, and I note the meeting that is to take place next week with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Veterans.

As the minister knows, Veterans First Point Lothian is a bespoke service that has been jointly funded by the Scottish Government and NHS Lothian as a one-stop shop, offering support, advice and mental health care for veterans. It is a

multi-award-winning service that has provided support, including peer support, to more than 2,500 veterans over the past 15 years.

Notwithstanding that meeting, I have written to the MOD to say that, if NHS Lothian remains intransigent about removing the funding, the MOD should step in. It is only £200,000, for goodness' sake. After all that those men have done in serving to protect us, that is peanuts.

15:13

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. In the short time that I have, I will concentrate on Forces Children Scotland, although not because I do not recognise the contributions of all people who have been involved in the armed forces—both serving and veterans. The issue of young people and children echoes what Willie Rennie said in his speech.

Forces Children Scotland was founded in 1815, just four days before the battle of Waterloo, which stands as a pivot point in history and as a roll call for Scotland's armed forces—the Cameron Highlanders, the Gordon Highlanders, the Black Watch and, indeed, the Scots Guards all served there. History tells us that approximately 6,000 to 7,000 Scottish soldiers paid with their lives at that battle. It is a testament to Forces Children Scotland that it is supporting more than 13,000 children—twice the number of adults who gave their lives at that battle.

I recommend, to all in the chamber and outside Parliament, the Forces Children Scotland report "It's not just their job, it's our whole lives". The children are rarely forgotten in discussions about veterans and serving officers, but sadly their needs are rarely followed through on. I will follow the report in looking at that issue from the perspective of children's rights—as colleagues across the chamber will surely know, I will never refrain from an opportunity to make reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

At the end of the day, our forces' children and young people are unique among our children and young people. First, their experiences are very difficult to understand for someone on the outside who has not shared those experiences. Secondly, as we have already heard, they are a group of children who frequently move. They find a great deal of comfort among children who understand their situation, but they can sometimes feel like outsiders.

Jamie Greene: Will the member take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield: I will.

Jamie Greene: I am sorry, Presiding Officer—I forgot to press the wee button. Thank you for taking my intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Greene, could you please just start the intervention?

Jamie Greene: A point that has been raised in previous debates is that the spouses or partners of serving members often struggle to find meaningful employment in the area where their partner is serving, and that can lead them to move away from that area, taking the children with them. Do you think that more could be done to ensure that the families of veterans and serving members are better supported in that respect?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Greene.

Martin Whitfield: I agree absolutely. I welcome that intervention, because it allows me to talk about article 9 of the UNCRC, which is about the right of a child not to be separated from their parent. As an immediate statement of a human right, that can be incredibly challenging to comprehend for an adult who is in charge of armed forces or is responsible for a group of serving soldiers or officers. However, a young person has the right not to be separated from their parents. One of the challenges that forces children face is—obviously—frequent separation from one parent, and sometimes both parents, which for a child leads to a lack of stability and confidence.

There is a call for that to be considered first and foremost when decisions are taken on who will serve and where and how they will serve. Clearly, those are not easy decisions to make. Perhaps in some situations, they are not decisions that are warranted by the value of the expected service that is required. However, for young people and children whose parents are going off to serve, knowing that they have been considered is incredibly important. They will then understand that the adults who are making decisions about their parents appreciate and understand the existence of their children.

In the time that I have left, I want to mention article 18 of the UNCRC, which is on access to childcare and family support. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitments in respect of those things, particularly family support. However, I would ask that the Scottish Government identify forces children specifically, or forces children and families—to refer back to Jamie Greene's intervention—as a priority group for receiving such support. That, again, would indicate an intention to support that group and their communities at difficult and challenging times.

I am conscious of my time, Deputy Presiding Officer. I recommend Forces Children Scotland to everyone in the chamber and outside the

Parliament. I also recommend that, when we talk about our veterans and our forces, we pause to remember that a significant number of children surround and are woven into the choices that are made about them.

I am grateful for your indulgence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Karen Adam is joining us remotely.

15:19

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am honoured to speak today on an issue that means a great deal to me and to Scotland. Our veterans and our armed forces community represent courage, sacrifice and service, and their contributions—during and after their military careers—continue to enrich our society in many ways. We owe them not just our gratitude but real support to help them thrive in civilian life. This debate is not just about recognition, it is about delivering the action that they deserve.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of visiting battlefields and war graves in the north of France. Walking through those solemn spaces, I was deeply moved by the sacrifices that were made by many people, including many Scots, for the sake of future generations. Their bravery leaves us with a debt that we must honour. Regardless of how we feel about the reasons behind any war, we can all agree on the need to support those who stand ready to defend us. Our veterans are not just part of history—they are a vital part of our here and now, enriching our communities with their strength and skills.

In my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, I am fortunate to know veterans such as David Jarvis, a winner at the Invictus games. David's story is one of resilience and determination, and he has used sport not just to rebuild himself but to inspire others. Through his efforts, he has shone a light on the challenges that veterans face, particularly in adapting to civilian life, and has shown what is possible when we provide the right support. His work goes beyond his personal achievements. He has become an advocate for veterans, demonstrating how they can excel when their potential is recognised and nurtured. David's journey serves as a powerful reminder of the talent and strength within our armed forces community, and his example should inspire us all to redouble our efforts to support them.

The Scottish Government has already taken important steps in that regard. Initiatives such as the veterans strategy action plan, the veterans mental health advisory group and the inclusion of veteran status in the census highlight a commitment to addressing the unique needs of

our armed forces community. Those achievements deserve recognition, as they reflect the dedication of this Government to ensuring that veterans and their families can access the services and opportunities that they deserve. However, even as we celebrate that progress, we must also acknowledge that challenges remain, and that is why I welcome the announcement that the Scottish veterans fund will this year help to support vital charities with funding of almost £500,000.

The veterans mental health and wellbeing action plan and the development of a dedicated mental health pathway are vital. Veterans deserve timely, person-centred care that addresses the unique challenges that they face, and we must continue to prioritise that area. Veterans Link Scotland, a veterans voice group that brings the lived experiences of veterans to the forefront of policymaking, is a valuable tool in that effort. By listening to those who are directly affected, we can ensure that support systems are accessible and effective.

Employment opportunities are also critical to supporting veterans in their transition to civilian life. Programmes such as the military skills and qualifications discovery tool and the civil service guaranteed interview scheme are excellent examples of how we can help veterans translate their military skills into civilian success. Expanding those initiatives and working with employers to challenge stigma will unlock even more potential within our armed forces community. Veterans bring a wealth of experience and skills to the civilian workforce and, by fostering opportunities, we can ensure that they continue to thrive and contribute to society.

From mental health to employment, the Scottish Government, alongside its partners, is making a real difference. However, there is more to do and, together, I hope that we can ensure that Scotland remains a place where every veteran is valued and supported.

To our veterans, I say this: your contributions matter, and your sacrifices are honoured.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

15:23

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of the Labour Party and to reflect on what has been a collegiate debate with constructive points made by members across the chamber. Some common themes have come up, including that of the impacts on families. In that regard, I note in particular the comments that were made by the member for North East Fife, Willie Rennie, around

education and his experience on the House of Commons Defence Committee, and on how those lessons are still worth learning, as there is read across to the Scottish Government's policy.

Those concerns were reiterated strongly by my friend Mr Whitfield, a member for South Scotland, who highlighted the work of Forces Children Scotland, which supports 13,000 children across the country—a significant number of young people. In discussions, young people living in garrisons and bases have highlighted the fact that it can be difficult to be honest about any challenges that they face, because camp life is a village in microcosm and word gets around quickly. They do not want to embarrass their parents or to be bullied or victimised, so it can be a challenging environment in which to raise concerns or to reach out for support. Forces Children Scotland does vital work to support forces children in our country, and we need to consider the reality of garrison life. When the Government is considering how we can support the resilience of our defence estates, that might be one factor to bear in mind.

The issue of uptake of general practitioners was mentioned in the context of supporting veterans, as well as some of the concerns around that. I had the pleasure of joining the member for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale in her constituency, visiting the barracks in Midlothian a year or so ago. She highlighted the issue of the Veterans First Point Lothian funding cut.

Christine Grahame: I can advise the Parliament that Mr Sweeney took part in all the challenges while I watched from the sidelines and applauded his skill.

Paul Sweeney: The member's words of encouragement were most welcome, and I certainly did my best to fulfil her demanding heckles from the sidelines.

Nonetheless, the member made a very important point about Veterans First Point, and we need to support such organisations. I mentioned Glasgow's helping heroes project in my opening remarks as another example of one-stop shops that are critical interfaces for our armed forces and veterans communities.

The member for Aberdeen Donside has a family with an illustrious heritage in the Gordon Highlanders, as she alluded to. She mentioned the role of the RFCAs—the Lowland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association and the Highland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. Notionally, they are Crown bodies with reporting lines into the Ministry of Defence. I wonder whether they could have a greater role in interfacing with devolved institutions, particularly the national health service, in promoting greater uptake and engagement with

veterans and reserves. Perhaps the minister may wish to consider that in his response regarding the strategic defence review.

There is a lot up for grabs. I have spoken to my colleagues in the UK Government and the defence team, including the new Minister for Veterans, the MP for Birmingham Selly Oak, Al Carns, who hails from Aberdeenshire, and, of course, Luke Pollard from Plymouth and John Healey. I am sure that they are all keen to work with the Scottish Government as best they can to advance policy at all levels to support the armed forces, particularly on the issue of recruitment and retention, which I mentioned in my opening speech. That matter was also raised by Mr Golden, a member for North East Scotland, in relation to the uncertainty of service and how we can improve career prospects and avoid unnecessary service leavers. It is important to provide stability in career progression. That was not helped by his Government's cuts to the armed forces over the years, of course, but we can hopefully turn that around and promote a greater service pathway.

There is much to take stock from in the Scottish veterans commissioner's annual progress report. I know that she has been taking notes from the public gallery, and I look forward to her feedback on the debate. We note the areas of success, but we also note the critical areas of lack of progress. Let us work together to improve them. Everyone has a stake in that success for the sake of our veterans community.

15:27

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, as a representative of Moray in my Highlands and Islands region and as a resident of Moray, an area where I have lived for my entire life, which is home to so many of our veterans.

There are 355 council wards across Scotland. Moray does not just have the top ward in terms of the percentage of military veterans living there; it does not just have the top two—it has the top three. Out of the whole of Scotland, it has the top three wards in terms of the percentage of military personnel. We start off in the Heldon and Laich ward, which is home to RAF Lossiemouth. One fifth of the households in Heldon and Laich have military personnel or a veteran living there. Secondly, the Forres ward is home to Kinloss barracks and, formerly, RAF Kinloss. Thirdly, Fochabers Lhanbryde is the ward that I represented for 10 years on Moray Council. Those are three wards with such a large number of veterans living there. I am grateful that, because of the census, not only are we able to see that in Moray—we have known for a long time about the

large veteran population there—but that is now clear to the rest of Scotland.

Susie Hamilton has been mentioned a number of times today, and I, too, welcome her to the public gallery. She wrote in our local newspapers about how good it is that the percentage is very clear to everyone, and she noted the impact that those veterans have in our local community.

Willie Rennie was absolutely right: sometimes, in these debates, we speak about the negatives. Let us ensure that we also speak about the positives.

I know that some businesses in Moray have been set up by ex-forces personnel because they wanted to stay in the area. Others have decided that Moray is a prime location to base themselves because of the expertise that they can draw on from ex-military personnel who served in the army or the Royal Air Force. That is crucial to our local economy in Moray, which is why it was also warmly welcomed by Sarah Medcraf from the Moray Chamber of Commerce.

As we have such a significant veteran population in Moray, I am delighted that it will be the new home to the Erskine veterans activity centre north, which will open later this month at the former Victoria hotel in Forres. I received a great briefing on the centre ahead of the debate. It says that the new facility will be

“a vibrant, welcoming space where veterans can immerse themselves in activities, support services, and a true sense of community.”

Open Monday to Friday from 9.30 am to 3.30 pm, the facility will be

“a dedicated hub for veterans to reconnect with purpose and with community.”

I do not think that I am overstating it by saying that it is one of the most exciting new developments that we have seen in Moray for a very long time. I know that I am not alone in thinking how positive a development it is for the veterans in our area and the wider community.

The briefing finishes by saying:

“In the months and years ahead, EVAC North will become a vital part of the community, a place where veterans can find a sense of purpose and belonging, and where locals can show their gratitude and support.”

That sums it up very well. The people of Moray and the wider community will be very vocal in showing their support.

Paul Sweeney: I had the opportunity, with Mr Greene and some others, to travel to Lossiemouth, in Mr Ross's region, on one of the P-8 Poseidons, which was a great experience. One thing that struck me was the huge opportunity for economic development that the garrisons present

to Scotland. Perhaps we could do more to promote the economic and social potential of those sites.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. With others in the chamber, I and many representatives fought as hard as we could, after we lost the RAF base at Kinloss, to make sure that we did not lose another in Lossie. Not only was the base at Lossie retained—which is now a significant footprint for the UK's defence and the defence of our NATO allies—but we also have the army barracks at Kinloss, which are crucial.

I know that I do not have much time left, but I want to mention the minister's opening remarks. He opened the debate in a collegiate manner, which is why that tone has continued throughout. He mentioned the previous UK Government, which I thought was welcome and right. Johnny Mercer was the first ever veterans minister to be at Cabinet level and did a power of work in that area. His efforts when he was in government continue.

Willie Rennie spoke about the service pupil premium. We had some money in Moray to spend on that, but the money was withdrawn. I spoke to teachers who could see the impact of losing that support, particularly in schools around Lossie.

Maurice Golden, the convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community, gave an excellent speech in which he reiterated many of the points that have been made.

There is a lot more that we could speak about in the debate, but it has been helpful. There have been probing questions for the Government, and there are issues that the Scottish veterans commissioner will take forward. Today, across the parties and as a Parliament, we want to do what is right and best for our veterans, because they gave and continue to give so much for us. Let us get it right for them. We can do that if we work together.

15:33

Graeme Dey: I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I will attempt to respond to as many as possible in the time that I have available.

Before I do that, I highlight the Government's attempts to work with the charitable sector across Scotland, because it is imperative that we encourage collaboration between the Government and organisations and across organisations. That is one of the reasons why we are providing £315,000 a year in funding for the unforgotten forces consortium, because that will enable the consortium to work with its partners to provide support to, and improve the lives of, veterans who are aged over 60 across Scotland. I was reminded

of that on a visit to its annual conference in Stirling recently.

We continue to fund 14 projects through the veterans fund, and we have provided £456,000 of support in this financial year. The priorities for the fund remain to support projects that provide help to veterans and their families in the face of the cost of living crisis, including early service leavers, and projects that encourage collaborative working across the veterans community.

Earlier this week, I visited the Thistle Foundation in Edinburgh to confirm this year's allocations, and I heard directly from veterans about the value that they place on the services that they receive there. A few weeks earlier, I was at an event where I was approached by a member of a military wives choir, who wanted to talk to me about the difference that the money that the choir has received from the fund has made to her and her colleagues. That reminded me that the beauty of the fund is that it can have an impact on so many people in so many different ways, and I am proud of the range and scope of approaches that we have taken with regard to applications.

Of course, we can absolutely do more, and I will pick up on members' contributions in that regard. Jamie Greene led the way by highlighting the lack of progress on the homelessness pathway, and I accept that. I reiterate my assurance that I am working with the Minister for Housing in that respect, and I, like Jamie Greene, expect to see the progress that he called for.

Jamie Greene also referred to incomplete data, and he was absolutely right to do so, because we need that data to address, and to improve our understanding of, some of the challenges. Yesterday, I read the "Health and wellbeing of UK armed forces veterans: Veterans' Survey 2022" report, which contained a number of stats that touch on Jamie Greene's ask.

For example, according to that report, more than 75 per cent of veterans across the UK were registered with a dentist and 98.4 per cent were registered with a GP. That surprised me, because we are aware that a number of early service leavers, when they leave the forces, tend not to know how to access a GP. That highlights an issue that arose from the survey, because the report carries with it a health warning—no pun intended—that the survey was self-selecting. We cannot assume, therefore, that it is typical of the whole cohort of veterans, and the information is not broken down into independent countries within the UK. Jamie Greene is right to highlight the issue—there is a lack of data, and we need to do something about that. I would be happy to work with the UK Government to see how we can do that in a collaborative way.

Jamie Greene also stressed the need for appropriate mental health provision. That is why we are developing, at pace now, the mental health and wellbeing pathway, which will ensure that there is appropriate access to services across the whole country.

Paul Sweeney made an interesting point about pressure on serving personnel to terminate their roles owing to issues such as childcare and lack of employment opportunities for spouses. We are all aware of those issues, but that is the first time that I have heard that characterisation of what they are leading to. I undertake to have a look at that, in particular regarding Paul Sweeney's point about taking account of those issues in a public policy sense. We will take that point away.

Paul Sweeney was also eager that we have more time in the chamber to explore veterans issues. I would be happy to have those opportunities, and if he can help me in encouraging the Parliamentary Bureau to facilitate that, I would be delighted. He also expressed the hope that the Scottish Government would work more closely with the UK Government on some of these issues. My first interaction with Al Carns was encouraging in that regard, although I have to correct Paul Sweeney, as Al Carns is not from Aberdeenshire; he is an Aberdeen boy—a fellow Aberdonian.

Maggie Chapman made a good point about veterans being experts on their own needs. I was very much reminded of that on my visit to the Thistle Foundation earlier this week, when I heard directly from two individuals about what worked for them and what did not. It is imperative that we develop services that reflect those needs.

Willie Rennie's contribution reminded me of the contributions from his former colleague Mike Rumbles during such debates in the chamber.

I see that Mr Rennie is offended—I apologise for that.

Willie Rennie: It was all going so well.

Graeme Dey: In all seriousness, Mike Rumbles, on a number of occasions, quite robustly raised his concerns about there being a postcode lottery in mental health services across Scotland. That was during my first spell in this role—it prompted me to go around the country looking at what was on offer, and he was right. That is what has driven us to try to develop an accessible service across the country, so Mike Rumbles was correct in that regard.

On Willie Rennie's point about service children, I have to be honest and say that I am not convinced about the case for a service premium, but I am happy to engage with him on it, and I will read the Forces Children Scotland report that Martin

Whitfield highlighted in his thought-provoking contribution.

Jackie Dunbar noted that her office had signed up for the armed forces covenant. I encourage all MSPs to consider doing that, although I warn them gently that an organisation is meant to have a minimum of 10 staff in order to qualify for that—if Jackie Dunbar has found a way around that, good on her. I genuinely encourage members to pursue that.

Maurice Golden noted, among other things, the sense of being undervalued that many veterans feel. To that, I would add the sense of being misunderstood, because that is one of the issues that veterans report when they come out of the services. They are concerned about articulating their past, because they think that people will not understand who they are.

On the point that Douglas Ross made in his speech, I hope to visit the new Erskine premises the week after next, parliamentary business allowing.

I am conscious of the fact that I am winding up the debate. I once again thank members for their constructive contributions, and I reiterate the importance of allowing the Parliament the opportunity to scrutinise our support for veterans, their families and the entire armed forces community in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland. There will be a short pause to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Violence Against Women and Girls (Young People's Voices)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15735, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on empowering young people's voices in tackling violence against women and girls. I invite those members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:41

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I am proud to open our debate to mark the annual 16 days of activism against gender-based violence campaign, which calls for everyone to imagine a Scotland that is free from violence against women and girls.

Last year, Zero Tolerance worked with a group of women who were asked to imagine just that. The film that they created was full of words such as "respected" and "free". They thought that Scotland would be busy because so many more women and girls would be in public spaces, laughing, talking and having fun.

Sadly, as 2024 draws to a close, violence, abuse and misogyny remain an everyday and detrimental reality for women and girls in Scotland and internationally.

I am proud of our contribution to tackling this global issue and I am pleased to announce the launch of the new phase of our Police Scotland partnership programme with the police services of Malawi and Zambia. Through our international development fund, the new programme will continue to tackle violence against women and children.

Although we have our differences across the chamber, I am sure that we can be unanimous in recognising the importance of the global 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

Violence against women and girls has no place in Scotland. As Taylor Swift sang in her song "Starlight",

"Don't you dream impossible things?"

A Scotland without violence against women is not an impossible thing, but it is a bold and ambitious goal. As parliamentarians, we can demonstrate through our collective voice that we are united in our ambition to end that blight on our society.

A significant message from a recent debate in the Scottish Youth Parliament was the importance of respectful dialogue and the recognition that young people's voices are an integral part of the movement to tackle the issue. I welcome members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who are present

in the chamber and I thank them for eloquently voicing the concerns of young people on this topic during their debate. As I promised them, we will use their debate to inform the debate on today's motion by emphasising the importance of meaningful engagement with children and young people.

The Scottish Government has a bold ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world in which to grow up. An act that was fully commenced in July 2024 incorporates into Scots law, within the limits of our devolved competence, the rights and obligations set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The right of children to have their views heard and taken seriously is a guiding general principle of the UNCRC, and we are committed to ensuring that children and young people are at the heart of decisions that affect them. That is why a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Olivia Brown, has a representative voice on the equally safe joint strategic board, which oversees and supports the work to tackle violence against women and girls through our equally safe delivery plan.

The issues raised in the Scottish Youth Parliament debate, including technology-facilitated abuse, are reflected in many of the deliverables in the plan. Online abuse is a key issue affecting young people, and we recognise the harm and distress that it causes those who are targeted. I saw that for myself on a recent visit to Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis, where young people had been supported to develop an awareness-raising exhibition that focused on mainstream and social media handling of violence against women.

Keeping children and young people in Scotland safe from online harm is a priority for the Scottish Government. Although the regulation of the internet is a reserved matter, we will continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government and Ofcom on the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 and ensure that there are improved protections to keep children safe online.

I want us to lead from the front. That is why our equally safe delivery plan has a commitment that I convene a media summit to bring together key players from across all forms of media, including social media, to formulate a progressive and united approach to challenging violence and abuse.

Furthermore, in collaboration with Education Scotland, we have ensured that digital literacy, including internet safety and cyber resilience, is an integral part of the school curriculum. The Parent Club website also provides information and advice to parents on how to keep children safe online.

On 18 November, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety attended the launch of a

sexortion campaign. It was launched to respond to the growing incidence of sextortion over the past 12 months in Scotland. The campaign was a collaboration between fearless, which is a Crimestoppers service, Police Scotland and the Scottish Government. Importantly, it has been co-designed with teenagers, the group most affected by the issue. The collaborative model is one that I am keen to see replicated in other areas of our work.

In recognition of the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour for young people, we continue to implement the equally safe at school project. Developed by Zero Tolerance and Rape Crisis Scotland, the project works to prevent gender-based violence and to increase confidence and skills in order to respond accordingly.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Do the Scottish Government and the minister believe that one of the best ways to improve the situation with violence against women and girls is through education and educating young people?

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

Kaukab Stewart: I agree, and I am glad that the member has given me the opportunity to re-emphasise my point and celebrate the important work of Education Scotland and our teachers up and down the country.

Our mentors in violence prevention Scotland programme addresses gender stereotyping and harmful attitudes that condone violence against women and girls. In addition, the gender equality task force in education and learning focuses on eradicating systemic gender equality in education.

I pay tribute to the role that the sector has played in supporting women, children and young people who have experienced violence, abuse and exploitation. I witnessed at first hand on a visit to Monklands Women's Aid at the start of the 16 days how its work saves and transforms lives. I am fully aware that these are challenging times for the sector and the services are under enormous strain. I want the sector to know that I am committed to continuing the Government's support for the vital work that it does. That is why I am pleased that, earlier today, I was able to confirm my commitment to the delivering equally safe fund and advise current recipients of our intention to extend the fund until March 2026.

I want the Parliament not just to imagine a better future for women and girls but to be the driving force for change and the elimination of violence against women and girls.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign

2024; further recognises the vital contribution that the sector has made this year to tackle violence against women and girls, in particular the role that it has played in supporting children and young people who have experienced violence, abuse and exploitation; welcomes this year's debate at the Scottish Youth Parliament, which challenged politicians to ensure that the youth voice is central to action to address gender-based violence; recognises the importance of working with young people to ensure that their experience and expertise are harnessed to build a future that is equally safe; further recognises and champions the importance of education as an early and ongoing strand of prevention; condemns misogyny and all forms of violence against women and girls, and acknowledges the significant harm that they cause to individuals and wider society.

15:51

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): As we mark the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, the scourge of violence against women and girls continues to stain society in Scotland, in the United Kingdom and across the world.

The figures are spine-chilling. In Scotland last year, 1,721 young women and girls aged 18 or under reported domestic abuse and 405 girls under the age of 16 reported rape or attempted rape. Up to 90 per cent of women and girls with learning disabilities have been sexually abused. That is just the tip of the iceberg. It is an outrage. It is utterly shameful, and it must end. However, public outcry is not enough.

The criminal justice system has a vital role to play in tackling that violence but, as Fiona Mackenzie from the "We can't consent to this" campaign has emphasised, we cannot prosecute our way out of that crisis. We must tackle the root causes, as well as the conviction rate.

Karen Ingala Smith, who spearheaded the counting dead women campaign, argues in her book "Defending Women's Spaces" that

"Men's violence against women is more than a number of individual acts perpetrated by individual men ... it is a social and political issue."

She is right, of course. It is about sex inequality and challenging attitudes and behaviours that enable men's violence against women. It is about power and control.

Misogyny has loomed large over the lives of women and girls since the dawn of time, but in the era of TikTok and toxic influencers such as Andrew Tate, misogyny has become radicalised and amplified. Pornography—freely available and readily accessible—glorifies the objectification and subjugation of women. It has become mainstream online entertainment and it normalises sexual violence. All that has further devalued and commoditised women and girls, and our focus

must be on challenging and dismantling those attitudes.

Last week, I lodged a motion in the Scottish Parliament—which I am pleased has received cross-party support—to pay tribute to Gisèle Pelicot. The words of that remarkable woman—

"it's not for us to have shame, it's for them"—

resonated loudly throughout the world.

However, where are the men? That question was posed at an event that I co-sponsored with Claire Baker last night. Hosted by Beira's Place, it discussed the dangerous and destructive practice of non-fatal strangulation. With the exception of Russell Findlay, the room was full of women. It was exactly the same at Pam Gosal's event with For Women Scotland the previous day, which touched on the prevalence of pornography in schools. This is not about middle-class women of a certain age—although I fall into that category—but about women and girls of every age and every imaginable demographic. It is about the beliefs, attitudes and actions of men—and how can those ever change if men in positions of influence do not show up?

I agree with the Scottish Government that education is key. There is a lot that Police Scotland has got wrong when it comes to women, but the "Don't be that guy" campaign was powerful. It challenged the behaviour of men, not women, who for too long have been forced to modify what they wear and what they do to protect their safety. That kind of messaging must be repeated and reinforced as much as possible, if it is to successfully unpick the impact of misogyny and pornography.

Earlier this week, Reem Alsalem, the UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls, described the

"onslaught on women-specific language"

as a

"new form of #ViolenceAgainstWomen".

Today, this is a consensual debate, but it is a debate that is taking place just days after the Supreme Court met to decide what counts as a woman. That ambiguity was created by the Scottish National Party Government. If our own Government cannot define a woman, how can it plausibly secure our safety?

When vulnerable women and girls cannot rely on single-sex spaces to support them after experiencing violence and sexual abuse because of that ambiguity, where do they turn? Where do they go? When a member of the Scottish Parliament is wrongly accused of being transphobic for standing up for women's rights, as I was yesterday by Patrick Harvie, what signal

does that kind of bullying send not just to women and girls but to men and boys? It is shameful.

Kaukab Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Tess White: Will I get the time back?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will get the time back.

Kaukab Stewart: Will the member accept that, under the Equality Act 2010, single-sex spaces are absolutely a right?

Tess White: I am glad that the minister has said that. I would like her to share that with her colleagues and make sure that it is enshrined, and to say that to the King's counsel who represented the Government, who needed a flow diagram to describe this. The minister should have a conversation with her very own Government KC.

Today's debate is an opportunity to take stock, to call for greater accountability and to demand renewed action. Violence against women and girls can and must be prevented, but to get there the Government and the Parliament must look inwards as well as outwards.

15:57

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for bringing the motion to the chamber, as we mark the 16 days of activism, and for the cross-party nature of the debate. The 16 days of activism developed from the international day for the elimination of violence against women, which we mark on 25 November. It was established in 1981 by Latin American and Caribbean feminists and then adopted by the UN.

Despite the 16 days of activism having been marked since 1999, we all know that a huge amount still remains to be done. I welcome the focus of the motion, which highlights the importance of education and of listening to younger people on how we can address women's inequality. Ninety-three per cent of young people who were recently consulted by the Scottish Youth Parliament agreed that many girls and women feel unsafe in public spaces.

We know that violence against women is endemic across the world, and I welcome what the minister has said about the Scottish Government's international work. However, we also know that, as the minister also said, we have very high levels of violence against women and girls in Scotland. As Tess White said, that is an outrage. The only way that will change is if we change our culture, and young people need to be central to that.

In 2021, my colleague Pauline McNeill and I launched Scottish Labour's consultation on ending violence against women and girls to develop our

policies in the area. One of the key issues that emerged during that consultation was the significant challenge of sexism and misogyny in schools, the need for a cross-campus strategy to deal with sexism and misogyny, and the rising levels of violence against pupils and staff in schools, particularly girls and women staff. I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for her support and for the work that she is doing on tackling sexism and misogyny in schools and in developing our policies. I thank everyone—in particular, all the young people—who has attended events and contributed to the discussion that my party is having.

We all need to support initiatives to combat sexism in schools, including the mentoring projects and the variety of other initiatives that are taking place across Scotland. However, we must be clear that what we are currently doing is inadequate and that far more needs to be done.

We have been joined this week in the Parliament by Scottish Women's Aid, which has a stall in the garden lobby. SWA staff have been sharing with MSPs not only the experiences of the women who use their services but the importance of listening to children and young people who are affected by abuse. Women might be able to separate from their abusers, but the abuse can continue through child contact. Again, we need to listen to women and children as we develop our policies in all areas.

Research from Engender shows that 43 per cent of girls and women in Scotland do not feel safe outside alone. The Scottish Government's research, which was published last year, found that women feel more comfortable when train station ticket offices are open and staffed. However, the recent announcement of a reduction in hours at ScotRail ticket offices across Scotland is disappointing and another example of how we need to prioritise the needs of girls and women in all our policies. I look forward to working alongside my colleague Claire Baker, who has been appointed as Labour's new transport spokesperson, and with colleagues from any party across the chamber with a desire to assist in rolling back cuts in ticket offices and in ensuring safe staffing levels in all public spaces where people need to use public transport.

The voice of children and young people is vital in all areas of policy. The Scottish Government and MSPs must ensure that the

"youth voice is central to action to address gender-based violence",

as the motion sets out. I very much hope that we continue to work cross party to ensure that that happens and that we accept that, sometimes, that

will have to mean changes in the way we do politics and the policies that we adopt.

16:02

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I refer colleagues to my entry in the members' register of interests. Prior to my election, I worked for a rape crisis centre.

It is so important that, during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, we take time to consider what we are and are not doing to tackle the everyday sexism, violence and misogyny that women and girls around the world face. The debate is an opportunity to highlight the excellent work that is done by so many across Scotland.

For me, a highlight of this year came in February, when Monica Lennon and I co-hosted an event to celebrate the expansion from Tayside to the rest of Scotland of the young women know programme. We were delighted to meet many of the young women who are involved in the programme, to hear their stories and to share their vision and enthusiasm. Young women know is a campaign about healthy relationships and consent, which is led by young women and girls. It began with three local projects, including our fierce girls in Dundee and brave lassies blether in Angus.

Our fierce girls, launched in 2021, is a joint project between Dundee City Council and the Young Women's Movement Scotland, which does excellent work across the country. It works by bringing together young women and girls to develop creative and relevant resources, including animations, to address peer sexual abuse. The campaign aims to make sure that every young woman and girl in Dundee knows what a healthy relationship is and where to go if they need advice or support. As a founding member of the group said,

"Conversations surrounding healthy relationships and creating a safe space are absolutely crucial. We owe it to the young people in our lives to help them understand how they deserve to be treated, and to provide them with a safe space to talk about their relationships ... to address peer sexual abuse comfortably, and without stigma."

Brave lassies blether is a partnership programme between the Young Women's Movement and NSPCC Scotland that is delivered with Angus Council. It works with young women aged 16 to 18 to create toolkits to support young people in their understanding of healthy relationships, consent and safe spaces. The messages of brave lassies blether include:

"We want young women to feel like they have a safe place to talk about issues they are having. That their experiences are not what will define them ... that there is always someone to speak to and they don't have to

struggle alone. Women's voices matter. What we have to say matters."

I am sure that many members, on hearing those words, will feel the same bittersweet ache. It is moving that young women have the wisdom and compassion to share that assurance with one another, but it is desperately sad that it is still needed.

Women's voices matter. The north-east of Scotland has a rich tradition of women's writing, art, politics and activism, and of speaking, sharing and making space for women to be heard. I have time to mention only a few this afternoon, but I pay tribute to all the groups and individuals who have spoken, organised and marched for our safety, our dignity, our autonomy and our liberation.

Aberdeen Women's Alliance was the key organiser of the Aberdeen reclaim the night march that took place on Monday 25 November. The Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Dundee and Angus and the Dundee Violence Against Women Partnership organised Dundee's reclaim the night march on Friday 29 November.

The 16 days of activism in Dundee will end with an event at Abertay University next Tuesday entitled "Together we stand: a creative call for change". In concluding, I echo those words: we must stand together, determined to make that change.

16:06

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased to contribute on behalf of Scottish Liberal Democrats to the annual debate on the 16 days of international activism. I thank the many organisations that provided briefings for the debate for their contributions and for their work to address gender inequality and gender-based violence.

As others have highlighted, the Scottish Youth Parliament called for various actions to be taken to tackle gender-based violence, including early intervention through education and increased support for victims of violence and abuse. Girls are not safe from harassment and abuse in Scotland's schools. A University of Glasgow study found that two thirds of Scottish secondary school pupils had been sexually harassed and that a third had experienced personally invasive behaviour, such as sexual touching. Primary prevention approaches aim to stop such violence by tackling the root cause, which is gender inequality. Harassment, verbal abuse and toxic banter must be challenged to disrupt a climate that enables more serious abuse and violence.

Gender-based violence affects every community. For her social science baccalaureate, Shetlander Gracie Gowans-Little conducted a

survey on perceptions of sexual violence. Ninety per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that sexual violence is an issue in Shetland. At the cross-party group on men's violence against women and girls, a presentation by Angus Women's Aid and Limitless focused on the serious issue of domestic abuse and coercive control in youth relationships. The presenter pointed to the fact that the availability of hard-core pornography has created a situation in which high levels of violence are the norm.

A report by the Children's Commissioner for England found that the average age at which children first see pornography is 13 years old and that they are most likely to see it on social media sites. Research shows that exposure to such content, which often depicts violence towards women, creates attitudes that are permissive of coercion and aggression in sexual interactions. Those concerning findings demonstrate the importance of dedicated education for young people that covers healthy relationships, consent and critical literacy.

Young men and boys also need critical thinking skills to tackle the reach of so-called misogynistic influencers. Boys who are looking for videos on topics such as cars or exercise are at risk of exposure to such content, which draws them in with videos about making money and motivational advice and escalates to misogynistic rants and hateful comments.

Misogynistic attitudes are linked to the perpetration of violence against women and to higher rates of substance abuse and depression among men. Teenagers are drawn to risk and rebellion, which means that it is not enough just to say that influencers are wrong. Emily Setter, a researcher in criminology, argues that we must understand why young men and boys are vulnerable to those messages and must offer them a credible alternative.

I commend the work of Rape Crisis Scotland and the University of Glasgow in developing equally safe at school, which is a toolkit to create a whole-school approach to preventing gender-based violence in secondary schools. I hope that schools across Scotland will be equipped to tackle harmful cultures in schools, to prevent gender-based violence and to support children who are affected by it. Teachers will also need training and support in enacting new policies.

Education can help to normalise men challenging each other's behaviour. As others have said, Police Scotland's "Don't be that guy" campaign encourages men to have frank conversations with each other about behaviour that is damaging to women and to prevent harassment.

In last year's debate I spoke of the patriarchy and misogyny restricting the freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan, but that situation is even worse today. In August, the Taliban prohibited women's voices from being heard in public. The level of human rights violations is so extensive that Amnesty International's latest report found that it constitutes gender persecution.

I have more to say, but I realise that I am running out of time.

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

16:11

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Violence against women and girls is a blight on our society. It is a consequence of gender inequality and the misogyny that permeates all our lives.

I begin by thanking Zero Tolerance Scotland for sharing some research ahead of the debate, as well as for its year-round work. Zero Tolerance says that girls and young women are facing a

"daily assault of misogyny",

while boys and young men

"face the pressure of unhealthy masculinity",

and it warns that extreme misogyny is resurging, with attitudes that seek to justify and incite violence finding a home on the internet.

Online communities and so-called influencers create content that is targeted specifically towards boys and young men, peddling extreme misogynistic views that can then creep into other online and offline discourse. Last year, 83 per cent of secondary school teachers said that they were worried that those attitudes and beliefs were having a direct and negative impact on pupils' behaviour, which is obviously extremely concerning.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts has a global flagship campaign to end violence against girls and women, for which it should be commended. During a recent visit to the annual review of Girlguiding West Lanarkshire, which covers part of my Rutherglen constituency, I was honoured to become a Girlguiding ambassador. That role encompasses recognising the value of what Girlguiding does and promoting its opportunities for girls and young women.

Each year, girl guides and girl scouts around the world play their part in tackling violence against women and girls in their communities through advocacy, education, awareness raising, community action and research. At home, Girlguiding UK produces an annual girls' attitudes survey. Now in its 16th year, the survey gives girls and young women a platform to speak out about

the things that matter to them and, importantly, asks about the challenges that they face today. This year, Girlguiding also produced a manifesto called "For all girls" ahead of the general election.

Some of the statistics from that work are sobering. Compared with 10 years ago, twice as many girls now report feeling unsafe due to sexism; 69 per cent of girls say that they hear "toxic" comments about women and girls at school; and 44 per cent say that they have heard comments at school that have made them feel afraid for their safety. The writers concluded that, because of the rise of sexism, online misogyny and gender-based violence, girls often do not feel safe.

The refreshed equally safe strategy, which was launched earlier this year, states that by challenging the misogyny and harmful attitudes that those young people report

"we pave the way for the effective dismantling of gender-based"

structures and attitudes that enable and support violence against women and girls.

Research shows us that education is a critical component in changing societal attitudes and reducing abuse. It can cover issues such as consent, healthy relationships, understanding signs of abusive behaviour and challenging gender stereotypes from an early age. The latest delivering equally safe fund impact report shows that the number of young people who are accessing sessions via grass-roots organisations is increasing, which is to be welcomed. However, it can still feel like, as a society, we have a very long way to go.

There is no doubt that this is challenging work. Misogyny must be challenged. Aggression and violence against women and girls is unacceptable, and we must all add our support and efforts to ensure that we have equally safe places for all women and girls. That is crucial if we are to achieve our shared aim of having a Scotland without violence, in any of its forms, against women and girls.

16:15

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I thank all the organisations that provided briefings for the debate and commend them for the hard work that they do. I also thank For Women Scotland for working with me to sponsor a round-table discussion this week that will highlight violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. I hope that the Government takes that subject seriously and will do more work on it.

Every year, the Parliament holds a debate on the 16 days of activism against gender-based

violence, and this is the fourth year in a row in which I have contributed to that debate. Every year, MSPs stand in the chamber mentioning statistics, personal experiences and case studies and asking what more can be done. It is very sad to note that, even now, not much has changed.

I personally take violence against women and girls and domestic abuse very seriously. I remember from a young age seeing my mother helping distressed women, who were sometimes in tears, bruised or even bleeding, in her shop in Argyle Street. As I was young, I did not know much at that time. Only years later did I learn that those women were suffering from domestic abuse and violence. My political role has now given me the opportunity to take a stance on that.

The theme for this year's 16 days of activism is

"Towards Beijing +30: Unite to End Violence Against Women and Girls."

It refers to the 30th anniversary of the Beijing declaration and the platform for action. These 16 days are not just days; rather, they are a lifetime for people. According to the United Nations, one in three women and girls will experience violence in their lifetime. That includes the one in four adolescent girls who are abused by their partners. Most tragically, a woman is killed by her partner or a family member every 18 minutes, with 60 per cent of femicides being committed by partners or family members. To put that in context, from the beginning to the end of this 80-minute debate, eight women will—tragically—lose their lives. These are real lives, and those statistics are absolutely unacceptable.

Moving closer to home, I note that, shockingly, an incident of domestic abuse is reported to Police Scotland every 10 minutes. Recent figures show that, in the fiscal year 2023-24, the number of domestic abuse incidents reported to Police Scotland rose to almost 64,000. The number of reoffenders has also risen, with reoffending accounting for an estimated 65 per cent of reported cases. Statistics show that, at the same time, the numbers of recorded sexual crimes and domestic abuse incidents have increased by 10 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Unfortunately, the real figures will be much worse, as many survivors are afraid of reporting such crimes to the police.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I appreciate everything that the member has pointed out. I wonder whether she welcomes the fact that yesterday's budget announcement included £26 million specifically to support victims of crime. Obviously, a significant number of those victims will be victims of violence against women. Also, is she aware that the Criminal Justice Committee is currently

scrutinising the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill?

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

Pam Gosal: Thank you.

We need absolutely every penny. This is about not just domestic abuse and sexual violence but making sure that the streets are safe, so that our women and girls can go out in them. I absolutely welcome that money, but we have a lot more to do in the Parliament. We need not just to hand out money but, as members will hear, to change behaviours.

As today's debate is about empowering young people's voices, we must highlight the prevalence of violence among young people. One organisation that I spoke to, which helps survivors of domestic abuse, indicated that it is witnessing a stark increase in the number of young people who seek support. Many times, the perpetrator is also under the age of 18.

Coercive behaviour is also a form of abuse and is increasingly being reported in further and higher education. I attended a recent BBC lecture on violence by Dr Gwen Adshead, who said:

"if schools are not about emotional education, then I'm not quite sure what they're for."

That is why my protection of domestic abuse bill is very important. It provides for a statutory requirement and has received overwhelming support, with 94 per cent of consultation respondents agreeing with it.

I will conclude with some personal thoughts. I know this because I come from an Asian family. Why, when our daughters leave our homes, do parents say to them, "Be safe, text us or phone us when you get there," or ask, "Should your dad or your brother pick you up? Will you get home safe?"? When will parents—mothers—say to their sons, "See when you're out there, just be careful, son, that you do not make any female feel uncomfortable, and that you respect women"? What a change that would make. If we had changed the behaviours of boys and men, we would not be standing here today. I hope that, next year, we can report that something has been done and that changes have been made in men's behaviour.

16:22

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Like many feminists of a certain age, I am tired of fighting a system that is so ingrained with inequality that it feels immovable and intransigent. It is as if the glass ceiling is becoming ever more opaque and could soon become the cement ceiling, which means that

smashing the patriarchy is that much harder—a task so difficult that it feels impossible—and can make the yearly 16 days campaign feel futile. Then I hear the voices of our young women—my 16-year-old daughter and thousands like her—who raise their fists and their voices, shouting from the rooftops that what is happening today is not okay.

Today, the situation is worse than ever. Our young men are being captured by a pervasive culture of misogynistic hatred, dressed up as the greatest-of-all-time influencers, who peddle a brand of toxic masculinity that is so damaging and all-encompassing that I see clearly that we have gone back in time, to an age in which, daily, women and young girls are subjected openly to hatred in all spheres of their lives.

We need to ask ourselves: how did we get here? How did we empower the likes of Andrew Tate to poison the discourse so insidiously that he has not only taken too many young men with him but succeeded in helping to convince too many young women that feminism and the quest for real equality are damaging to society? How is it that we have left social media unbridled to the extent that we are only a click away from encountering extreme violent pornography that glorifies and normalises strangulation—meaning that our young people are at risk of becoming desensitised to normal, healthy relationships?

Many years ago, as a teenager, I railed against the use of women's bodies to sell products, due to the damage that it did to women as a whole. Today, the internet age that we live in is dominated by influencers and those who seek to make money in any way possible. My teenage plight seems tame in comparison with the horrors that our young folk navigate every day.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Elena Whitham was not able to make the event at Beira's Place, which was sponsored by Claire Baker and Tess White. Scotland is the only country in the UK that has yet to introduce specific legislation to address non-fatal strangulation. It has been done in England and Wales and in Ireland. It is about time that we persuaded our Scottish Government to look at specific legislation, rather than relying on assault as the crime.

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

Elena Whitham: I absolutely agree with the member. I have been looking at that issue for a long time. Before coming to Parliament, I led work in the East Ayrshire violence against women partnership to look at the pervasiveness and horribleness of pornography and what it is doing to our young people and our population as a whole.

When talking about these issues, we cannot shy away from the fact that so many of our young men feel ostracised and left behind. That feeling is nurtured and exploited by incels and those on the far right. We need to unpack that reality and address it urgently. We owe it to those boys and to their life chances. Why are we failing them as well?

We must also confront the fact that increasing numbers of young women do not feel able to participate fully in their own lives. Twice as many young women as a decade ago feel scared to travel on public transportation, to walk the school or college corridors, to speak out in class and to venture to the local shops. Young Scots are crying out for a different world, and we have a responsibility to help them to create it.

We know that extreme misogyny is a symptom of the wider patriarchal attitudes and rigid gender norms that still permeate our society. To eradicate misogyny and men's violence against women, we must tackle the gender inequality that is at their core. We can do that through effective primary prevention and the equally safe strategy, focusing on structural, cultural, attitudinal and behavioural change. That long-term holistic strategy has the aim of ensuring that all women and girls, but especially marginalised women, share equal power with men and boys. We must look forensically at all the parts of the system and root out those parts that work against the aims of our equally safe strategy. We must address them urgently. We must also make the misogyny bill a reality.

Finally, as a former Women's Aid worker who has seen first hand the harrowing reality of how court-mandated forced and unsafe contact perpetuates the abuse of child survivors of domestic abuse, I say loudly that we cannot ignore their voices—voices that have now been amplified by their rights under the UNCRC. Our court system must pay due regard to their right to feel safe and free from further abuse by an abuser who will all too often use the system as a form of lawfare and coercive control.

I urge all members to participate in the social media vigil #ForThemAll, this Friday at 7pm, to remember the far too many women and children who have been murdered by their abusers.

16:27

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the chance to speak in the debate and contribute to this sobering discussion of what more can be done to protect and empower young people's voices in Scotland.

Although for us the theme of this year's 16 days of activism is to imagine a Scotland without

gender-based violence, recent statistics remind us that violence against women and girls remains far too common. I attended a meeting last night, which others have mentioned, that was hosted by Tess White and Claire Baker and which brought to the Parliament the stark reality of the situation in Scotland. It touched on the unpleasant truth about life for many women and girls, particularly those who are the most vulnerable in our society.

For example, a clear majority of domestic abuse victims are women and the vast majority of perpetrators are men. We must not shy away from that reality. Women do not fear being attacked or abused by other women; they fear the actions of men. Therefore, as has been said, we must focus on the behaviour of men if we wish to put an end to that.

In 2023-24, more than 63,000 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded in Scotland, which is a 3 per cent increase on the previous year. Recorded incidents of rape and attempted rape increased by 10 per cent, with 95 per cent of victims being women. The reality for our young women is that, of all the sexual crimes reported in 2023-24, 37 per cent involved a victim under the age of 18.

Those are just a few of the damning insights into gender-based violence in Scotland, but it does not have to be like that. Gender violence is not innate. The truth is that it is learned and nurtured through stereotypes, misogyny, bias and ingrained inequalities.

I want to raise the issue of pornography and the normalisation of porn in the lives of young men. Last night, we heard from women who are researching this area, which is not often tackled, as it is an uncomfortable area and one that seems impossible to change. However, porn is not acceptable and is not normal, and we should be saying that to young men. Young men need to know that, and they need to be educated on the kindness that relationships can bring and not focus on the behaviours that are played out in those pornographic images. Society has a responsibility to challenge that industry and the behaviours that relate to it. We, as parliamentarians, must ensure that adequate and appropriate resources are provided to tackle that injustice.

I welcome much of what the minister said in her opening speech and the work of the Government, but I also think that members across the chamber have made some very powerful statements about what we can do. We all agree that the recent statistics reveal that more must be done to tackle violence against women and girls.

I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing up the issue of Afghanistan. We all agree that what is happening to women and young girls in

Afghanistan must be challenged. Scotland should never accept complacency. It must challenge all aspects of violence against women here in Scotland and, as Beatrice Wishart reminded us, right across the world.

As we have heard, a Scottish Labour report that was published last year found that a significant shift in social and cultural norms is required to prevent and address violence against women and girls. Tackling sexism and misogyny from a young age is critical to ending gender-based violence later down the line. Therefore, the Government must ensure that it funds initiatives and services that promote that necessary cultural change.

Women in politics have always worked in a cross-party manner and have been prepared to work with Governments to develop new strategies that should be followed by tangible outcomes. We need men in the chamber to do that, too, and I welcome the First Minister taking a lead on that today. I thank him for being here, and I thank all the men who are present in the chamber.

For the sake of young girls and young people, we must tackle the behaviours that we are discussing today, and I hope that we in Scotland can work in a cross-party manner to do so.

16:32

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Not so long ago, in this chamber, we reflected on the situation in Afghanistan and the terrible and horrific circumstances for women and girls in that country. They are denied access to healthcare and education, they are repressed and they are denied their human rights. Afghanistan is a very different place to Scotland, but it serves as a warning from history—and the present—that things can regress. These 16 days, here in Scotland and internationally, are a chance for us to remember those who have suffered from violence against women and girls, to reflect on the situation that we are in and—for those of us who are men—to refocus on what more we can and should do.

In Scotland, we have made significant advancements with legislation, although I appreciate that there are calls for more to be done. There is also the Government's commitment to introducing a law on misogyny, and there is collaboration across the UK to take more action on the difficulties in social media with regard to what it is doing in certain worrying instances to, as has been referenced, almost encourage toxic masculinity.

Further, there is the important work that is done in Scotland by our many stakeholders, through funding from the Government and the equally safe strategy. There are many projects and

organisations that make a difference across the country and in our communities. In Edinburgh Northern and Leith, we have specific focused organisations such as Sikh Sanjog, Shakti Women's Aid and Saheliya, and there are national bodies and initiatives such as Women's Aid, which is with us this week in the garden lobby, as well as Aberlour Children's Charity and the financially included project, which have been doing work in Parliament today—I was glad to meet them earlier to talk about the important work that they do around reducing coercive control and coerced debt.

There is also White Ribbon Scotland, which has engaged with many of us in Parliament in recent years. Next week in Parliament, I will host an event with it on persuading men and boys to take action on men's violence against women and girls. I also mention Zero Tolerance, which has provided important information for us today and is doing great work, as others have said.

There is much to do. Many of the statistics have already been stated but, according to Zero Tolerance, only 19 per cent of girls and women feel completely safe in educational settings. In relation to misogyny and gendered attitudes in schools, it has found through its research that 83 per cent of schoolteachers are worried about the influence of online personalities and the negative effect that they are having on young boys and their behaviour.

We can look back to research even from 10 years ago about young people's attitudes to violence against women and girls. The report that was produced in 2016, "Young People's Attitudes to Violence Against Women: Report on Findings from the Young People in Scotland Survey 2014", showed worrying trends even back then. We must get ahead of the prevention work and invest in prevention. That is what all the various organisations are asking us to do. That means taking initiative, and it means hard cash for the third sector organisations that make such a difference—sometimes an intangible difference. It also means leadership from all of us, as role models, parliamentarians and community leaders.

Last year, I put forward 16 actions that members of the Scottish Parliament could take over the course of the year between each of the 16 days of activism. I would encourage colleagues, particularly male colleagues, to take those 16 actions. One of the key ways in which we can make a difference is by being proactive in our communities. Rather than just engaging in campaigns such as "Don't be that guy," as great a campaign as it is, we should say, "Here's how you can be a good guy," or "Here's how you can be a better guy." We are not all perfect, but all young people and all individuals can make a difference.

Here and more widely, we are in a struggle to influence young men's views and behaviour, and how they are formed and shaped. The more that men can do to encourage healthy masculinity and to be active in our communities and online, the bigger difference we can make in trying to improve the situation before the next 16 days of activism.

16:37

Maggie Chapman: I spoke earlier about our fierce girls in Dundee and the brave lassies blether campaign in Angus, which are making a huge difference to the lives of young people. Again, I thank and applaud them. I also wonder what more they would be able to do if they did not have to put those energies and that creativity into the basic foundational work of enabling decent, non-toxic relationships. What transformations could all that solidarity and care achieve if it did not have to resist the ever-increasing violence that women and girls are facing?

Zero Tolerance found that less than a fifth of girls and young women feel completely safe in educational settings, that the number feeling unsafe has doubled in the past 10 years, and that girls are silenced in class, losing sleep and concentration through fear of violence, harassment and rape.

How did we get here, after decades of activism, political change, public education and awareness campaigns? The Zero Tolerance briefing gives us some clues. It found that boys and young men are absorbing deeply misogynistic material without any awareness that that is not normal. The language of the incel movement and having Andrew Tate as a role model are no longer confined to a troubled niche. They are, for a growing number of young men, the mainstream—the norm.

The effects of that poison are deep and broad. A heavy cloud hangs over the lives of girls and young women, as risk and the perception of risk, everyday misogyny, hostility and insult, anxiety and fear affect almost all—with worse for many. That stifles the development of boys and young men, exploiting their emotions with predatory role models, insidious narratives and toxic tales of patriarchy. It oppresses, insults and undermines young people who resist binary heteronormative gender roles and undermines healthy relationships for all young people.

We cannot shrug that off as a passing craze. The normalisation of deep, extreme misogyny; the othering of anyone outside of what is a self-imposed identity; the toxic concept of the alpha, or high-value, male; and the increasing gulf between young women and young men in their

experiences, attitudes and values are all profound dangers to individual and community wellbeing.

The attitudes and behaviours of radicalised adolescence find their reflection in older generations, too. Being successful means being able to assault women with impunity. It does not take the re-election of Donald Trump to demonstrate that rule—just look at this week's news in the UK and Ireland. What can we do? We need primary prevention, education and training as Zero Tolerance, the Scottish Women's Convention and Close the Gap recommend. We need action on economic and other abuse, as highlighted by Aberlour Children's Charity and Scottish Women's Aid. We need robust and effective misogyny law, and we need action, urgently, from men as our allies.

The boys and young men who have been radicalised by extreme misogyny will not listen to women or girls—we know that—but they may listen to other men. We need more men to step up and name misogyny, call it out and tell the truth about the harm that it causes. We need that to happen now, and we need that to come not only from those whose job it is; not only from those who have a son, a nephew, a grandson or a brother; and not only from those who have a sister or a daughter. Misogyny harms women, but it harms men too, in some ways more deeply. Toxic narratives created the crisis, but honest conversations can help to heal it: conversations about what it truly means to be successful, and about living an authentic, compassionate life—a life where women and girls feel safe and respected in your presence.

16:41

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close on behalf of Scottish Labour in an important debate. I will pick up where other speakers have left off in reflecting on the importance of ensuring that boys and men understand the vital role that they play in reflecting on and changing their behaviours, and not leaving it to women and girls to tackle the scourge of violence, aggression and all the issues that have been discussed and debated. It is disappointing that Ben Macpherson and I appear to have been the only male speakers in the debate. There has been a range of inspiring and important speeches, but they have all been made by women. We have to reflect that more men must take responsibility in the Parliament and in society for our behaviours and that we need to work together.

In summing up, I want to reflect on the many contributions that have been made and the many actions that we can take from the debate and move forward with. The motion for debate focuses on the role of young people, and we have heard

much about the concerning nature of what young people are experiencing. It is important that we learn from that and move forward. We need to ensure that we have good education in schools, which we have heard from a number of speakers. Of course, there needs to be education of young women and girls so that they understand issues of consent and respect and the support that they can get. Crucially, as I said at the start of my speech, we need to ensure that boys and young men are educated, that they have positive role models, that they understand the real issues that exist around consent in respect, and that they reflect on their behaviours and have space in order to do that. We will all want to take that away from the debate and do more work on it.

That is why I am glad that Katy Clark raised the work that is being done in Scottish Labour. We have a suite of policies that I think we could look at on a cross-party basis. The minister has referred to the work that has been done by the Government, and other members have spoken about the work of their parties to move the issue forward. It is clear that toxic masculinity is on the rise, that we have serious and concerning issues on sexism and misogyny, and serious issues with access to harmful pornography. I recognise the work that has been done across the Parliament to look at many of those issues in depth—to look, for example, at better online regulation, at the education piece and at the need for positive role models. It is important that we continue to work together on those issues.

I highlight the work on strangulation to which members have referred today, such as the event that was held last week. My colleague Claire Baker has been involved in that work. A consensus has come out of today's debate that there is more work that we can all do together to look at those very serious issues.

I was pleased to hear members refer to some of the international issues that sit across the 16 days of activism, not least the very serious issues in Afghanistan. We should all take those issues seriously, and reflect and take action on them, so it is important that Beatrice Wishart was able to bring that aspect into the debate.

In the latter section of the open debate, we heard powerful contributions from Pam Gosal, Elena Whitham, Carol Mochan and others, reflecting on the questions that we, as a society—and as men and boys—need to ask ourselves. Pam Gosal's challenge to us all was to get to a stage at which mothers—it could also be fathers—say to their sons, "Who are you going to be when you go out tonight, and how are you going to treat women?" That is vitally important. Ben Macpherson followed that up by saying that it is not enough just to not "be that guy"—we should all

try to be a better person and a good guy, and think about our behaviours. Those two reflections were extremely important.

As I said, I am conscious that we could have had more men speaking in the open debate, but I acknowledge that the First Minister will make a contribution at the debate's conclusion. That is important, and it shows that the whole Government is taking the issue seriously.

It is clear from the contributions from members on all sides of the chamber that we all have more work to do. It is not just about the 16 days of activism, although they are important. There are 365 days in a year, and we need to ensure that we take the issue seriously, and that—crucially—men and boys take our role seriously. We must work to change attitudes and behaviours, and to ensure that we have respect for women and girls and that we build a more equal society as we move forward.

16:46

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, and to have listened to such impassioned speeches from members on all sides of the chamber in agreement on what we are trying to tackle. I was also pleased to hear Kaukab Stewart's opening comments about the importance of a collective response. If anything is ever going to demonstrate how important the Parliament considers this issue to be, it is the fact that the First Minister is in the chamber to make a speech, as is the leader of the Scottish Conservatives. It is also the number of colleagues, across the chamber and online, who think that the debate is important enough to attend on a Thursday afternoon, which—as we all know—is not the norm. We should be proud of that.

I will focus a lot of my comments on prevention strategies. We have heard from many members today about the importance of adults setting examples to young people, and to boys in particular, because traits such as racism and sexism are learned behaviours. It is not enough for us to recognise misogyny—it is time that men are challenged openly, as we have been challenged in the chamber today, to set the standard for our children and their peers.

That is important, because casual misogyny exists. We know that we have made great strides in tackling things such as casual racism and casual homophobia, and we have to do the same for misogyny. The debate is timely, considering what has been covered recently in the press. Am I surprised that misogyny at that level still exists? Absolutely not. However, it is the attitude of the establishment to the reporting of such behaviour,

and the willingness to allow it to continue unchecked and to sweep it under the carpet, that is the most shocking and repulsive thing. That attitude simply emboldens those who perpetrate that kind of obnoxious behaviour.

I want to talk about the perception of sexism in society. We have come a long way, and I make no apologies for using sport as a reflection of society. Sport is such a fantastic vehicle for tackling all kinds of inequalities and behaviours such as racism, homophobia and religious bias, because the focus on performance and achievement delivers a mutual respect that transcends any colour, creed, race, religion or sex.

However, I remind members that it was only in 1984 that women were first allowed to run in the Olympic marathon, when the race was won by Joan Benoit. In those Olympic games, women were not allowed to run any further than 3,000m or take part in the hammer, pole vault or triple jump events—all measures that were put in place by men.

We are starting to move the dial. Attitudes to women are starting to change. I found out recently at a Caledonian Gladiators women's basketball match that the only two professional basketball teams in the whole of Scotland both get paid exactly the same, while they are trying to raise the number of people who watch the women's basketball to reflect the number that watch the men's sport.

It can be done, but I have a word of caution, and Elena Whitham put this extremely well. The 2024 Girlguiding attitudes survey highlighted that, for girls aged seven to 10, the number of ways in which girls believe that they are expected to behave differently because they are girls has increased significantly in the past 10 years. Those ways include the way that they look, the things that they like at school, the games that they play, the things that they say, the books that they read and yes—the kind of sport and exercise that they do.

Attitudes to women and women in sport have come a long way in the past 10 years. Women's sport has gained much more kudos and credibility, with all the role models that have shone through. However, there are still trends that need to be reversed, and that is important. The survey demonstrates that society is undervaluing women and girls, and that pervades and seeps into young girls' perception of themselves, creating limits for them as well as strengthening that belief and inequality in society. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—subjects are stubbornly male dominated. I suspect that that is very much related to the perception of the working environment—with those greasy overalls and the newspaper cuttings that we all know are

on the walls—and the way in which women perceive that they will be treated in that environment. We have to work to change that.

Girls face sexism and extreme views more commonly in the media—

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member take an intervention?

Brian Whittle: Of course—yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—the member is just about to conclude.

Brian Whittle: Am I? Sorry—I am just about to conclude. In that case, Deputy Presiding Officer, I will go to the summing-up part of my speech.

I highlight my colleague Pam Gosal's proposed domestic abuse prevention bill, which would create a domestic abuse offenders register that would require those who are placed on it to report to the police certain changes in their circumstances. That is the kind of message that we need to send from here. This is a very important debate, because one of the most important things that we can do is consistently keep the issue on the agenda.

In a very powerful speech, my colleague Tess White asked the question, "Where are the men?" I am proud that, when I look around the chamber and online, I see many men who have turned up for this debate. It is a good start, Deputy Presiding Officer, but there is much more to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the First Minister to wind up the debate. First Minister, I would be grateful if you could you take us up to just before 5 o'clock.

16:53

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. Carol Mochan, Paul O'Kane and Brian Whittle all made reference to my attendance at this debate as First Minister.

Somewhat more bluntly, Tess White said that it was time for the men of influence to show up. I hope that, by being here, I have ticked at least one box—if Tess White believes that I am a man of influence, which might be the most controversial thing that I say this afternoon. The question that I ask myself when I hear such comments is, "Where else should I be at this moment?" I should not be anywhere else, because it is important that the First Minister of Scotland makes clear the importance that the holder of this office attaches to tackling issues of violence against women and girls in our society and makes it abundantly clear that those matter at the very heart of Government and are taken deadly seriously by the leader of the Scottish Government.

This afternoon, an incredibly powerful expression of concern has been shared with members of Parliament, first of all by my colleague Elena Whitham. I can only say that her contribution makes me grieve even more the fact that she will not be a member of the next Scottish Parliament, which I dearly and deeply regret.

The most powerful comment that Elena Whitham made, in comparing her experience as a teenager with the experience of her teenage daughter now, was that it is much more difficult for teenage girls today than it was when she was growing up. I am seized of the seriousness of that comment, because it resonates with what the Cabinet heard a couple of weeks ago in the annual meeting of the Cabinet and children and young people in Scotland. Members of the Children's Parliament and the Scottish Youth Parliament wanted us to talk about one of our themes: gender-based violence against women and girls. If that does not tell us about the gravity and seriousness of what girls and women in our society are facing, what else will?

My colleague Clare Haughey made reference to the outstanding work that has been done by Girlguiding Scotland to survey young girls in our society. The experiences that girls are having make for grim reading.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Will the First Minister take an intervention?

The First Minister: I will in a moment.

Katy Clark made reference to the widespread concern among women about their safety.

The contributions from Elena Whitham, Clare Haughey and Katy Clark along with, crucially, the comments from the representatives of the Children's Parliament and the Scottish Youth Parliament stress the importance of Parliament taking these issues seriously.

Russell Findlay: At a For Women Scotland event in Parliament this week, a female teacher told how male pupils are openly watching porn on their phones, taking up-skirt photos of female pupils and subjecting female pupils and staff to depraved sexual comments and intimidation. They should not have to tolerate that. Will the Scottish Government consider introducing a full ban on mobile phones in schools?

The First Minister: Those are real-life problems in our schools, which is why the Government has taken the action that it has on mobile phone technology in our schools. However, they highlight a deeper issue, which is the importance of proactive education on the damage that can be done by the very activities that Russell Findlay has put to me.

I am reminded of the challenges that I faced as education secretary and the controversy that surrounded the introduction of the relationships, sexual health and parenthood education, which was vigorously resisted by many people. However, I judged, after very careful consideration, that, for all the reasons that members on all sides have given, that education was required to confront the reality of what was readily available, a click away, on any child's mobile phone. The importance of values-based education is fundamental in that respect.

Aside from the education system, there has been reference to the importance of criminal justice interventions. We have discussed the issues that Pam Gosal raised. Fiona Drouet expressed to me in a meeting that I had with her just a couple of weeks ago the importance that she attaches to promoting the legislation on non-fatal strangulation. The Government will consider those issues as part of its review of the criminal justice system.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I want to reflect on the actions that need to come from this debate. One of them is that men must take up the challenge from Ben Macpherson about being a better guy and reflecting on our own behaviour. As First Minister, I am absolutely conscious at all moments of the example that I set in my behaviour. That is uppermost in my consideration of how I act and conduct myself on these questions as First Minister.

We have to strengthen the approach that is taken in education. I believe that values-based education and the relationships, sexual health and parenthood education will help us to win these arguments with young people, in particular young boys, in our society.

There are also the negative implications of social media in our society. Social media has many strengths, but Parliament will be aware, as I am, of the curse that it can be with what it is exposing our young people to. I have been reading a fascinating and incredibly disturbing book called "The Anxious Generation", by Jonathan Haidt, which goes through many of the implications of social media activity on children and young people. It makes me seized of the importance—I have corresponded with the United Kingdom Government on this question, and it is engaged on it—of much greater responsibility on the part of the social media giants that are responsible for purveying some of the most unacceptable behaviours in our society. [Applause.] The Scottish Government will be resolute in pursuing that particular issue.

A week last Friday, I had the pleasure—I am not sure that "pleasure" is the right word; rather, I had the privilege and responsibility—to launch the 16

days of activism against gender-based violence against women and girls in my home city of Perth. The event was powerfully led and put together by a magnificent team of people who concentrate on the issue annually. However, I am seized of the importance of Paul O’Kane’s and Ben Macpherson’s comments that, although 16 days are welcome, 365 days in which we change behaviour, conduct and attitudes would be even more welcome. I assure Parliament of the importance that I, as First Minister, and my Government attach to accomplishing that objective. [*Applause.*]

Pam Gosal: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to apologise and correct the record: it is every 10 minutes that a woman is killed by her partner or by a family member, not every 18 minutes, as I accidentally said in my speech. Also, my proposed bill is about domestic abuse prevention, not protection. It has been a long week—sorry.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Ms Gosal. That was perhaps not a point of order, but it is on the record now.

That concludes the debate on empowering young people’s voices in tackling violence against women and girls.

Scottish Languages Bill: Financial Resolution

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-15752, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution on the Scottish Languages Bill. I call Shona Robison to speak to and move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Languages Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament’s Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Shona Robison*]

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

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-15753, on the establishment of a committee. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament shall establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee

Remit: To consider, review and report on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) supported bodies landscape in accordance with the Parliament's resolution of 31 October 2024 and develop a clear strategic framework to underpin and provide coherence and structure to the SPCB supported bodies landscape by the end of June 2025, including—

- (a) creating effective accountability and scrutiny mechanisms;
- (b) formalising strengthened criteria for creating new supported bodies; and
- (c) identifying and addressing any barriers to sharing services and offices.

Duration: Until 30 September 2025.

Number of members: 5.

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Scottish National Party.

Membership: Murdo Fraser, Richard Leonard, Ben Macpherson, Ash Regan, Lorna Slater.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-15734, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises and acknowledges the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that it continues to make to society; further recognises that the contribution of veterans and their families continues and grows as they move back into the communities that they served, with their experiences positively enriching society and providing a valuable talent pool for employers, and agrees that the Scottish Government, cognisant of the important ongoing work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15735, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on empowering young people's voices in tackling violence against women and girls, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign 2024; further recognises the vital contribution that the sector has made this year to tackle violence against women and girls, in particular the role that it has played in supporting children and young people who have experienced violence, abuse and exploitation; welcomes this year's debate at the Scottish Youth Parliament, which challenged politicians to ensure that the youth voice is central to action to address gender-based violence; recognises the importance of working with young people to ensure that their experience and expertise are harnessed to build a future that is equally safe; further recognises and champions the importance of education as an early and ongoing strand of prevention; condemns misogyny and all forms of violence against women and girls, and acknowledges the significant harm that they cause to individuals and wider society.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15752, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution on the Scottish Languages Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Languages Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-15753, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the establishment of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament shall establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee

Remit: To consider, review and report on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) supported bodies landscape in accordance with the Parliament's resolution of 31 October 2024 and develop a clear strategic framework to underpin and provide coherence and structure to the SPCB supported bodies landscape by the end of June 2025, including—

- (a) creating effective accountability and scrutiny mechanisms;
- (b) formalising strengthened criteria for creating new supported bodies; and
- (c) identifying and addressing any barriers to sharing services and offices.

Duration: Until 30 September 2025.

Number of members: 5.

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Scottish National Party.

Membership: Murdo Fraser, Richard Leonard, Ben Macpherson, Ash Regan, Lorna Slater.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:03.

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