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Wednesday 22 January 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 22 January 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands. As ever, I would appreciate succinct questions and answers to match, in order to get as many members in as possible.

Cattle Levels (Impact on Beef Supply)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported concerns by the Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers that falling cattle levels are leading to a reduction in beef supplies, and that gaps could subsequently appear in the red meat sections of supermarkets. (S6O-04218)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government maintains strong support for the Scottish beef industry through the £40 million that is paid annually to beef producers through the Scottish suckler beef support scheme. The Scottish Government's support package for livestock farmers is the most tailored in the United Kingdom and includes voluntary coupled support for beef production and support for less favoured areas. We will continue to work with the sector, including by meeting the Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers and Quality Meat Scotland, to consider how to meet the challenges that are affecting it.

Douglas Ross: The minister's answer is at odds with what the Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers has said. Scott Walker, who is from that organisation, said that some of the blame lies with the minister's own Government. These are Scott Walker's words:

"Over the years, the Scottish Government has gradually discouraged livestock production as they see it as a problem for the environment ... They have led this view that the cow is bad for the environment."

Is that criticism of the Scottish Government not correct?

Jim Fairlie: Absolutely not. Under no circumstances is that correct, and Scott Walker is entirely wrong. The Scottish Government's policy

has not been—and is not—to reduce cow numbers. With the Scottish suckler support scheme, we are ensuring that suckler cows stay on the land and encouraging them to produce calves more timeously.

I gently remind Douglas Ross that it was he who asked the Scottish Government to join the UK Government's UK-wide agriculture policy, which is part of the problem.

Douglas Ross: Rubbish. Just answer the question.

Jim Fairlie: It is sucking cattle out of Scotland into the UK, which is having a direct effect on meat wholesalers in Scotland because—

Douglas Ross: Listen to what Scott Walker is saying.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

Jim Fairlie: Store cattle are being sucked out of Scotland. As long as the suckler herd is declining in England, store cattle will be taken out of Scotland. That is adding to the problems for meat wholesalers in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Douglas Ross: It is not me who is saying this—it is Scott Walker. Listen to what the industry is saying.

Jim Fairlie: Douglas Ross needs to understand those facts before he comes and asks—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. Members, I will say at this juncture that I am not having shouting across the chamber—I am just not having it. We need to make progress with this portfolio questions session.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Last month, the Parliament passed legislation to restrict calving intervals to 410 days to qualify for support, having been reassured by the minister that the force majeure clause would deal with issues such as weather and ferry cancellations. However, the Scottish Government guidance remains unchanged and quotes circumstances such as severe natural disasters to qualify. The minister will be aware that ferry cancellations are all too common, and the news that CalMac Ferries has said that it can no longer carry livestock on ferry journeys lasting more than three hours without a transport authorisation licence will simply make matters worse.

Will the minister now put on record the circumstances in which force majeure will come into play, giving my constituents the reassurance that they require to stay in the cattle industry?

Jim Fairlie: I cannot give all the circumstances in which force majeure will come into play, because they could be many and varied, and decisions will have to be based on individual circumstances. I give the member my reassurance again that the aim is to make the process as simple as possible for the producers so that we can ensure that they are not unduly damaged in circumstances that are beyond their control. I have given that assurance before and I will continue to give it. However, the restriction to 410 days is proof positive that the Government is taking action, alongside the industry, to reduce emissions from and criticism of the sector. We are doing everything in our power to ensure that we support the sector.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I share the concerns expressed in the member's question.

Will the minister explain how the cumulative impact of trade deals that deliver nothing to the primary producer, together with the uncertainty about future levels of funding and the potential threats to Scotland's future support schemes posed by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 1998 and the Subsidy Control Act 2022—all of which was presided over by Douglas Ross's party and which he supported—have exacerbated the very issues that Douglas Ross brings to the chamber today?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely accept Elena Whitham's point. The initial post-Brexit trade deals that the previous United Kingdom Government agreed have not benefited Scottish agriculture in any way, shape or form. The economic impact assessments have identified agriculture and semi-processed food as the losing sectors in the Australia and New Zealand trade deals. The Conservatives celebrated those deals.

The previous UK Government also took the decision to reduce our seven-year European Union common agricultural policy budgets to yearly allocations from His Majesty's Treasury. That lack of financial certainty and the fact that new trade barriers with the EU far outweigh the expected gains from other trade agreements again demonstrates that Scotland's trade and interests would have been best served by remaining in the EU.

Arran Ferry Service Relocation

2. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, as part of the cross-government co-ordination on islands, including island connectivity, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the impact on islanders of the relocation of the Arran ferry service from Ardrossan to Troon. (S6O-04219)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The main Arran services are operating solely to Troon until 28 March. CalMac Ferries will run services from Ardrossan and Troon to Brodick during the summer season, with the published timetables, I hope, reflecting that.

Transport Scotland has been engaged in the Ardrossan harbour business case review and with considering the benefits of retaining and enhancing services from Ardrossan. It updates ministers regularly. The review has had input from the Isle of Arran ferry committee and from North Ayrshire Council on local economic impacts. Further updates on the business case review are expected soon.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister for his update. The lives of many residents on Arran are as deeply rooted in Ardrossan as they are on the island. That is where they access education, health services and the third sector, and many will work in and around the Ardrossan area. The problem is that the ferry does not go there. What island impact assessment was carried out by public bodies on the move of the ferry service—albeit temporarily, we hope—to Troon? What is being done right now to ensure that islanders enjoy the same access to public services as anyone else following that move?

Jim Fairlie: The member is more aware than most people of the reasons why everything has moved to Troon. I confirm that the business case development includes an assessment, which was undertaken by North Ayrshire Council, on what the socioeconomic impact will be.

The winter timetable is under way and the ships that we have are currently sailing to Troon. That is the position that we are in.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): As we know from the Tories' disastrous privatisation of Ardrossan harbour in 1992, the consequences of poor decisions can be felt for decades.

A Peter Brett Associates study comparing the costs of Brodick's ferry going to Ardrossan with its going to Troon found that Troon would be 4.9 times more expensive over a 30-year period. Will the minister impress on colleagues the necessity of making Arran's ferry service fit for the future by redeveloping Ardrossan harbour?

Jim Fairlie: The member has been engaged on the issue and he knows that the Government is well aware of the Troon and Ardrossan issues. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport gave evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee yesterday, and she is well aware of the issues. We will continue to have those conversations about the importance of Ardrossan.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): When will the next meeting of the Ardrrossan harbour task force take place? When will the long-overdue business case for Ardrrossan harbour redevelopment be published?

Jim Fairlie: As far as the exact dates are concerned, I would have to get our officials to write to the member with that information.

Brexit (Impact on Rural Economy)

3. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its latest assessment is of the impact of Brexit on Scotland's rural economy. (S6O-04220)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mairi Gougeon joins us remotely.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Brexit continues to impact negatively on Scotland's rural and island areas. We no longer have multiyear certainty of funding for agriculture and rural development that we previously used to enjoy when we were members of the European Union.

Brexit has also resulted in trade deals that we know have disadvantaged our agrifood sector, and it has made recruitment of employees more difficult, disrupted supply chains and created new trade barriers for our rural and island economy. I am sad to say that rural businesses and communities are continuing to pay a heavy economic price for a Brexit that they did not vote for.

Gordon MacDonald: Tory Brexit has had a detrimental effect on people and businesses throughout rural Scotland. Unfortunately, the Labour United Kingdom Government is continuing the economic vandalism of Brexit. Does the Scottish Government possess data on the cumulative impact of Brexit on rural Scotland across the five years since it occurred?

Mairi Gougeon: Certainly, we have some information on that. However, first and foremost is that the economic consequences of Brexit are still being realised. We know already that it has created new barriers to trade, which have had a significant financial impact on businesses. It has also driven up food price inflation, supply chain costs and, as I mentioned in my previous response, labour shortages.

Many Scottish food businesses are already suffering from lower exports to the EU. As a result of that, there was a 45 per cent fall in fruit and vegetable exports between 2019 and 2023. As I also touched on in my initial response, our farmers and crofters are no longer benefiting from the multiyear EU funding that is vital for supporting long-term investment and planning.

Agricultural Support

4. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a farmer.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans for future agricultural support. (S6O-04221)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): In June 2024, we updated the agricultural reform route map to set out the changes to agricultural support that will come in in 2025. That includes the start of the whole-farm plan, new protections for peatlands and wetlands, and a calving interval requirement for the Scottish suckler beef support scheme.

The route map will be updated again in the early part of this year, to set out the requirements that farmers and crofters will need to meet in 2026. It will set out the support that will be on offer to help them to meet those requirements.

Tim Eagle: In July 2024, I received a letter—as did all farmers—that told us that we had to prepare for the future of agricultural support by getting our whole-farm plans in order. Then, in December, in order to make that support happen, the minister had to put in place the Rural Support (Improvement) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024—which were secretly withdrawn only a couple of weeks later, due, I think, to a legal error.

What confidence can the industry have in the Government if it cannot even get its own stuff right?

Jim Fairlie: The answer to that question is that there was a legal drafting error. It was nothing more than that. There was no change to the policy, and we will continue to update the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee as we bring new regulations forward.

Tim Eagle: It's a disgrace!

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Ssh.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Doris, I am in charge of doing the shushing in the chamber, thank you.

Water Management Support

5. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding what funding will be available in the next financial year to support farmers to address water management issues impacting on agricultural land. (S6O-04222)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Improving resilience to flooding is an absolute priority for the Scottish Government. There have been regular discussions with ministerial colleagues about supporting flood management, including through issues relating to agricultural land.

The Scottish Government's national flood resilience strategy, which was published in December last year, makes it clear that, through our agricultural reform programme, we are considering how farmers can be supported to make changes to handle extremes in water availability.

The Scottish Government is also developing a flood recovery framework to provide greater clarity and coherence about flood recovery responsibilities, and to support and help communities and businesses to recover from flooding.

Willie Rennie: I have been trying to help the victims of flooding in Cupar and in other areas in my constituency along the River Eden. They are frustrated that, despite the publication of the flood resilience strategy, and despite talk about bringing farmers on board and working in partnership with them, the practical effect on the ground is that there is no change. The farmers have a disagreement about what best practice is, and there is very little financial support or real practical guidance to make a difference. When will we see an actual change, rather than more strategies and plans?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely take on board Willie Rennie's point, and I get the frustration of the farming community, but there are differences of opinion: there are differences about whether we should be dredging, doing upstream mitigations or putting in walls. All sorts of discussions are going on. That is part of the wider process of making sure that we study the issue and get to an agreed position on how to manage the situation. However, that has to be done on a catchment basis—it cannot be done as a blanket approach across Scotland.

The issues that Mr Rennie is talking about along the Eden are specific to that catchment, and that is something that we need to discover. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency and local authorities need to be part of the conversation on that, as does the farming community.

Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024

6. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 will aim to benefit the farming

sector in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley. (S6O-04223)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The 2024 act will allow for the realisation of our vision for agriculture. Ultimately, it is a positive vision that puts our food producers at its core and recognises the essential role that they have in relation to nature recovery and climate adaptation and mitigation. It enables the delivery of the four-tier framework, which values and rewards the actions of our producers in helping to help feed the nation and in stewarding our countryside.

Many people are already leading the way on that work, and they deserve praise for farming to produce food sustainably, in ways that actively benefit both nature and climate. The framework approach recognises that there will be a phased transition, and it provides flexibility to respond to any of the geopolitical, economic, climate and nature challenges that we might face in the future.

Willie Coffey: I thank the cabinet secretary for that detailed answer.

From my previous questions, she will be aware of how highly we rate first-class local produce in my part of Ayrshire—namely, Dunlop cheese, Mossgiel and the Coo Shed milk, quality beef and lamb, Lochlea whisky, Irvine Valley gin, Ayrshire tatties and, not least, the famous Kilmarnock pie. How can we use the bill to encourage more local food and drink production? More important than that, how can we get all those products on to our shelves so that local people can buy them, and to help to sustain those vital local industries?

Mairi Gougeon: First of all, I absolutely recognise the passion that Willie Coffey has—quite rightly—for the products that are made in his local area.

We need to do what we can to make more of our own locally produced foods available more locally for people to buy. We are doing work on that in a couple of areas. First, we have committed £10 million since 2023 and over the course of this year to support the delivery of our food and drink strategy. That facilitates a range of activities and direct engagement with retailers to increase the volume of Scottish food and drink on retail shelves, and to promote provenance to customers.

Secondly, only earlier this month, a report on the Scottish Government-funded go local programme, which is delivered in partnership with the Scottish Grocers Federation, showed that there has been a 44 per cent increase in monthly sales of fresh and healthier Scottish products in participating stores. The programme uses shelf-edge labelling to promote products. That is an example of where the support that we provide to

such schemes is vital in ensuring that we get local products out there.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware of my interest in this topic. One of the things that we can do very quickly is improve our public procurement policy in order to get local produce into our schools and hospitals. What progress has the cabinet secretary been making on that?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, absolutely. I am more than happy to follow that up with Brian Whittle to provide more detail. However, I have no doubt that he will be aware of the food for life programme. We have been looking to further expand that in a project area, working with the Soil Association Scotland, and I can provide the member with more information on that.

However, it is also important to point to the work that we are doing through the good food nation plan. Procurement was a key factor that we identified in the first draft of the plan, and we have undertaken a consultation on that. We are always keen to see what we can do to use the levers that are at our disposal. We recognise that procurement is quite challenging because of the different legislative requirements that we are working to, but I am more than happy to follow up that discussion with the member.

Bird Monitoring

7. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether NatureScot's proposal to mandate advance written notification to landowners for schedule 1 bird monitoring could discourage the identification of raptor crimes on managed land. (S6O-04224)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I very much appreciate the value of the work that is done by the individuals who monitor raptor populations across Scotland. I had the great pleasure of going out to watch ospreys being rung and was struck by the very good relationship between the land managers and the people who were doing the raptor ringing.

NatureScot's intention to introduce a condition to schedule 1 licences, requiring advance notice to landowners of visits to nests of highly protected species, is a reasonable and proportionate requirement. In fact, it is already set out as part of best practice guidance, and it is currently required in the national nature reserves. That requires the provision of advance notification of visits, where it is reasonably practicable to do so, which helps to build co-operation between landowners and raptor monitors. There is no reason to think that the measure will reduce the identification of wildlife crime.

John Mason: I thank the minister for his answer, but I am slightly confused by it, because he said that the requirement is "reasonable and proportionate" but also talked about when it is "reasonably practicable", so I am not quite sure which one it is.

A lot of the people who take part in the work are volunteers and might not know who the landowner is, and, in some cases, landowners and raptor protectors do not get on terribly well. In those cases, will that not make things more difficult for raptor protectors?

Jim Fairlie: In many cases, contact details will be known by the licence holders and contact will be made, with the existing relations usually being very good. I emphasise the point that there should be notification when that is reasonably practicable. If the owner of the land cannot be found, the licence application should be made through NatureScot's licensing division.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I echo John Mason's concerns, which reflect concerns that I have heard from the Orkney raptor study group. It has made the same point about information being shared with landowners and difficulties in knowing who precisely owns land—a problem that the Orkney Native Wildlife Project has come up against, despite all the resources at its disposal. I encourage the minister to look again at the concerns that the raptor study groups have raised and consider how they can be better addressed to ensure that the monitoring that is going on can continue.

Jim Fairlie: I take on board Mr McArthur's point. That issue has been raised with me. However, it is proportionate and not unreasonable for people who live on, work on and deal with the land to know that those who are carrying out what would ordinarily be illegal practices on that land have a licence for that. I think that that is fair and proportionate.

However, on Mr McArthur's point, if people do not know who the landowner is and cannot get contact details to provide notification, when it is reasonably practicable to do so, they can provide notification through NatureScot's licensing division.

Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

8. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the three main aims of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill are. (S6O-04225)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Land Reform (Scotland) Bill will strengthen the rights of rural communities by giving them greater involvement in decisions about the land on which

they live and work. It will better ensure that Scotland's land is transferred and used in ways that take account of local need, which will improve opportunities for more diverse land ownership. The bill will also support the use of land for environmental purposes and modernise the legal framework for tenant farming and small landholdings to support the delivery of our vision for agriculture.

Edward Mountain: I remind members that I am a landowner in Moray and that I own 500 acres of arable land.

More than 16 people and organisations that have given evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee have said that the bill will not deliver the aims that the cabinet secretary has described. Just this week, the Scottish Land Commission published 20 pages of advice on part 1 of the bill, which highlight what it believes to be failures, and I am told that it might publish more advice. Is the cabinet secretary still content with the bill as it stands, or will it need significant reform?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sure that Edward Mountain appreciates that I am carefully listening to and considering the evidence that the committee is receiving. I expect that there will be amendments to the bill on the back of the evidence that the committee has heard. We are listening, and we will pay close attention to proposals that will strengthen and improve the bill to ensure that it achieves the aims that we have set out.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): When the Scottish Government consulted on its proposals for land reform, we were told:

"The Bill will be ambitious. It will address long-standing concerns about the highly concentrated pattern of land ownership in rural areas of Scotland."

However, the Government's bill defines large landholdings as those of more than 3,000 hectares, which is nearly three and a half times the size of Glasgow city. Even then, that land will be subject to only a transfer test, not a public interest test. My proposed bill would have set a presumed limit of 500 hectares on sales and transfers and would have made transfers over that limit subject to a public interest test. With that in mind, is the cabinet secretary open to reducing the area of land that is defined as a large landholding in the Government's bill?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sure that Mercedes Villalba will be aware that, although the 3,000-hectare threshold applies for some provisions, there is a 1,000-hectare threshold for others. I am more than happy to continue to engage with her and other members with an interest in the bill,

bearing in mind the bill proposals that she had been working on.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Scotland needs a strong and dynamic relationship between its land and all its people. Therefore, our land reform journey needs to continue. Asking those with significant vested interests in the current patterns of land ownership to objectively consider the issues of land reform, the question of why it is necessary and the type of action that ought to be taken is like asking turkeys to vote for an early Christmas. How will the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill ensure that folk and communities throughout Scotland are empowered?

Mairi Gougeon: The bill is hugely important in that. To create a fairer, more equal and more socially just Scotland is a really important part of the Government's aspirations. The bill will pass more power to people and local communities across Scotland, because it will encourage and support responsible and diverse land ownership, with communities having a say in how land in their area is used. All land in Scotland should contribute to a modern, sustainable and successful country, which is very much what we hope to achieve through the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Given the time pressures across the afternoon, we will crack on with questions on the next portfolio, which is health and social care. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. We are tight for time, so brevity will be required in questions and responses.

Thrombectomy Services (Fife)

1. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase access to thrombectomies in the Fife region, in light of the reported 1.9 per cent increase in investment in the national thrombectomy service. (S6O-04226)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We have invested £38 million to date in a national thrombectomy service. Most national health service boards, including NHS Fife, can now refer to thrombectomy hubs, increasing geographical access to thrombectomy. We are also funding thrombectomy specialist nurse posts in spoke hospitals with high rates of ischaemic stroke, including NHS Fife, to ensure

that people who would benefit from thrombectomy are promptly identified. Work is on-going to establish how the £16 million that was announced in the Scottish budget, once it has been scrutinised by the Parliament, can be best used to maximise the number of patients who are able to benefit from thrombectomy.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the minister for that response, but it is clear that there is something of a postcode lottery when it comes to thrombectomy services. My Fife constituency relies on the Lothian thrombectomy service, which also serves Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway. Will the minister ensure that investment in the Lothian service rises so that there are not unacceptable delays and waiting times for my constituents?

Jenni Minto: The Scottish Government remains committed to expanding the national thrombectomy service and ensuring that access to that treatment is as equitable as possible. I had the pleasure of visiting NHS Lothian's thrombectomy hub at the Edinburgh royal infirmary on 14 January and I was very impressed by the staff's dedication and commitment to improving the care of those people who have experienced stroke. I found it an invaluable opportunity to learn at first hand about the east of Scotland thrombectomy service and to discuss service delivery, staffing levels and equity of access with the clinical and service management team.

We will continue to work with everyone who I have just mentioned in boards and regions, and with NHS national services, to expand access to thrombectomy.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a practising NHS general practitioner.

In my region—Glasgow, which is the largest city in Scotland—a person should only have a stroke on a Monday to Friday between 9 am and 5 pm, because that is the only time when anyone can get a thrombectomy. Let us contrast that with Edinburgh, where it is available seven days a week. There is significant inequality of access to life-changing and life-saving thrombectomy, and the situation is even worse for people who live in rural areas, where travelling by road is hit or miss. Warm words will not cut it. Will the Scottish Government commit to funding the nationwide, round-the-clock service that Scots deserve? What will it do to ensure that that is available to everyone?

Jenni Minto: I agree that we want to have the best 24-hour service that we can have, which is why we plan to invest an additional £16 million in thrombectomy services if the budget passes. We are working closely with stakeholders to

understand why the current thrombectomy rates are lower than those that were predicted via modelling. We are also working with them to understand the needs in each area, because we must understand that it is not only about money, but also about the workforce.

Mental Health Services (Funding)

2. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it remains committed to dedicating 10 per cent of front-line national health service spend to mental health and 1 per cent to child and adolescent mental health services. (S6O-04227)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): We remain committed to delivery of the 10 per cent and 1 per cent spending targets for mental health services and CAMHS respectively. However, as we all know, there are continued and unprecedented challenges to the public finances. That means that, in practice, achieving the targets will depend on the outcome of future budgets. It is also dependent on the financial decisions that are taken by NHS boards and their partners on the continued local investment that is needed to achieve the targets. We will continue to closely monitor our progress towards the 10 per cent and 1 per cent targets over the remainder of the parliamentary session.

Paul Sweeney: "Progress towards the targets" seems an interesting way of describing it when NHS funding for mental health has decreased to just 8.53 per cent, which represents a £238.5 million shortfall when adjusting for inflation. In the 2022-23 financial year, no health board achieved the Government's 10 per cent spending target and only one board invested at least 1 per cent of its funding in CAMHS.

We have been hearing about the target since 2021, yet the share of the spend is actually going backwards. There is now just over a year of the parliamentary session left. Will the Government work with health boards to ensure that spend is suitably allocated to realise the commitment before the next election, or is it content to continue posturing instead of delivering on the target?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that we are working very closely with health boards on the target. We measure it using the Scottish health service costs book, which is published annually in arrears by Public Health Scotland. NHS mental health expenditure rose from £1.28 billion in 2021-22 to £1.3 billion in 2022-23—an increase of 25 per cent or 2 per cent in cash terms, representing 8.53 per cent of total NHS expenditure. Expenditure on CAMHS rose from £98 million to £114.8 million, which is a 17.2 per cent increase,

representing 0.75 per cent of total NHS expenditure.

The trend in the proportion of spending has tended to be driven primarily by relatively more investment being made in other services. I assure the member that we are absolutely committed to delivering on our mental health priorities and on CAMHS, and we are seeing a massive improvement in CAMHS as a result of our investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will call a couple of members to ask supplementary questions. They will need to be brief, as will the responses.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): The Scottish Government has almost doubled direct investment in mental health services across Scotland since 2020-21. Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government will ensure that the crucial mental health funding in the 2025-26 budget will allow more community-based support for teenage mental health to be put in place?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government has invested in a range of community-based support and online resources, such as ifeel and Parent Club, to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people. In particular, since 2020, we have provided local authorities with more than £65 million to develop and deliver supports and services across Scotland that are focused on prevention and early intervention, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, and tackling emotional distress. Where appropriate, those services offer an alternative to CAMHS by providing support in a community setting. That investment will continue with the baselining of that funding into the local authority general revenue grants in 2025-26.

We have also invested directly in our communities mental health and wellbeing fund, which I have spoken about in the chamber many times before.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Many solutions for poor mental health sit outside the health portfolio. They include community activities and inclusion, which, in many cases, third sector organisations are better placed to deliver. Does the minister not recognise that squeezing investment to councils, which fund those interventions, just heaps more and more pressure on statutory services such as CAMHS?

Maree Todd: I thank the member for giving me the opportunity to reiterate yet again that we have invested £66 million in our communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults since 2021. That fund is open to a wide range of projects including those that support young people aged 16 and over. Given the pressures on young people, I

am really keen for that group to be given added focus in the future delivery of the fund.

Human Metapneumovirus

3. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to address the reported rise in cases of human metapneumovirus, or HMPV, and ensure that Scotland is prepared for any pandemic regarding this condition. (S6O-04228)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): HMPV is just one of the respiratory viruses that Public Health Scotland routinely monitors through our national respiratory surveillance programmes. The latest data shows that the national incidence rate for HMPV remains at a low activity level overall and is normal for what we would expect at this time of year.

HMPV typically causes mild disease, and the current threat level is assessed as low. Public Health Scotland continues to monitor trends and indications of the severity of viruses or diseases such as HMPV, as well as other respiratory diseases, and any action that is taken as a result will be proportionate and based on evidence gathered.

Alexander Stewart: Although it is not the same as Covid, there has reportedly been an increase in HMPV in the United Kingdom, which could have implications for overwhelming the national health service. The UK Covid inquiry showed that the Scottish Government was inadequately prepared for the Covid-19 pandemic and that there was not a sufficient level of urgency. Cabinet secretary, could you outline what steps the Government is taking—if Scotland were facing a looming pandemic tomorrow, for instance—to ensure that proper planning is put in place?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Neil Gray: We are working to ensure that the lessons identified from our policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic are put in place and that policy across Government can respond to the next pandemic. We therefore established a standing committee on pandemic preparedness, which published its full recommendations on 26 November last year, and the Government has accepted those recommendations in principle. We are committed to responding to both the UK and Scottish Covid-19 inquiries, and we have established governance arrangements within the Scottish Government to deliver a cross-Government programme of work to improve our pandemic preparedness, with ministerial oversight at the heart of that.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I recognise the steps that the cabinet secretary has

described today, and I welcome the cross-Government approach. Is the Government monitoring the approach that has been taken on pandemic preparedness in other countries, which will help to promote understanding and ensure that Scotland gathers the best evidence base for developing its own future response?

Neil Gray: Absolutely. In the interests of brevity, I will just say that we are monitoring that domestically, within the four nations' responses—and we are considering how we can collaborate on that—as well as looking to international evidence.

Delayed Discharge (Highlands and Islands)

4. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is dealing with delayed discharge from hospitals in the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-04229)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Since last June, the collaborative response and assurance group that I chair jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has met weekly with leaders from across the health and social care system, including leaders from Highland and Islands health and social care partnerships. Our most recent meeting took place on Monday. We have been working to support areas with high levels of delay, including in Highland, to understand their challenges and to support them to deliver the changes that will improve people's journey from hospital to home or to the care setting that is right for them.

Our planned budget for 2025-26 includes investment of a further £200 million to reduce waiting list backlogs, improve capacity and remove barriers that keep some patients in hospital longer than necessary.

Rhoda Grant: Since 2022, Highland Council has lost 161 care home places, due to eight care homes closing. On top of that, care at home has declined significantly, which increases delayed discharge. Last October, NHS Highland reported that it had to reduce delayed discharge by 65 per cent just to meet national targets. What interventions are being put in place that are specifically tailored to the Highlands and Islands to provide more care places and packages so as to meet that challenge?

Neil Gray: I thank Rhoda Grant for raising the issue. As she will understand, Maree Todd and I are both heavily engaged with areas facing the most significant challenges regarding delayed discharge, as are senior and other officials across Government—and Highland is absolutely at the top of that engagement.

We have been working with people in the area on how we can support the whole system to

respond, which includes providing support to maintain some care home provision that would otherwise have been put to closure. That is clear in evidence around Moss Park, on which we have engaged previously. We are working with partners on further interventions, which I hope will help to improve the situation, as we are starting to see from the data.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Last month, NHS Grampian declared a board-level critical incident, due to overoccupancy at Aberdeen royal infirmary and Dr Gray's, which is in my region, caused in large part by delayed discharge. My constituents have to travel long distances, including to Raigmore, which puts further pressure on the Highlands and Islands. What more could be done, and at quick speed, to get rid of the delayed discharge issues that we have?

Neil Gray: I thank Tim Eagle for his question, because it allows me to reiterate the fact that the pressures that impact on the hospital environment are shared with the social care environment. We need to ensure that we respond to the pressures that exist in primary and secondary care and in the acute system. That is exactly what we are targeting with the interventions that we are taking through the budget, which is why I hope that colleagues on all sides of the chamber will support it and allow us to get on with that work.

Dentistry Provision (NHS Dumfries and Galloway)

5. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with NHS Dumfries and Galloway regarding the provision of dentistry. (S6O-04230)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The director general for health and social care met with senior officials from NHS Dumfries and Galloway, including the chief executive, to discuss national health service dental provision this Monday, 20 January. I understand that the discussion was productive, and my officials continue to meet quarterly with the health board to discuss all aspects of NHS dental service delivery.

Emma Harper: We know that more than 17,000 NHS dental patients across Dumfries and Galloway have been deregistered. Last week, I met with a retired dentist who suggested that mobile dental units could be a solution. Could the minister consider raising that with NHS D and G to ensure that people in Dumfries and Galloway have access to an NHS dentist?

Jenni Minto: I know that some health boards, such as NHS Tayside, to which I referred in

responding to previous questions, have chosen to invest in mobile dental units. I understand that those have been successful, and I certainly encourage such innovative thinking. However, that would be a decision for the health board to make, based on its individual needs and circumstances.

Premature Babies (Support)

6. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what policies it is considering to better support the health of premature babies on neonatal units, including the development of a specialised baby box. (S6O-04231)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Since 2017, the Scottish Government has been working with national health service boards to implement "The best start" plan to improve the quality and safety of maternity and neonatal services and to secure improved health and wellbeing for mothers and babies. "The best start" plan emphasises parents as key partners in caring for their baby and aims to keep mothers and babies together as much as possible, with services being designed around them.

Recommendations include providing accommodation; the young patients family fund; repatriating babies to their local neonatal units; and transitional care and neonatal community care. The plan also recommends that we move to three neonatal intensive care units, based on evidence that outcomes will be improved for the most pre-term and sickest babies.

Many essential items in the baby box are suitable for premature babies, and the Scottish Government has no plans to introduce a specialised baby box for premature babies.

Mark Griffin: Premature babies have very specific needs, and the baby box is often stocked with items that are not appropriate for those babies at birth. A premature baby box could contain things such as specially sized clothes; sensory toys, which are important for development; specific information on prem awareness and baby care; and details of the young patients family fund, which the minister mentioned.

I ask the minister again, therefore, whether she thinks that the standard baby box is appropriate for some very low birth-weight, pre-term babies, and whether the Government would consider even a pilot scheme to support a baby box that is specifically designed for premature babies.

Jenni Minto: I thank Mark Griffin for his follow-up question. I absolutely recognise the work that he did, along with the Government, to implement the young patients family fund, and I thank him for that work.

I am listening to what he is saying. There are certain items in the baby box that are suitable for premature babies, but we would be happy to meet with Mr Griffin to have a further conversation around the matter.

NHS Fife Chief Executive (Discussions)

7. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the chief executive of NHS Fife, and what was discussed. (S6O-04232)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Both ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet with representatives of all health boards, including NHS Fife, to discuss matters of importance to local people. Senior health officials met with the NHS Fife chief executive earlier today as part of the national health service executive group, which discusses key operational matters and supports NHS boards and senior leaders to work co-operatively, regionally and nationally.

Annabelle Ewing: The cabinet secretary will be aware that timely access to medical treatment—whether via a general practitioner appointment or hospital intervention—is a worry for an increasing number of my constituents. What action is he taking to deal with those concerns?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with Annabelle Ewing's assessment, which is why the prioritisation that we have set out through the budget aims to tackle those very issues.

In relation to GP appointments, we continue to work together with all relevant partners to effectively implement the general practice access principles that were established in 2023, including through our commitment to the on-going recruitment of primary care multidisciplinary teams, as well as 800 more GPs.

As Annabelle Ewing will be aware, our draft budget sets out a clear plan to reduce waiting times and delayed discharges, which is supported by the provision of £200 million of targeted investment, and shift the balance of care from acute to community. We will also continue to build on the good work that is under way in many boards, including by ensuring that every core accident and emergency department has a frailty unit or frailty team that is linked to community re-enablement and by optimising our flow navigation centres to create more alternatives to accident and emergency.

We want to make progress on improving our health service. That is why, by 26 March, we expect nobody to wait longer than 12 months for a new out-patient appointment, in-patient treatment or day-case treatment.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): NHS Fife has made it clear that the mental health estate is not fit for purpose. Stratheden hospital is an old Victorian building. Will the cabinet secretary agree to look at the case that NHS Fife is making for the mental health estate to be replaced to ensure that people get the proper care that they require?

Neil Gray: I thank Alex Rowley for raising the issue in the tenor in which he has done so. Despite recent media coverage, it is simply untrue to claim that there is “no money” for mental health in NHS Fife or, indeed, in any other health board. Although we have had to take difficult decisions about reductions that affect all of Government, we maintain our commitment to mental health and have supported overall increases in mental health spending over a period of years.

Mr Rowley knows that the position on capital remains challenging. In determining our capital programme, we will assess the full implications of the UK autumn budget, and we await the outcome of the United Kingdom Government’s spending review.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland was very critical of the facilities at Stratheden hospital in Fife, which Alex Rowley has just mentioned. The facilities there are overcrowded, cramped and outdated, and there is a lack of privacy and a lack of access to recreational and therapeutic activities. When will the money be forthcoming to build a new facility?

Neil Gray: I thank Willie Rennie for setting out the situation. I accept some of what he has said. I say to Willie Rennie what I said to Alex Rowley: we will provide an assessment, based on the UK Government’s recent budget, as well as the spending review, to enable us to determine what capital programme we can bring forward.

Neurodivergent Children and Young People (Support)

8. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed plans with NHS Lanarkshire to ensure that neurodivergent children and young people receive the right treatment and support. (S60-04233)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government engages regularly with all health boards regarding their provision of support for neurodivergent children and young people. We are working closely with health boards and local authorities towards implementing the national neurodevelopmental specification in full. The specification aims to ensure that children and

families receive support and access to services that meet their needs at the earliest opportunity, based on the getting it right for every child approach. That support will often be community or school based, and receipt of it should not be dependent on a formal diagnosis.

Colin Smyth: In March last year, I raised with the First Minister the case of my constituent in Lanarkshire, who is now just 14, who had been waiting three and a half years for a neurodevelopmental assessment. She was eventually given an assessment in April last year, but she then had to wait until December before any treatment began. That wee girl’s mum described to me how her daughter often spent hours lying on the floor, screaming and crying in pain. She believes that, had she had that treatment sooner, she would not be facing a massive uphill struggle to get her health and life back.

Minister, my constituent’s mum wants to know why it has taken more than four years for her daughter to finally get treatment. What is the Government doing to change things and stop other kids who are struggling now having to wait years to get the support that they need?

Maree Todd: As I have said many times in the chamber, the Government’s ambition in relation to the provision of support for children with neurodivergence is to look at the whole child and to provide holistic support, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis.

The needs of the child should be identified and met, and their rights should be upheld. That is the system that we intend to operate. NHS Lanarkshire is working very hard to implement the national neurodevelopmental specification, and it proactively provides support to children and families, although I acknowledge that the level of support in the case that Mr Smyth has detailed has not met the standard that I expect. I know that NHS Lanarkshire provides services, including speech therapy, dietetics and learning groups for parents, and that is independent of being provided a diagnosis.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): It is important to recognise the unwavering support and dedication of families with neurodivergent children. I am part of such a family and can attest to the extreme challenges that you face in seeking to secure access to diagnosis and support.

Can the minister please provide an update on what further intended actions the Scottish Government is taking, both in the 2025-26 budget and in the longer term, to best support families of neurodivergent young people in alleviating the difficulties that they face?

Maree Todd: I recognise the work that Elena Whitham has done on that issue, and I want to reassure all families that it is an absolute priority for the Government. I am happy to detail some of the funding that we are providing, which, since 2020, has included £65 million for local authorities to fund community-based mental health and wellbeing support services for children, young people and, crucially, their families.

That investment will continue. I will provide details in writing of the number of families who have benefited from that investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank colleagues for accommodating so many portfolio questions.

14:51

Meeting suspended.

14:51

On resuming—

Safety in Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16170, in the name of Miles Briggs, on delivering school environments where it is safe for pupils to learn and teachers to teach. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button. I remind members that we are very tight for time across this debate and the next one.

14:52

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Last night, I met teachers in Edinburgh at an event that was organised by the Edinburgh branch of the Educational Institute of Scotland to hear first hand about the pressures that teachers in the capital are facing in our classrooms. They spoke of emergency and crisis levels of violence and abuse, and they shared stories of teachers going off on sick leave due to stress and needing to go to accident and emergency departments for broken bones following violent incidents in their schools. Attacks on teachers and pupils in our schools are totally unacceptable and must stop.

It is clear that there is cross-party concern and, I hope, cross-party consensus on the need for more action and leadership to address the on-going increase in cases of violence against pupils and teachers. The need for action to restore positive learning environments, in which all young people and teachers are safe to learn or teach in a respected and supported setting, is a pressing issue and should be ministers' number 1 priority.

The Scottish Conservatives have led the debate on school discipline. In March last year, we secured a debate on ending violence in schools. As today's motion states, we welcome the work that ministers have undertaken as a result of that debate, but we need to be honest that it is not delivering the change that we need in our classrooms and schools, and it is not being delivered at any pace.

Unions have warned that there has been a failure of local authorities and Education Scotland to do anything significant to embed the national action plan on relationships and behaviour in schools. Teachers, pupils and parents are crying out for ministers to take action and to provide leadership to turn the situation around.

Today's debate therefore presents an opportunity for a reset of our school environment, which I believe is needed. Many schools can be—and are—great learning environments for our

young people, teachers and the wider community. However, it is concerning that, in too many cases and too many schools, the school environment is now becoming toxic, with students and teachers experiencing stress, bullying or other negative behaviours that impact on their mental health, wellbeing and ability to learn.

Ministers have acknowledged the rise in the incidence of violence and abuse in our schools and the fact that many cases go unreported. That is why the Scottish Conservatives want common sense policies to be brought back to our classrooms and schools. It is why we are calling for action from ministers today to develop a set of national policies to help to deliver the positive changes that we all want to see and to restore our schools to safe and welcoming learning spaces.

The key questions that teachers raised with me last night is why ministers have not commissioned any work to understand why children are exhibiting such negative behaviours and why schools are not being given the support that they need, increasingly, to address those problematic issues. Above all, teachers want ministers to be clear that they support them in saying that violence in our schools must end and that pupils and parents must be responsible for their actions.

That is why I call on ministers to set a clear national policy on what we should expect in every school—which, it is clear, is the direction that teachers want to see. That includes a ban on mobile phones in the classroom—full stop. It also includes a return to single-sex toilets and accessible toilets in all our schools, and the commissioning of a full independent review of the recording of data into incidents of attacks and violence against school staff.

We want clear guidance and support for teachers. We need the restoration of a situation in which poor behaviour in our classrooms has consequences. The majority of our well-behaved pupils in Scotland cannot continue to have their education negatively impacted. Above all, Scottish National Party ministers need to finally empower teachers to take action against disruptive pupils, knowing that ministers have their back.

Yesterday, I heard a new term that teachers are using: “lappers”. Increasingly, pupils are turning up at school and simply walking around the school or running around the corridors. The situation in our schools will only get worse if we do not get a clear and robust response from ministers. We have called for that, and they said that they would deliver it, but we have not seen action. It is totally unacceptable that more and more pupils and teachers now fear—actually fear—going to school each day. We need an end to the acts of physical and verbal abuse against them.

To date, SNP ministers have failed to put in place the measures that would allow teachers to act against those who are responsible for violence and threats in our schools. We need to acknowledge that, in recent years, the school environment has changed. We need clear national policies to be put in place to deliver for teachers and parents, and we need to ensure that we know what they can accept.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Miles Briggs talks about national policies, but have teachers and headteachers not been given the power to deal with mobile phones, and is that not better dealt with at local level?

Miles Briggs: There is a huge difference between the guidance that ministers say that councils can develop and, rather than leaving it to individual schools, a national policy that says that we believe that mobile phones should not be in classrooms. There is broad evidence on that.

I will touch on the important issue of social media. There has been an important debate in Australia about the negative impact that social media is having on young people’s mental health. That is why our motion also calls on ministers to undertake a review of the issue in Scotland and look towards a potential ban in that area. We must consider the toxic environment that our young people are living in and how we can change that.

Schools must be a safe place for pupils to learn and for teachers to teach. That is simply not the case right now, and it will only get worse if SNP ministers do not get a grip of the situation. I am clear—let me be clear to any teacher watching the debate—that the Scottish Conservatives support our teachers 100 per cent in demanding fresh action to restore discipline in our schools. That must be the number 1 priority for SNP ministers. They must be judged over the next year on their actions, and we will continue to press the Government for that action.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the ongoing concern at reported cases of violence against pupils and staff, and disruption in schools, and the need for action to help restore positive learning environments in which all young people and teachers are safe to learn and teach in a respectful and supported setting; welcomes the publication of the joint national action plan with COSLA in August 2024, which set out a range of actions needed to be taken at both local and national levels to address violence in schools, alongside the Scottish Government’s action plan on tackling violence and verbal abuse in schools; calls on ministers to bring forward an update to the Parliament on how these actions are being taken forward; further calls on ministers to review the reporting and publication of data on incidents relating to violence and harassment in schools; notes the disparity in the availability of early years provision across Scotland and the potential long-term impacts on children’s development and educational outcomes; calls for a review to identify and mitigate negative influences on

learning environments in primary schools, including factors affecting pupil behaviour and engagement; further calls on the Scottish Government to support children and young people impacted by violence and disruption in schools and to facilitate an environment in which all young people are safe to learn, develop and grow; notes the publication of the Scottish Government guidance on mobile phones in schools, and calls on ministers to take forward a national policy on a ban on mobile phones in classrooms and the provision of single-sex toilets and accessible toilets in all schools; acknowledges the recent passing of a law banning children under 16 from using social media in Australia, and calls on ministers to undertake a review in Scotland of the negative impact of social media on young people and the growing body of evidence suggesting that “over-exposure” to mobile phones and social media can result in pupils experiencing limited concentration, isolation and poor mental health, as well as the potential for a similar ban in Scotland.

14:59

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I am grateful to the Scottish Conservatives for securing the debate. I am keen to speak to the measures included in their motion in relation to my ministerial responsibilities. In closing the debate, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will focus on specific actions for schools.

The motion references early learning and childcare provision and refers to “disparity” in provision. I would respectfully challenge that point. The Scottish Government continues to invest around £1 billion a year into delivering 1,140 hours of funded ELC to all eligible children. Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom to already offer 1,140 hours a year of funded ELC to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds, regardless of their parents’ working status. Families across Scotland have been benefiting from that provision since 2021. However, I recognise that there are pressures—

Miles Briggs: Will Natalie Don-Innes take an intervention?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, I will.

Miles Briggs: The minister says that she takes umbrage with the word “disparity”. Probably every member in the Parliament will have written to Government ministers to say that people cannot get the nursery choices that they want. Why is there an issue when we highlight the disparity that clearly exists across our country?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am going to speak about some of the challenges.

In one of the most recent surveys that was undertaken on ELC, 97 per cent of parents were satisfied with the quality of ELC that they were receiving. However, I recognise that there are challenges. I have spoken to members about inconsistencies in rates and other matters, and I

continue to work on those. I recognise that ELC providers in Scotland face pressure in relation to the £5 million burden arising from the UK Government’s increase in the employer national insurance contribution. In relation to flexibility of provision, we know that there are differing models of ELC delivery in local authorities. That is why we will continue to work with local government and sector partners to ensure that the 1,140 offer meets families’ needs.

Turning to the measures in Miles Briggs’s motion that relate to factors influencing behaviour and engagement, I must challenge his characterisation of schools and our children. Often, we need to look a bit deeper to understand why a child or young person might act in a certain way. Respondents to the Scottish Government’s behaviour in Scottish schools research in November 2023 cited societal factors, such as poverty and deprivation, and challenges associated with home and family life, such as trauma and adverse childhood experiences, as the root causes of disruptive behaviour.

We must strike a balance between in-school approaches to promoting positive behaviour alongside the external factors that might influence behaviour. That is why I am committed to whole-family wellbeing and to prioritising services that help families to thrive, stay together and avoid crisis points, which might later impact on a child or young person’s school experience.

Liam Kerr: Will Natalie Don-Innes take an intervention?

Natalie Don-Innes: Can I get the time back, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, not really.

Natalie Don-Innes: Furthermore, my work on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 means that I take very seriously Miles Briggs’s reference in the motion to supporting “children and young people impacted by violence”.

I was happy to work with members from across the chamber to strengthen the provisions in the 2024 act.

Childcare improvements remain a shared priority across Government. Last week, the First Minister’s cross-party youth justice summit involved the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, members from across the chamber, youth justice organisations and young people who have been impacted by violence. I was struck by comments from Jimmy Paul, the head of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, who said:

“There was a real commitment to reducing violence in Scotland and the issue was not politicised. It was a step in the right direction to tackling violence in Scotland—it is the start of the conversation and it will look at the root causes and drivers of violence, not just the act itself. Everybody in the room from experts, young people and politicians, were on the same page”.

It is in that spirit that we should go forward together as a Parliament. We owe it to our young people not to use incidents of youth violence as political footfalls. Scotland’s approach to confronting and correcting youth offending is effective and proven. Scotland needs to stay alert to emerging issues and respond on the basis of evidence. That is how we minimise the number of future victims and how we turn around young lives.

Across the chamber, we are committed to ensuring that our children and young people are nurtured and free to grow up safe. They should be protected from harms and harassment in their day-to-day lives, which includes online. When browsing the internet, children can be exposed to cyberbullying, violent content, sexualised material and hate speech, including messages that incite violence or encourage toxic masculinity. Exposure to such content is putting our children at risk. That is why I am pleased to inform the Parliament that the First Minister has asked me to work with the Minister for Victims and Community Safety to create a new task force to identify what more can be done within the limits of devolution to protect children and young people from online harms—*[Interruption.]*

The reaction from members on the Conservative benches is appalling. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: The First Minister has also written to the UK Government to voice his support for joint working between our Governments to improve online safety. I sincerely hope that members from across the chamber support that endeavour. It will take all of us—Government, Parliament, local authorities, agencies, schools, teachers and organisations—working together.

I hope that today’s debate provides an opportunity to explore what more can be done collectively.

I move, as an amendment to motion S6M-16170, to leave out from first “calls on ministers” to end and insert:

“recognises the importance of the Scottish Government and local authorities working together to facilitate an environment in which all young people are safe to learn, develop and grow; notes the Scottish Government national guidance on mobile phones in schools, which empowers headteachers to take decisions on banning mobile phone use in schools; agrees with the importance of ensuring that children are protected from online harms; notes the

importance of ensuring that children and young people are able to share their perspective on their education, and calls on all partners to continue working closely with the Scottish Government to improve behaviour and relationships in schools.”

15:04

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

We have returned to the issue many times, but the situation persists. NASUWT has said that teachers fear for their safety and the GMB has called the situation a “national emergency”, so our focusing on it today is crucial.

We welcome the publication of the joint national action plan, echo calls for ministers to bring forward an update and urge the Government to review the reporting and publication of data on the issue. We also welcome the mobile phones guidance, but more is needed, including on the impact of phones and social media on violence against women and girls. I look forward to hearing more about the task force, but we need more than just a task force—we need action in schools and across communities.

The issue that we are discussing is far wider than all that, but we cannot address it without also considering the workforce and the need for strong public services around young people. The motion and other amendment do not include that detail, so I will set out why I believe that it is crucial. Cases of violence against pupils and staff and disruption in schools have escalated, which is unacceptable. It is worrying that it looks as though the lowest-paid staff, and women and girls, face the brunt of it.

GMB data suggests that women workers are more often subjected to incidents involving violence, and Time for Inclusive Education focus groups have heard from girls that misogyny, homophobia and racism are “rife”. They also heard that body shaming is common, that rape jokes are minimised and that some girls do not want to eat in school due to sexualised comments being made by boys. Other girls do not want to go to school at all. That all affects girls’ mental health and attention span.

The focus groups all indicated what members of the Scottish Youth Parliament backed up at the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning—that social media can be unsafe places, with content from popular figures, memes and videos normalising misogyny, anti-LGBT prejudice, racism and violence. Young people told the committee this morning that they want more support on the issue at school, so I encourage the minister and the cabinet secretary to look at the Mind Yer Time campaign, as a start.

I also urge the cabinet secretary to consider that in the context of the growing body of evidence that highlights the role of phones in the problem. There is evidence that overexposure to social media can influence attitudes as well as resulting in people experiencing limited concentration, isolation and poor mental health.

Young people also said this morning that when we discuss violence and its impact, we also have to consider the wider context, which our amendment seeks to do. Without addressing the systemic and structural issues that schools face, classrooms will continue to be like pressure cookers, with overworked staff and unsupported pupils. The Educational Institute of Scotland has said that teachers are working on average 11 hours extra per week unpaid, and they are still waiting for reduced contact time. We cannot address violence in schools in isolation from those issues. That is why we urgently need the Government to publish the comprehensive workforce plan that will address gaps in the teaching and school staff workforce, which Parliament voted for last May.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will I get my time back, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am sorry, but I am unable to take the intervention.

The Government must also address long waits and gaps in provision of key public services, including child and adolescent mental health services, educational psychology and speech and language therapy. Nearly one in six children and young people who needed treatment waited more than four months for help. There is also growing prevalence of communication needs among children, with 6,000 waiting for speech and language therapy and 53 per cent of those waiting more than 18 weeks.

We have to address all that if we are serious about the school environment. That means finding ways to support joint working between education and the national health service, so that things such as speech and language therapy are positioned closer to education services and to the child.

All that can have a detrimental impact on the school environment, and MSYPs echoed that this morning, saying that we have faced years of real-terms cuts to the NHS, cuts to youth work and cuts to community services. We are seeing the degradation of community services all round, and we are left with the inevitable result that education needs to pick up the slack.

That is why we must take a broader view of the issue. It is also why we support the committee's

finding that we need to design school buildings that are accessible and welcoming environments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to close.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We believe that that includes classroom design, and the availability of single-sex, accessible, gender-neutral and changing places toilets, because no one can learn if they cannot access a private, safe and accessible toilet.

I move amendment S6M-16170.2, to leave out from "the disparity" to end and insert:

"that the GMB union has described the environment in schools as a 'national emergency', and that reports from NASUWT state that teachers in Scotland 'fear for their safety'; further notes the concerns raised by teaching unions, such as EIS, that teachers are working, on average, 11 hours per week unpaid; is concerned about the evidence of the impact of violence, particularly on women and girls, in schools; believes that this situation is not sustainable; considers that adequate staffing is required to create a safe environment in schools, and calls on the Scottish Government to publish a comprehensive plan to address gaps in the teaching and school staff workforce, as voted for by the Parliament on 15 May 2024; believes that long waits and gaps in the provision of public services, such as child and adolescent mental health services, educational psychology and speech and language therapy, have a detrimental impact on the school environment, and particularly children with additional support needs; welcomes the Equally Safe delivery plan, which gives direction to the Equally Safe at School programme; supports the finding in the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on additional support for learning that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Futures Trust should work with local authorities 'to ensure that schools are designed as accessible and welcoming environments for all', and believes that this should include classroom design as well as the availability of single-sex, accessible and Changing Places toilets, and calls on ministers to consider the growing body of evidence suggesting that 'over-exposure' to social media can result in pupils experiencing limited concentration, isolation and poor mental health, and to bring forward a national policy on how best to address this in Scotland."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise, but I am afraid that we have no time in hand. Ross Greer—up to four minutes, please.

15:09

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The challenge of violence in our schools is very real. One of my frustrations with how the debate has developed over the past couple of years is that young people are almost always spoken about as either the victims or the perpetrators of that violence, and we rarely talk to young people as opposed to talking about them. We need to recognise that young people are absolutely key to the solutions. We heard from members of the Scottish Youth Parliament this morning that they want to talk about the core reasons behind the rise in violence in our schools.

The vast majority of pupils are well behaved the vast majority of the time: recent reports have confirmed that. All staff and pupils deserve to be safe at school. Our schools are certainly not all unsafe all the time, but there is a very real issue. Like most members, I know teachers who have been injured in the workplace throughout their career, but that has been happening far more frequently—and, in some cases, more severely—in the post-pandemic period.

Like the last time we debated this topic, the aspect that I want to focus on is violence against women and girls in schools. I raise the issue again because of my frustration at what I see as a lack of urgency in tackling it. The Zero Tolerance report from two years ago, “Gender inequality and violence against women and girls in Scottish schools” showed that one in five young women and girls felt unsafe at school in Scotland, and two in three had been sexually harassed.

In large part, that is because boys and young men just do not respect girls and women—and, in some cases, they hate them. I have said before that it is a matter that is to be dealt with through the personal and social education curriculum in our schools. I raise that issue because I have worked on it throughout the nine years that I have been a member of Parliament. We recognised the problem nine years ago, and in the period of time that it has taken us to get even this far—and we are nowhere near done with it—the issue has only got worse. The manosphere did not exist nine years ago, and Andrew Tate was not an influencer nine years ago.

I will address specific points on social media later, but I want to talk about the fact that, at the moment, the guidance for teaching sexual education in our schools makes one passing reference to the principle of consent—just one. That guidance is from 2014; it is not decades old. For three years, we have had a draft set of new guidance on how to deliver sex education in schools, which starts off with what our committee called for some years ago—a substantial section on the principle of consent and the importance of respect in relationships and respect for women and girls, in particular. It has been sitting as a draft for years now, and I am frustrated by the lack of progress.

However, I am pleased that, yesterday, I received an answer from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to a written question, saying that following the consultation that took place, we will finally get a finalised copy of that guidance in the coming weeks. That is important, because the new guidance starts with that substantial section on consent. It is also inclusive of LGBTQ young people, because we know that queer young people are disproportionately victims of violence in

school. Age-and-stage-appropriate guidance for boys and young men on the importance of respect and healthy relationships is absolutely essential if we are to tackle the issue.

I want to talk about the issue again—I bring it up every time we debate the subject—because of my frustration about the fact that it has taken a decade to change just that one guidance document. In this Parliament, we talk a lot about tackling violence against women and girls, but can we seriously say that we are making progress and that we are proud of the progress that we have made when, in order to talk in any depth about the importance of a basic principle such as consent, it has taken a decade to change just one guidance document on one element of education?

This morning, members of the Scottish Youth Parliament confirmed that PSE in our schools is supposed to be co-designed by young people, specifically because of issues raised in relation to sex and relationships education, but that is simply not happening.

I am proud of the progress that we have made in certain areas; however, I am immensely frustrated that I am essentially making the same speech that I make in every one of these debates, because, for nine years now, we have failed to get to grips with what I see as one of the lowest-hanging fruits—one of the easiest areas in which we could make a difference.

15:13

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is too early to judge whether the Scottish Government’s action plan is working, as we have not even got through the first phase of the plan. However, I have not seen any evidence that the action plan is making a practical difference on the ground, so far. I continue to receive reports from parents who are frustrated, angry and feel powerless; from pupils whose education is disrupted; and from teachers who are really frustrated about the lack of support. We must start to see action in this area, or people will lose confidence in the plan’s ability to deliver.

I will make some observations. As a liberal, I always want to understand the root causes of any behaviour and to provide support to address those causes. That is why I am a liberal.

I want to be clear about this. Just because we understand the causes of the violence, that does not make it any more acceptable. There must be consequences for that behaviour, because endless understanding without consequences, support and action does not help the perpetrator, let alone the victim, of that behaviour. Often, I get the impression that some people make excuses

for those who engage in violence rather than taking the necessary action and providing support.

My second observation is that teachers need to be empowered, supported and respected. When they are unreasonably challenged by parents, they must have the support of their management. Questioning by management of teachers and circumstances is fair—it is the right thing to do—but management must have the backs of teachers in issues of behaviour in the class. I hear of too many occasions on which the teachers do not bother a second time, because they do not get the necessary support when they are challenged.

I will move on to mobile phones. The evidence for a ban on phones in schools is pretty convincing. They are contributing to disorder and disruption in the class, and they are misused on many occasions. Once we are confident that learning and safety will not suffer—those are two important aspects—we should move towards a nationwide ban.

If the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills needs that power, we should give her that power. Although it is fair that she has given the power to headteachers, that is clearly not enough, because they need to have the support from the centre to deliver something that, in many cases, will be quite controversial.

My final point is on an issue that was raised in the Education, Children and Young People Committee last week—part-time timetables for certain pupils. We heard that some pupils are getting timetables of as little as 15 minutes a week. Sometimes, that is because it is in the interests of the pupil, and that is fine. I get the impression that their getting 15 minutes in school is sometimes done only in the interests of the school. On other occasions, it is 15 minutes because that ticks a box when it comes to keeping the Promise, in that we should not have care-experienced young people being excluded from school.

The experiences will vary from pupil to pupil and from school to school, but people attending the committee last week gave us clear evidence that, on many occasions, part-time timetabling is not being appropriately implemented. I want to make sure that, if there is just 15 minutes in school being provided, the rest of the pupil's week is populated with support and action, and that they move back to the school in a transitional way. That is important.

15:17

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to be able to speak on such an important issue. Violent and disruptive behaviour in Scotland's schools has become an epidemic. In

2023 alone, school staff reported almost 45,000 instances of violence and abuse, with 200 staff being physically or verbally abused every day. Another survey found that 70 per cent of Scottish pupils experience sexual harassment, with 34 per cent experiencing unwanted touching. Think about that for a moment. One in three pupils is being touched against their will, seven in 10 pupils experience harassment of some kind, and a physical or verbal assault against staff takes place every two minutes of a school day.

The violence in Scotland's schools is out of control. The SNP Government needs to do far more to help teachers to tackle this growing crisis, and my colleague Miles Briggs has already set out some of the actions that it must take.

I want to focus on the impact that that violence is having on young girls. We know that the vast majority of pupils experiencing sexual harassment are girls. We know that 20 per cent of girls no longer feel safe at school and that half of those say that their fear is holding them back in their education.

Last month, I held a round-table session on the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. One of the guests was a teacher who recounted some of the shocking incidents that had taken place at her school. She described boys having a group chat in which they rated girls and photoshopped their heads on to fake bodies. Most appallingly, she said, the boys took advantage of unisex toilets to sneak their phones under the stalls and film girls. Sadly, that is not the first time that such an incident has happened. Recently, a hidden camera that had filmed hundreds of naked girls was found in a unisex toilet stall in a Dundee school. However, when the teacher I spoke to raised concerns about the mixed-sex toilets, she was branded transphobic.

Raising concerns about girls facing sexual harassment in mixed-sex toilets is not transphobic; it is common sense. It is a bare-minimum safeguard that young girls deserve, yet one in 20 schools in Scotland currently offers only mixed-sex facilities, with no single-sex toilets at all. It is no wonder that so many girls feel unsafe at school when even toilets and changing rooms are no longer safe spaces. That is why it is vital that single-sex facilities are available in every school.

The SNP must do more to support teachers to tackle sexual harassment and violence. That includes empowering teachers to discipline violent pupils and put an end to the terror that many girls live with. Schools should be environments where pupils feel safe and enjoy their childhood. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Scotland under the SNP Government. A generation of children are having their education disrupted, while a generation of girls are learning to fear

sexual harassment every day. Talking shop will no longer cut it. We need real action to tackle this crisis.

15:21

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

I know that we all agree that having a safe place for our young people to learn in and for our teachers to teach in is central to having a successful educational system. I see, from the various amendments to the motion, that we also share the same concerns over reported cases of violence against pupils and staff as well as disruption in schools. Violence and abusive behaviour in schools is completely unacceptable.

I also welcome the publication of the joint national action plan with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is mentioned in the amendments and which sets out the actions that will be taken over the next three years in response to the “Behaviour in Scottish schools 2023” research. The action plan states:

“The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 places duties on public authorities which include taking into account the views of the child or young person. Therefore, children and young people should play an integral role in shaping the local policies on relationships and behaviour that will affect them.”

That crucial point could be more prominent both in the debate today and in our overall discussions about education and children’s participation in it. Although working alongside organisations such as Education Scotland and local authorities is important for implementing the action plan, we should genuinely listen to the pupils themselves. They are the ones who experience daily disruption in the classroom, and it is their input that will guide us in creating the safest and most conducive learning environment for both students and teachers.

By involving pupils in the process of shaping their educational experiences, we empower them to become co-creators of their learning journey. That approach not only fosters greater engagement but challenges the traditional power dynamics that often leave students’ needs and views overlooked.

Liam Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Bill Kidd: No, thanks. There is no time.

When pupils feel that their opinions are valued and taken seriously, they are more likely to feel respected and, as a result, less inclined to act out in the classroom. That shift towards a more

inclusive and respectful environment is essential for creating a school culture in which both students and teachers can thrive and in which learning is not only safe but meaningful and effective. Indeed, one of the main points to come out of the recent discussion on the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 was the very issue of ensuring that safety is central to any educational reform, including, I hope, the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In conclusion, if we are to build an environment that is safe for pupils and teachers, we need to involve those who will be using that environment. Therefore, should the Government be minded to produce an update on how the actions are being taken forward, as is called for in Mr Briggs’s motion, I ask it to please ensure that UNCRC article 12—which states that, when adults are making decisions that affect children, they should ask the children what they think—takes centre stage.

15:25

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have always believed that the greatest gift that any society can give a child is access to a good-quality education that gives them the opportunity to achieve and to reach their full potential. Sadly, for too many children in Scotland, that is not happening. When I speak to parents, pupils, teachers and school staff, they all ask me why the politicians in this place and the politicians in councils cannot work together to resolve the issues. That is where people are at. We know that there are problems and serious issues, and we need to find a way to come together to find the solutions, working with schools, teachers and local authorities.

I was therefore disappointed by the speech that the minister just made, in which she warned us about using youth violence as a political football. None of us would be doing our job if we did not come here and raise these issues, which is why I am grateful to the Conservative Party for giving us part of its business time today in which to speak about them. I ask the education secretary to consider having further debates in Government time so that we can look at how we can work together to tackle these issues.

In fairness to the education secretary, she has always been more than willing to acknowledge that there are serious challenges in our schools. This week, I read in *The Courier* a report of a public meeting in Glenrothes, which I believe the education secretary was at. I have a host of quotes from teachers and parents that highlight some of the very serious problems that people face in our schools. I suggest to the minister that she does not put her head in the sand. The

starting point must be to acknowledge the problems and to look at how we are going to tackle them.

I take on board Bill Kidd's interesting point about the involvement of schools. I had the pleasure of meeting a P7 class from Fallin primary school in Parliament this morning, and I told them about this afternoon's debate. I said that one of the issues in the discussion would be the fact that, although the Government has issued guidance on the use of phones in schools, many schools would lean towards a total ban, and I explained the procedures for how that would happen. That generated more discussion than I have ever had before when I have met schoolchildren—up went the hands. The majority of the primary 7 pupils did not want to see a ban, and they demanded to know what my view on it was. I told them that I was leaning towards a ban but that I was, of course, going to listen to them.

Fallin primary school's phone policy is that children have to hand their phones in at the start of the day. They get them back at lunchtime and then hand them in again after lunch. I was informed that a high school in Stirling has banned phones completely. I say to the cabinet secretary that we need to look at how that initiative is going and how it works.

We need more additional support teachers, more assistant support teachers and more learning support teachers in schools. That is what the education establishment, teachers and schools are telling us. It is good that we are making some progress, but we clearly have problems. We need more resources, more teachers and more learning support teachers. That is the way to move forward.

15:29

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We have heard the concerns about violence in our schools, including in primary schools. Physical and verbal abuse is an issue in primary schools, as it is in secondary schools. As we have heard, mobile phones are not just a teenage problem, as 62 per cent of eight-year-olds own one. That means that younger children have the same access to negative influences and developmental anxieties as their counterparts do.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In 2023-24, there were 3,170 incidents of violence in schools in the Highlands. That means that there has been a 548 per cent increase in four years, and the figures equate to 16 incidents every day. Does Roz McCall believe that teachers want action, not more task forces?

Roz McCall: Yes.

Let children be children. They should grow up in a state of innocence—it is called “childlike” innocence for a reason—but for many children in Scotland, that is not the case. They are burdened by pressures that their young minds cannot comprehend. Schools should be a glorious respite from that. If we give a child the time and space for their mind to develop in a safe and psychologically sensitive way, they will cope far better with the trials of life in later years.

However, that space varies greatly depending on what part of the country the child lives in. Families across Scotland face a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing the 1,140 hours of funded childcare, regardless of the minister's earlier comments. Funding issues for local authorities mean that some offer funded childcare immediately following a child's third birthday, some offer it a month after a child's third birthday and some delay it until the following school term. Some local authorities take children who come from a different council area because their parents work nearby, but some refuse to do so. There is disparity in the offer, which is adversely affecting working parents and, subsequently, their children.

When I became a mum, I was given the advice that it was my job to ensure that my child was never put in a situation that they could not handle. Unfortunately, we do that every day. Not a single girl who attended school with my daughters did not have a negative reaction to primary 2 food and nutrition education. Food became bad, and the fear of a note coming home from a teacher about insignificant vegetable content was almost palpable. Every seven-year-old I met at that time became worried about what they ate. Food was no longer fuel to be run off at play time but a source of anxiety. Now, we have expanded food guidance to nurseries, where birthday cakes are a thing of the past, with the unintended consequences being that even younger children will be made to worry about what they eat.

Equally, we are starting to force sexualisation on children. Children are children. Young boys playing with dolls and wearing pink frilly dresses is absolutely normal, as is girls climbing trees and building bridges. Their imaginations are firing, and limits do not apply—and nor should they.

It is therefore deeply concerning that groups such as LGBT Youth Scotland are infiltrating our primary schools. This morning, I checked LGBT Youth's website, where it proudly states that it is

“Scotland's national charity for LGBTQ+ young people, aged 13-25.”

I am all for support being provided to those in that age range when it comes to sexual issues and worries—although I might now have concerns

about that particular organisation—but there are no 13 to 25-year-olds in primary schools.

Experts are warning of the lasting psychological danger of introducing young children to material on trans ideology. Former Scottish Government adviser and educational psychologist Carolyn Brown said:

“Children struggle with their bodies during puberty. Without harmful ideology influences, they grow into who they are meant to be. LGBT Youth Scotland believe those struggling with puberty are born in the wrong body. This causes lasting psychological harm, sending children down an irreversible road of medication and surgery.”

Primary school is neither the right place nor the right time for children to be worried about that. It is time to let children be children.

15:33

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): In such debates, I normally look at the Opposition party’s motion to try to find something to talk about, because the motions are normally pretty tight and on a specific issue. Today’s motion is about everything. I am not moaning about that, but it gives me the opportunity to talk about anything that I want to talk about in the education environment.

I accept that it is challenging for teachers, pupils and others in the school environment. To a certain degree, it has always been thus. I remember it being like that when I was younger, and that was not yesterday. On the whole, that is not what I experience when I go out to schools in my constituency of Paisley. For example, I recently visited a school to see an anti-alcohol play that was being done for first years—don’t use alcohol, kids. Because of the relationship that I had with the school, I was asked to go to the modern studies class and talk to the pupils about something. In fact, they helped me with a speech that I made in the Parliament the next day. Apparently, one of them bragged that I used one of their lines.

The MSYPs who were at the Education, Children and Young People Committee today talked about how we and education authorities engage with them. They were almost offended when Miles Briggs brought up the issue of violence in schools, because they felt that young people were getting the blame for the whole scenario. That is one of the things that we must be careful of in a debate such as this. The MSYPs want us to engage with them—they want to talk about the education environment and how we can work together to make it better for them.

One of the questions that I asked the MSYPs was about the pressure on them in relation to social media, and that was when they lit up about

the whole debate. I understand why we talk about banning mobile phones in schools when they become a distraction and a problem there, but the Scottish Government has done its bit to empower headteachers with the power to take away phones.

There is a balance to be struck. One of the young women who was at the committee today mentioned that she has a health condition and that it could become a bit of a problem if she did not have access to her phone. We need to be more flexible and discuss the issue with a wee bit of maturity and not just stick to our political lines and shout at each other from various parts of the chamber.

The MSYPs mentioned, in particular, the pressure that is created by social media and the occasions on which they feel that they are being pushed. Some of them might be triggered when they are in class or in school by something that has been said on social media. However, the big thing for them was the societal issues. Behaviour changes are made because of societal issues, and they said that they were willing to work with every one of us to try to make that difference in our society. What I saw today were young people who were willing to engage with the political process to make that difference, so we need to be careful when we highlight individuals and say, “Young people are the problem—they’re creating all the violence; there’s an issue there.”

I acknowledge that our teachers need to work in a safe environment and that they work in a challenging one; I know that we must have a safe environment for our young people. All that we have to do is ensure that everyone sits down in sobriety and has that conversation so that we can make the difference and change things. That, for me, is the whole point of the debate, not the yah-boo politics from some.

15:38

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Our schools must be places where our children can thrive and where our teachers can excel. Too many classrooms are undermined by disruption and sometimes even by violence. I fear that they are lacking clear, decisive policy that is backed up by strong leadership. The wellbeing of pupils and teachers alike is sometimes at risk, and that must change.

Strong leadership begins here, with all of us in the Parliament—that is a theme that has developed over the debate—and with our taking responsibility for the safety and success of our schools. Schools are our children’s first independent communities; they teach children things about respect, conflict management and the

shared values that underpin our society. Yet I feel that many schools have been left ill-equipped to address the challenges that they are facing, which the pandemic has exacerbated. I must be very clear with the Government that empowering headteachers without providing robust national support to underpin that empowerment is—I am sorry to say—not leadership but passing the buck.

We have to ensure that our schools have clear policies and protection and that we are enforcing consistent behavioural standards. Mobile phones are rightly being discussed—they are clearly having an impact on our young people's mental health and we need to focus more on them. We know that smoking, drugs and alcohol cause harm, and I believe that we are approaching the point at which we understand that the use—or overuse, I should say—of mobile phones and social media is also harmful to our young people and to their mental health.

We did not leave the smoking ban up to the discretion of venue managers, and neither should we leave the issue of mobile phones in classrooms up to individual schools. A nationwide ban is now necessary, and it should be brought forward as quickly as possible to safeguard the learning and wellbeing of our children. The Government needs to step up; its suggestion of a task force is just not going to cut it.

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

15:40

Ross Greer: In closing, I will round off the points that I made earlier on the importance of personal and social education in tackling violence against women and girls and on co-design by young people themselves, which is absolutely essential. Teachers have given us clear feedback that that is what they need. In many cases, they are not on the same social media platforms as their pupils, and, if they are, the algorithm shows them something completely different, so they are simply not aware of what young men and boys in particular are seeing online.

Most PSE is not delivered by subject specialists. It is not fair for us to expect a geography teacher or a biology teacher who is trying to keep on top of their own specialism to also keep on top of areas such as developments in the manosphere and the new wave of misogyny.

Young people want to help to solve this; we heard that in the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning. If areas such as sex and relationship education and PSE overall are co-designed by young people, they can be kept up to date with the challenges that young people face. The issue with this part of the

curriculum has so often been that it becomes outdated very quickly and that teachers in classrooms simply do not have the time to keep on top of it.

We need to seriously consider subject specialism in this area. There are a few schools in Scotland that deliver PSE through subject specialists, as opposed to teachers from other areas taking either one period per day or a couple of periods per week to deliver it.

Bill Kidd got it absolutely right when he said that pupils feel more “respected” when their views are taken on board. They feel more like they are part of the school community. Co-design results in better learning and better behaviour, and it is better for staff as well.

Edward Mountain made an important point highlighting the rise in incidents of violence in schools in the Highlands—I think that he mentioned a 500-ish per cent increase. That is in large part a real increase, but it is also in part an increase in the reporting of a level of violence that was always there but previously went underreported or misreported.

Parliament has previously taken evidence on schools not accurately recording such incidents because they wanted to protect their reputation. Say that a school did not want a reputation for having a problem with misogyny, so it put an incident down as a generic incident of difficult pupil behaviour. That makes it harder for us to get a grip on the problem. That is still a lingering issue; reporting has improved, but the issue has not been entirely resolved.

I want to talk about one area in which I think we have made progress, regarding mental health support and counselling in schools. Although the challenges with CAMHS have certainly not been tackled, we have seen a significant increase in access to mental health support for young people in school. The recent six-monthly reports that we get showed that 10,000 young people were accessing that support, then 12,000 and then 14,000. The service is meeting a level of demand that was always there. It would be wrong to suggest that all incidents of violence in schools are simply because of mental ill health, but there is clearly a link between those two issues, and so that support is absolutely essential.

On the issue of phones in schools, I would absolutely be in favour of an outright ban on phones in classrooms, but I am uncomfortable with the idea of a complete ban on having them on school grounds, because of the issues that some members have mentioned, such as the fact that one of the reasons why a lot of young people have a phone, particularly at a younger age, is to ensure their safety when they are getting to and

from school. In practice, if phones are banned from school grounds, that would prevent them from having their phone on that journey.

It is true that social media causes harm to young people. However, it causes harm to people of all ages, and the people who are most likely to fall for misinformation and conspiracy theories are not sitting in school—they are far older than that, and we, as adults, need to face up to that. However, there are also positives from social media for young people, in particular for isolated young people, who can find a community that they would not otherwise have found. I know that that is the experience of a lot of LGBT young people in particular.

In closing, all that I would say is that what is essential here is that we build community and create belonging. Young people deserve that, and they will respond with respect to it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have no time in hand. Martin Whitfield has up to four minutes.

15:44

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I hear your suggestion, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as a former teacher.

This has been a fascinating debate, and I had a beautifully prepared speech for it, but I want to move away from that, because of what we have heard this afternoon. As George Adam highlighted in opening his speech, the wideness of the motion has allowed people to speak about anything in relation to education—and members have done that. That is important, as the debate has been a nuanced one, with a lot of causes, some solutions and a lot of questions that still need to be answered, in particular in relation to data.

We have heard evidence that there are cases where schools and individual teachers, for a variety of reasons, some of which have merit, have chosen not to report violent acts or to report them in a different way, so as to preserve the reputations of others. The call in the motion for a better discussion about what data is collected and how it is collected is important, although I am concerned about kicking that down the road to another task force. We know what the data is; the challenge is in how the Government can collect it and how it can ensure that it is robust.

I was very much impacted by Roz McCall's speech in which she talked about the importance of childhood. One of the things that gets missed—and this speaks to Ross Greer's concern about children being blamed for the violence that takes place—is the issue of whether there is a loss of

childhood now. The childhood that our young people are going through now is very different from the childhood that almost everybody sitting in the chamber went through.

We talk about the algorithms that show us things on our social media, which are very different from those that are shown to our young people. Who is looking to capture that data? Who is getting under the bonnet to see what our young people are being exposed to?

I am pleased that so many members, including Pam Gosal, Pam Duncan-Glancy and Ross Greer, raised the question of violence against women and girls. We are now at a point where the situation is not just about violence in schools but about violence that is deliberately being stirred up and perpetrated against certain groups. That needs to be addressed. Some solutions have been put forward, but much more work needs to be done.

In the short time that I have, I wish to capture an important element that was raised by Bill Kidd, on articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sitting within the convention is one of the solutions that the Government, and others in elected bodies such as local authorities and in schools, could take much further: involving our children and young people in determining what the solutions are. It is necessary for them to be there not only when the decisions are being made or when the talks are being given; their involvement should not be seen as a one-off. If we involve our children and young people in the solutions, they can express the experiences that they are having—they can tell us what it is like. They can also suggest the answers.

That may respond to the example of P7s putting their hands up to say, "I don't want my phone taken off me" and the idea that we should perhaps think about that. The journey of that discussion will enlighten young people: it will be about pedagogy and being with them when they learn something. The UNCRC is in place for a very good reason.

I will finish with a very short quote from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland:

"Children and young people are yet to feel change. For some children, if reform is not urgent, they will be denied their right to an education that develops them to their fullest potential for their entire school experience."

15:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Presiding Officer, I apologise that I had to leave the chamber briefly during the summing-up speeches.

I thank the Conservative Party for devoting some of its time this afternoon to wellbeing in

Scotland's schools, and to behaviour in particular. The breadth of the issues that are covered in the motion and the amendments, including the Government's, means that we have not been able to fully do the topic justice this afternoon. However, in the coming weeks, subject to parliamentary agreement, there will be a full debate in Government time on the impact of poverty in our classrooms, and I look forward to that as another opportunity to speak to some of the issues in more detail. Nevertheless, today's debate has been hugely important.

I will touch on a number of the points that members made in the debate, although I am conscious that time is short. Miles Briggs was absolutely right to say that our schools have changed post pandemic, and that change has partly informed the changed behaviours that we see in schools. I was pleased to hear that Miles Briggs attended his local EIS event last night. As we heard from Mr Rowley during the debate, I attended my event in Glenrothes last Thursday, where I listened to the views of mums and dads, carers and EIS members. They were very clear about the need for more resource, more staff and more investment. That is why the Government's draft budget proposes an additional £41 million to support teacher numbers and £29 million for additional support needs as extra investment in our schools.

Miles Briggs spoke to there being no data on changed behaviour patterns post Covid. That somewhat negates the behaviour in Scottish schools research that was published in November 2023, which looks at data from nearly 4,000 staff across the country. There are also other data sets that he could consider, including the survey of more than 8,000 children that was carried out by HM Inspectorate of Education in Scotland, which looked at bullying in our schools.

I turn to Ms Duncan-Glancy's points, a number of which were very relevant and pertinent to the issues that we are discussing today—in particular, reduced class contact. It may please the member to know that I met the teaching trade unions on that matter just yesterday. They have a requirement for the Government, working with local authorities, to table a suggestion to move forward on meaningful progress, which is part of the deal that we struck with local government ahead of the budget. That will be done in advance of the 3 February deadline that they have set. I very much welcome the trade unions' engagement on that matter, because reducing class contact and teacher workload is part of the solution to some of the challenges that we have talked about today.

Ms Duncan-Glancy also spoke—rightly—to the worrying increase in misogyny in recent years. We

see that borne out not only in the evidence from trade unions, but in our behaviour in Scottish schools research. I am grateful to the member for her suggestion in relation to the Mind Yer Time web resource. That is funded by the Scottish Government, with £170,000 of support going directly to the Scottish Youth Parliament, so I am glad that the member welcomes that investment from the Government.

Ross Greer, too, spoke about the experience of women and girls with regard to sex education, and he was right to raise consent as an issue. I accept that the update to the relationships, sexual health and parenthood guidance has taken too long, but I am glad that we will be able to publish it shortly, as I confirmed to Mr Greer only yesterday.

I agree with Mr Rennie's comment that it is too early to judge whether the national action plan has had an influence. However, I put it on the record that, as I think the Government's amendment makes clear, we will provide the Parliament with an update on the plan in March and set out the range of measures that have been taken forward.

Mr Rennie was also right to say that understanding cases individually should not necessarily negate consequences for adverse behaviour in our schools. I agree with him on that point. Over the past year, we have discussed consequences in our schools at length in the chamber. It is currently the case that young people will face consequences in their schools, but that depends on the behaviour management policy that exists. Mr Rennie spoke to the importance of school management, and I very much agree with him on the need to support staff with regard to how those behaviour management policies are taken forward. That is another reason why the national action plan is crucial, as it will drive more consistency across the country in how schools advocate for policies and enact the consequences that we have talked about today.

Bill Kidd spoke about the need to listen to pupils, and he was absolutely right on that point.

Various members expressed views about mobile phones. I am sure that all MSPs will be aware of the national guidance in that regard, which was published last August and was broadly welcomed. Mr Rennie was correct to say that, as education secretary, I do not have the power to enforce a national ban, but the national guidance goes as far as I am able to go in setting out our expectations and in empowering headteachers to implement a ban.

At this point, I note that not all headteachers in Scotland want a full ban. I encourage members to engage with and speak to their local headteachers. When I launched the guidance, I went to Stonelaw academy and spoke to the

headteacher there about the process that they had undertaken. They got the young people to mine their data and look at the way in which they interacted with their phones—at their screen time, for example. They got buy-in from parents and from the community, but that approach took time. A ban is not a simple step, and we need to be mindful that there would be other consequences of having a national ban—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: One member mentioned health needs, which we also address in the update to the national action plan on mobile phones.

I am very conscious of time. As I said to Parliament back in September on the subject of addressing post-pandemic challenges in our schools,

“there are unlikely to be quick, easy fixes”.—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; c 72.]

However, we all need to work together to that end, recognising that there must be a shared spirit of partnership.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Douglas Ross to wind up the debate.

15:54

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We have had an excellent debate. It was led by Miles Briggs, who covered a range of issues. His outlining of the concerns that he heard about from EIS members last night replicates what each and every one of us have heard from parents and staff up and down the country.

Just last month, I met two teaching assistants in Moray who explained that they love their jobs but they are facing hugely challenging and difficult circumstances in the classroom every day and they wonder about their future in the profession. That relates to the point that Willie Rennie made about support from management. One of the concerns that those teaching assistants came to speak to me about was their belief that their headteacher does not do enough to support them if a pupil needs to be removed from the classroom or needs more support. I am not saying that that is the case across the board, but there are some examples of headteachers who do not take the action that is needed to support their staff in the classroom.

That relates to Alex Rowley’s point that we need more support staff in our classrooms, but is it an attractive opportunity for people to come into our classrooms to do a difficult job if they will not get the support that they need? The two issues that Willie Rennie and Alex Rowley raised are

important and they are linked to some of the problems that we are facing at the moment.

In what I thought was an excellent speech, Pam Gosal mentioned that a teacher suffers physical or verbal abuse every two minutes in the school day, and that is not the case only in the areas that have been mentioned today. In my area of Moray, we did a freedom of information request, and the figures on the increase in physical and verbal assaults on staff are shocking. In primary schools, the number of physical and verbal assaults has trebled in the past four years. In secondary schools, there were seven and a half times more physical and verbal assaults last year than there were four years previously. In 2020-21, there were just under 700 physical and verbal assaults in Moray primary schools. In 2023-24, the figure was almost 2,500. That huge increase raises questions about what is happening in our schools and about the guidance that the Scottish Government has put out. It is clear that the situation is not getting any better but is getting worse.

Of particular concern is the number of physical assaults using a weapon. In 2020-21, the figure for secondary schools in Moray was one. I strongly believe that that was one too many, but the figure went up to five and then six. In 2023-24, the number of physical assaults with a weapon that were recorded in Moray went into double figures—it was 11. We are talking about cases in which weapons have been taken into our schools and used against pupils, staff and others. We must get a grip on that.

That brings me to the Government’s response today. The minister was not very happy when she heard groans from Conservative members when she mentioned a task force. I am sorry, but that is the reaction. If the minister and the cabinet secretary think that, in staff rooms up and down the country, teachers will be celebrating and punching the air because the Government has announced another task force, they are completely wrong.

Natalie Don-Innes: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I will give way to the minister in a moment. I will give way if she can answer this question. She said that she has been instructed to announce the commencement of a task force. Does she or the education secretary know how many task forces, advisory groups and working groups are currently listed on the Scottish Government’s website?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not know whether the member and the rest of the Conservatives were listening to me. The task force is in relation to protecting children from online harm and abuse. It is not in relation to violence in schools. I advised Parliament that the cabinet secretary would speak

about the actions for schools. The setting up of that task force is a really positive move. Anything that will help to protect our children and young people from online harms should be welcomed.

Douglas Ross: It is welcome, but the answer to my question is 302. That is the number of task forces, working groups and advisory groups that have been set up by the SNP Government, and that number is now to increase to 303. That is what the SNP reaches for every time there is a problem. It thinks that the problem can be solved by setting up another task force to listen more and do more, but it will not take action. In the debate, we heard the figures on the shocking rise in assaults on teachers and fellow pupils. The Government's approach is not working. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure what the minister's hand gestures mean, but the issue is not being dealt with properly. We are not getting to the core of the problem, and another task force is not going to do it.

We have not had much time in this debate, as has been mentioned. I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary will hold a debate on the subject in Government time, but we have asked for that before now. Yet again, we are having a Conservative-led Opposition day debate in which we are raising education issues. However, we will listen and we will contribute to the debate that the cabinet secretary holds, because the issue of a safe school environment is hugely important to people up and down the country. I thought that the seats behind the cabinet secretary would be fuller, given how crucial that subject is.

Miles Briggs's motion is so wide ranging because there are so many issues that we need to focus on in our education system. We were told that education would be the SNP Government's number 1 priority, but I have never seen evidence of that. Not once in the SNP's 18 years in government has education truly been the number 1 priority, and that is why our young people are suffering and why our teachers and support staff are struggling as well.

I want to give the final word to Roz McCall, who gave an excellent speech. She finished by saying that it is crucial that we "let children be children". As a parent and a politician, I could not agree more. By supporting commonsense Scottish Conservative policies, we can improve the opportunities for our children, let them be children and give them the chance to thrive in Scotland, as we would all like them to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. There will be a very short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Electricity Infrastructure Consenting

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16171, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on ensuring that communities are at the heart of the electricity consenting process. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I advise them that there is no time in hand.

16:01

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Up and down Scotland, including in my region, rural communities are being threatened by developments that, as one campaigner describes, are

"bulldozing through the north east".

Energy companies want to destroy our countryside to reward their shareholders, and the Scottish ministers are complicit in it.

I am not the only member of the Scottish Parliament representing a rural area whose inbox is full of constituents who are rightly concerned about the impact that planning legislation changes will have on their ability to protect their land and communities. The plethora of pylons that has been promised throughout the north and south of Scotland is causing locals a great deal of concern, with many community meetings, and community groups campaigning, on the issue.

The cabinet secretary, Gillian Martin, is perhaps unaware of that, given that she has never met with any of the 20 community groups in the north-east that have been established to oppose the pylon plans, even though the First Minister said that ministers would engage.

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The member knows full well that ministers cannot meet community groups during a live planning application.

Douglas Lumsden: Let us have a look at the ministerial code. It says that

"meeting the developer or objectors to discuss the proposal, but not meeting all parties with an interest in the decision"

would be a breach of the ministerial code. The lobbying register shows that the cabinet secretary has met Statera Energy and Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, but she will not meet any of the protest groups. That is a breach of the ministerial code. If she wants to come along, I will be more than happy to introduce her to some of those communities and individuals.

Instead of looking for solutions that empower, this devolved Government has chosen to once again ride roughshod over our rural communities. The Scottish National Party Government has demonstrated again that it does not understand or care about what goes on in our rural areas, and nor does the United Kingdom Government.

We often hear about a just transition, but what is taking place is an unjust transition. What is just about the overindustrialisation of our countryside, inflicting monster pylons, substations, wind turbines and battery storage facilities on many of our communities? The devolved Government is incompetent and does not give two hoots for rural Scotland. By not producing an energy strategy, it has left a vacuum. There is no plan for how much of each energy source we need and where it should be. That is why about 350 battery storage applications are in progress across Scotland. It is an absolute free-for-all, and the devolved SNP Government, asleep at the wheel, has allowed that to happen.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Douglas Lumsden talks about standing up for communities such as my community in the Borders. Communities are beset with hundreds of applications for renewables that are walking us into a nightmare, as they will destroy farmland, businesses and landscapes. Does he agree?

Douglas Lumsden: Absolutely.

We are currently facing plans for hundreds of miles of new pylons right across Scotland, affecting the Highlands, the Borders and Aberdeenshire, and just about everywhere in between. Turbines are popping up everywhere and battery storage is completely out of control. Communities are up in arms. They are being ignored, concerns are being dismissed and local issues are being discounted.

Compensation is not adequate and the promise of a couple of hundred quid off their energy bill for a few years or another community hall does not make up for the thousands of pounds that people are seeing wiped from the value of their home and the noise and disruption that come along with those developments.

Public inquiries are a vital part of our planning system to prevent rushed decisions from being taken by those with vested interests. They allow local communities to make their voices heard and empower our communities to have a chance to put their side of the argument. They are not about stopping all developments or standing in the way of progress; they are about giving the people who know the area best a voice—and the Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for our local communities.

I have done something that the cabinet secretary has not done; I have gone to speak to the individuals who will be impacted by these developments. They have genuine concerns, borne out of love for their landscape, their heritage and their homes. They understand the move to net zero—but not at any price. They simply want to have their say, and the proposals from both this devolved Government and the UK Labour Government will deny them their voice.

I have been meeting groups in Turriff, New Deer and Leylodge, and the residents are at their wits' end. One resident I have to mention is June Morrison, who is becoming a bit of a star on local television. June is already having to put up with a massive new substation in her back garden. On the back of that, there are plans for a huge hydrogen production facility and multiple battery storage facilities. That is the problem: it is the cumulative effect of all those developments together that make them so wrong.

Just this week, *The Press and Journal* reported on another massive wind farm—this time in Clashindarroch, near Dufftown, by Canadian firm Boralex. Campaigner Trevor Smith accused Boralex of seeking to

“strip the Cabrach of the natural assets which make it such a special place to live”,

and said that the development has become

“a symbol of corporate bullying and greed.”

We simply cannot stand by while our constituents are ignored like that. We cannot keep quiet when our communities are telling us that they do not want these monster pylons, turbines and battery storage facilities to be built together. We cannot allow big companies to greenwash and spend millions on advertising and lobbying to divide our communities. For those companies, this is not about delivering net zero; it is about delivering profits to their shareholders. We cannot ignore the voices of our communities on decisions that affect them so significantly.

I move,

That the Parliament opposes the UK and Scottish governments' jointly proposed reforms to the consenting process under the Electricity Act 1989, which risk silencing the voices of communities by removing the right to a public inquiry on consent decisions; notes with concern that the Scottish Government has allowed pylons and other electricity infrastructure to be built without the consent of local communities; acknowledges that community groups often do not have the resources to oppose electricity infrastructure, and calls on the Scottish Government to consider how this could be addressed, and implores both governments to abandon these plans and to ensure that community voices are at the heart of the consenting process going forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alasdair Allan to speak to and move amendment S6M-16171.3.

16:08

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): I welcome the opportunity to debate the UK and Scottish Governments' jointly proposed reforms to the consenting process. It is extremely important that everyone who has a stake in the consenting process hears about and is involved in the reforms.

However, let us clear up something in the Conservatives motion before we get started. Although land use and planning in Scotland are devolved, the powers to legislate for the generation, transmission, distribution and supply of electricity are reserved to the UK Government.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the minister give way?

Alasdair Allan: I would be interested to know whether the member can gainsay that, but yes.

Douglas Lumsden: The minister is right—just like nuclear power is reserved, but the Scottish Government can block it by using the planning laws that it controls. Surely, in this instance, it can use planning laws to ban whatever it wants.

Alasdair Allan: I was not aware of Douglas Lumsden's proposal that communities in Scotland should be in a position to block nuclear power stations. Scottish ministers—*[Interruption]*.

Douglas Lumsden: That is not the point.

Alasdair Allan: The point is that Scottish ministers determine applications to construct or install electricity infrastructure under the Electricity Act 1989. We do not choose, for instance, the routes of strategic power lines across the country.

In England and Wales, relevant legislation has long since been updated to make the consenting process not only more efficient but, I believe, fairer. As far as I am aware, that is not a reform that the Conservatives objected to. Indeed, our purpose in Scotland is to learn from reform in England, which may well result in similar changes to those that have been in place in England and Wales for many years.

At present in Scotland, it can take up to four years to process an application to determination. That is not in the interests of communities or the economy. The Scottish Government has long called for the relevant powers to be given to Scottish ministers. However, in October 2024, the UK Government announced proposals to reform the legislation at Westminster, launching a consultation that concluded at the end of November. The core aim is to make our determination process more efficient—not to make

it easier, as the Conservatives seem to suggest—for projects to get consent. Indeed, one of the central proposals is to modernise the system to allow community voices to be heard, including at an earlier stage.

Conservative members might be interested to know that those proposals did not simply materialise in the past few months. The UK Government committed to review consenting in Scotland in November 2023. Conservative members have now forgotten the next crucial bit, which is that that was when the Conservatives were in power in the UK. Indeed, they were taking forward those plans before the general election was called, so it is rather surprising to hear them describe the plans in such terms as they have used today.

Ensuring that community voices are heard in the process and in the right way is central to the reforms. Under the current system, Scotland is the only part of Great Britain where developers do not have to consult local communities before submitting their plans. We want to change that by ensuring that the procedure begins with communities having the opportunity to express their views so that they can be considered from the outset. The reforms would make pre-application consultation statutory for the first time—

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Alasdair Allan: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is the minister giving way to Rachael Hamilton?

Alasdair Allan: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: The queue for an energy grid connection is vastly oversubscribed. Communities that I and others represent are angry—and they are angry because there are so many applications. The reforms will not address that. There are hundreds of planning applications in the process. Surely we should be halting those and reviewing the situation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you have one minute left.

Alasdair Allan: There is certainly a need for reform at the UK level—which is where the powers lie—of the national grid in terms of grid connections and the capacity to make them, and to ensure that the grid queue is in the form that it should be in. I understand that work is under way on those areas.

To return to the planning system in Scotland, at present if a planning authority objects to an

application, a public inquiry is automatically held. The proposals seek to modernise that aspect of the system, but specifically do not seek to remove the option of a public inquiry. Under the proposals, planning authorities would retain the statutory right to challenge, but in the event of objections from the relevant authorities, the reforms suggest that alternative forms of consideration may sometimes be more appropriate. That would mirror the process that is already in place in Scotland under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, and it is therefore not quite the novelty that the Conservatives present it as.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you need to conclude. Please move your amendment.

Alasdair Allan: I move amendment S6M-16171.3, to leave out from “opposes” to end and insert:

“believes that communities must be at the heart of the renewable energy transition, and that it is vital that they share in the significant benefits that will be created, in contrast with how Scotland’s communities have been failed for decades under successive UK administrations’ energy policies; notes the ongoing representations by the Scottish Government to the UK Government around the need for energy market reform; further notes that Scotland has some of the most stringent environmental impact regulations anywhere in the world and that the planning and consenting system is designed to ensure that local communities have their say; notes that the proposed reforms have long been the established position in England, which the previous UK Conservative administration did not alter in its 14 years in office, and understands that the proposals would require developers to consult communities much earlier in the planning process, which will ensure that affected communities can more meaningfully influence the process of project development.”

16:13

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is fitting that, as members came into the chamber today, we passed a Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks stall, showing the practical work that it is doing. I have lobbied it endlessly about housing in our rural communities. We need to see the benefits, but we need a reformed and robust grid to maximise the opportunities from our renewable resources. We will not deliver jobs and community benefits across the country without it. It is a shame that the tone from the Tories today is about slowing that work down or—as Rachael Hamilton suggested—stopping proposals that are already in the system.

It is vital that communities be properly involved in and consulted on proposals to develop the grid and renewables. That is why the consultation that has been referenced is so important. Far from cutting communities out of the consenting process, the consultation that was published last October will give, as the minister said, pre-application consultations, which will help communities to be

involved in shaping consultations in order to provide clarity that will help with effective consideration and scrutiny of applications. It is vital that, for example, environmental impacts and proposed mitigations are consulted on early, so that local communities, statutory consultees and—critically—our local authorities are informed, so that they can all feed back and ensure that concerns can be addressed before applications are submitted.

The points in Liam McArthur’s amendment are important for environment, landscape and cultural history, and that needs to be acknowledged. We need change and, ultimately, we need to deliver on renewables and deliver a grid that will work.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): There have been circumstances recently in which communities, local authorities, the reporter and a public inquiry have objected but the Scottish Government has overturned all those objections. Do we want to find ourselves in that situation?

Sarah Boyack: The whole point of consulting people earlier is so that their views are heard much earlier and can shape proposals. We have examples of housing developments to which communities and local authorities have objected, and which have then gone to the reporter and the Scottish Government has approved them. That is the planning system: it is about making sure that people are properly involved, which does not happen at the moment.

Making sure that we have a grid that works is a key issue—not just to keep the lights on in our homes and businesses, but because security of supply is more essential than ever. We need to make sure that that is not just rhetoric, because we know that demand for electricity will only grow.

We need alternatives, but we did not get any from the Conservatives today. We need practical solutions. Are no upgrades at all being proposed? I sincerely hope that that is not what is being implied, because all types of renewables developments were mentioned. We need pumped hydro storage, we need battery storage and we need a joined-up approach and solutions, and the grid is part of that.

Community ownership has not come out in the debate at all. It is crucial, because giving communities benefits could lower people’s bills. Benefits could also include local jobs, local homes and local ownership. The work that Community Energy Scotland and Energy4All are doing is vital and will have real benefits for communities.

It is great to hear that the digital offshore skills passport is being launched, which communities and trade unions have been campaigning for for years, and that there is support for investment in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen for new jobs for

workers. Labour is doing that work with Great British Energy, and we are making progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Sarah Boyack: We need to develop more of a consensus, not just in the chamber but by working with local communities, so that we deliver community benefits, renewable energy, supply chains and jobs across Scotland.

I move amendment S6M-16171.1, to leave out from “opposes” to end and insert:

“agrees that the fastest and more secure way to deliver lower energy bills, create future energy jobs in Scotland and deliver energy security is to move to clean power; welcomes the UK Government’s mission to establish a net zero electricity system by 2030; acknowledges that this will require the development of new energy infrastructure; considers it crucial that communities close to energy generation benefit from that infrastructure; welcomes, therefore, the creation of GB Energy and the commitment that it will support communities to take a stake in local renewable energy projects through the Local Power Plan, and calls on the UK and Scottish governments to work together to support the development of renewable energy supply chains in Scotland to create long-term, sustainable jobs as part of the energy transition.”

16:18

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The Scottish Liberal Democrats strongly believe in the importance of empowering local communities. That belief has always been central to my approach in scrutinising policy and legislation. However, I also recognise that that must be balanced with other priorities, including the need to deliver vital infrastructure. Two weeks ago, at 5.30 pm on 8 January, the spare electricity capacity on the national grid was just 580MW. Experts warned that a further small drop in generation could have resulted in blackouts. Had it done so, this debate would not have taken place—or the tone and content of it would certainly have been very different.

The national grid represents an incredible achievement, but some 1920s infrastructure is still in use. Upgrades have not kept pace with the changing nature of energy generation and customer demand. Wind, solar and other renewables demand more decentralised transmission and use of storage. There is no world in which we can rely indefinitely on the North Sea basin. That is not a matter of politics—it is a matter of geology.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member give way?

Liam McArthur: No, thank you.

If we are still reliant on fossil fuels in 2050, we will be importing them. Even so, as we upgrade the grid, we must bring affected communities with

us. Both Scotland’s Governments must be clear, consistent and honest about why investment is needed. Steps to strengthen scrutiny and community engagement processes are still required, but that is not what Mr Lumsden proposes. I understand the strong objections that some people have to projects that they see as being intrusive: pylons, for example, have few aesthetic upsides. Projects should be developed with local communities’ needs in mind, and grid upgrades should give due respect to the environment, landscape and cultural history of the area, as well as to the wellbeing of the people who are impacted.

At the same time, we must be honest with ourselves and with those whom we represent. Proposals that could delay key projects, massively push up their costs or see them being cancelled altogether will have consequences, including higher energy bills for households and businesses, lower economic growth and a UK that is poorer, weaker and less resilient. Communities across Scotland certainly do not want that and would not thank us for leading them to it.

We need to find ways to allow decisions to take the social and environmental needs of local communities into account while avoiding endless delays and uncertainty. It took more than a decade to get the Beaulieu to Denny line through planning. Delays on that scale have financial costs, but also take a toll on people who are unable to get on with their lives and livelihoods.

There is also a risk that we drive away investment. Scotland and the UK have, broadly speaking, been seen to be stable regulatory and policy environments, but other countries have recognised the benefits of offering the same or better. As the push to decarbonise gathers pace, competition for investment intensifies. If we do not get this right, the price will be paid not only in higher bills but in jobs and prosperity being lost to other parts of the world—and not only in the energy industry. House builders, the whisky industry, data centres and manufacturers are all warning that they are starting to be held back by the outdated grid. We often hear Mr Lumsden and his colleagues advocating for the needs of those sectors. I wonder whether he has consulted them on the proposals that were put forward this afternoon.

In recent years, investment in energy generation has outstripped that in transmission and storage. That is not sustainable. Without transformation of our transmission and storage capacity across the country, we will be forced into an impossible choice: either to make ourselves more and more reliant on importing expensive and polluting fuels from the likes of Putin’s Russia, or to get used to grid failure and regular blackouts. Both would

result in higher bills for households and businesses, dramatically lower growth, and a poorer and less resilient UK. I would be interested to know which option Mr Lumsden prefers.

I move amendment S6M-16171.2, to leave out from “opposes” to end and insert:

“understands that the UK and Scottish governments’ jointly proposed changes to the Electricity Act 1989 and the consenting process have recently been issued for consultation, and recognises the importance of listening to the views of communities and other stakeholders before any changes are made; believes that delays to the delivery of vital transmission infrastructure risk holding back essential investment to decarbonise all sectors of the economy and the opportunity to put areas, including the north east and Highlands and Islands, at the forefront of the UK’s renewables revolution, but that the grid changes required must give due respect to the environment, landscape, cultural history, wellbeing and property rights of local people; notes that the outcome of the consultation has yet to be published, and calls, therefore, on both of Scotland’s governments to ensure that any concerns raised through the consultation are appropriately addressed and that concerted action is taken to build community support, secure a consensus around the grid changes that need to be made, and provide greater clarity to the public about why upgrades to the electricity network are important for Scotland’s economy, energy security and climate obligations, whilst also ensuring that developers fulfil their obligations and duties.”

16:22

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The energy transition is one of the biggest challenges and biggest opportunities in Scotland today, and it is important that Parliament supports the steps that are needed to deliver it. The missed 2030 climate target and the latest advice from the Climate Change Committee, in 2024, remind us that there is no path to net zero for Scotland or the UK without a major switch from fossil fuels to electricity. That is the case across many sectors, from the transport industry to how we heat our homes.

Of course, in recent years, all Governments of all colours in the UK have accepted that, including the recent Tory Government at Westminster. That switch requires a massive increase in the generation of renewable energy from all our abundant onshore and offshore wind, hydro, solar and wave resources. That growth in generation is already well under way in Scotland. We are doing very well in that regard, but it has exposed the huge backlog that we now face in investment in upgrading the electricity transmission network.

The Scottish Renewables briefing for the debate highlights that the UK will need to build twice as much transmission infrastructure in the next five years as it has over the past decade. Simply put, we do not have the transmission lines that we need to get the electricity to where it needs to be. We must grapple with that challenge now. The

climate will not wait, nor will the households that face ever-rising gas bills.

The joint UK Government and Scottish Government consultation seeks to address that growing barrier in transmission. I do not accept the Tories’ motion, which asks us to throw out all the work that has taken place so far, ignoring the consultation responses that have already been submitted and effectively shutting down the opportunity to refine the Government’s plans further.

Public inquiries are a sign that the planning and consenting system has failed, yet perpetual public inquiries appear to be what the Tories want for our communities. Public inquiries are highly formalised and adversarial, and can last for years. They are not a process that is suited to having the views of time-poor and underresourced community groups heard equally alongside those of developers.

Both Governments have been clear that attention must be given to how communities can be part of the future energy consenting process. During the new statutory pre-application process, developers will be required to notify the public and gather views. They will need to include evidence that there has been a robust process alongside their consent application, otherwise it will be rejected.

Currently, any prior community engagement that is carried out on an application is voluntary on the part of the developer. There is no consistency in what information developers need to present, whom they must inform and whose views they must seek out, and there is no consistency about how much of that information must be supplied to the planning authorities.

I urge both Governments to seriously consider the concerns that have been raised by organisations including Planning Democracy and the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland. There must be tougher requirements on developers who do not undertake a robust public engagement process, and a requirement to reconult the public if they cannot evidence how they have taken concerns into account. The Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland also raised concerns that the processes could become tick-box exercises and that engagement must be done in such a way that it is genuinely meaningful for communities.

My final point is about benefits. Since 1990, more than £194 million in community benefits have been committed from renewable energy projects in Scotland. That is significant, but it is a fraction of what could be delivered if communities had major equity stakes in projects. However, in comparison, no financial community benefits have been required for transmission projects. That

needs to change, so I welcome the voluntary steps that SSEN has already taken. We have socialised the financial costs of building shared infrastructure across the country, but we must recognise that the communities that host that infrastructure—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ruskell, you will need to conclude.

Mark Ruskell: —also pay a price, and it must be covered by the rest of us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. As previously advised, there is no time in hand. There will be back-bench speeches of up to four minutes.

16:26

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the debate and the fact that the motion focuses on the need to properly engage with and involve communities when deciding on energy infrastructure projects throughout Scotland. I make it clear that I accept that there is a need to upgrade and expand our energy infrastructure, because we are going to need more electricity. There are big economic benefits in the construction of that, but there are trade-offs, too.

Last week, I asked John Swinney about the number of proposed battery storage developments in Scotland. There are far more than is needed, not just here but across the UK. That is why, last week, the National Energy System Operator paused the applications process for new entrants to the connections queue from 29 January. That seems to have passed some members by today.

I do not think that there will be many MSPs who have not been contacted by communities that are concerned about potential battery developments. Communities mostly accept the need for such projects, but they want the sites to be in the right places. However, as I said, there are far too many in the pipeline. The overall transmission queue in Scotland for everything, not just batteries, is 152GW of installed and contracted generation. That is well in excess of the maximum winter peak demand in Scotland of around 5GW.

In the central belt alone, there are applications for 28GW of battery connection, which is the requirement for the whole of the UK. It is madness. That is why I have heard the phrases “gold rush” and “wild west” used when describing what is going on. That is exactly what it is, and we need some common sense.

The concerns from communities across Scotland should be taken seriously. The concentration of battery storage projects in certain areas can lead to a range of local environmental issues, such as habitat disruption, noise pollution and increased traffic during construction and

maintenance, not to mention the risk of fire. Those are some of the concerns that have been raised by campaigners in my region, including those at Drumbowie, which is near Falkirk, whom I met on Saturday. They and others feel cut out of the decision-making process.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Graham Simpson: I apologise, but I will not be taking any interventions.

Many of the projects in Scotland sit with the Scottish Government’s shadowy energy consents unit, which is taking the decisions, rather than with local councils, as is the case in England.

Once NESO has shaken things out, we will need clarity from the ECU and from the Government on the criteria for agreeing to or not agreeing to developments. For example, some of the potential developments in my region are in green-belt land. What is the ECU’s stance on that? We simply do not know. We need a transparent process for involving people and showing what community benefit will look like. I hope that the Scottish Government will publish its conclusions on that soon.

The current top-down approach must end. People have a right to be involved in the decision-making process and to have their concerns addressed. We need a Scotland-wide energy strategy that sets out how many projects are required and where they are needed. That would be a positive outcome of the reforms that are to come. Battery storage will be needed, but we must use the pause that is now in place to get it right.

16:30

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am sure that many members recognise that major infrastructure change of any nature will inevitably bring with it both opportunities and challenges. The decarbonisation of our energy network, and the strategic energy system that will be needed to support it through infrastructure at scale, will create some of those opportunities and challenges. Before I touch on some of them, I note that it would be wrong to present the issues in today’s debate, including consenting reform, as things that have happened out of the blue. The path that has led us to this point has been many years in the making.

Back in 2022, the previous UK Government increased its target for offshore wind production to 50GW by 2030. In doing so, it triggered the need not only to upgrade the existing grid infrastructure but to put in place significant new grid infrastructure. As a result, the grid operator—the

energy system operator—set in course a pathway of work to achieve the target that the previous UK Government had set. That was then reinforced by the electricity networks commissioner, who highlighted the need to put in place significant new grid infrastructure to achieve the previous Government's target.

It is important to keep in mind that the issue has not been created by the new Labour UK Government or the SNP Government in Scotland. We have been on the pathway for many years, and significant work has been undertaken to arrive at this point.

We need to recognise that the key to unlocking some of the economic opportunities from decarbonising our energy system is sufficient grid capacity. Members often speak to the need to deliver a just transition in the years ahead. However, simply delivering more offshore and onshore wind power and hydro power or hydrogen production facilities will not itself deliver a just transition. The key to delivering a just transition is the manufacturing capacity that goes alongside those developments.

Projects can achieve financial closure only if they have access to the grid, and it is only when we have a steady beat of projects in place that we can attract the economic investment in manufacturing that we need to deliver the just transition. The grid is absolutely key to supporting us in achieving the economic investment that we need to deliver a just transition.

I recognise and hear the challenges that communities have around some of the infrastructure. It is important that we have a consenting mechanism that listens to the concerns and issues that communities raise, and that we have distribution network operators that work alongside communities. When those operators provide support to communities, that must be based on the principles of community wealth building.

It will not be easy, but the reality is that we need to get the balance right between economic investment and the needs of our communities, and the proposed reforms will achieve that.

16:34

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The energy transition will require the most significant upgrades to our energy infrastructure in decades. Mr Matheson set some of that out very well. If we are to realise the potential of our offshore wind capacity, which is a huge opportunity for our economy, we will need to build that capacity for the decades to come. As has been set out, this is a long-term shared project of both the UK and the Scottish Governments. That

is why it was so disappointing that, when we debated the matter on 2 May 2024, members of both governing parties in the UK and Scotland refused to set out fully and explain that they were willing partners in this project that is bringing disruption to many parts of the country.

In that debate, I warned about the temptations of the populist right. That was before the arrival of Russell Findlay and Douglas Lumsden to their current positions and before the threat of Reform. We can see the effect of that in the motion that the Conservative Party has lodged for debate today. It is the responsibility of politicians and Governments to set out clearly our transition to net zero and the kind of economy that we need and to build the public's confidence in that, because it is essential to our country's future.

I have sat in the living rooms that Douglas Lumsden describes, I have walked the fields with members of the public in the north-east of Scotland, and I have made sure that there were changes to the proposed alignments in parts of the north-east. However, what I have not done is to pretend to people that there is an alternative that can easily be attained for them, in the way that Mr Lumsden has set out today.

I say to Graham Simpson—time is short or I would have intervened to make the point to him—that I have been approached by people who are concerned about the cumulative impact on particular geographies. There are many applications, and Mr Simpson is right in his observations about them. However, we know that the planning permission applications that are being put forward are speculative and beyond capacity. We must make it clear to residents that far from all those applications will be granted. Certainly, they will not all be advanced to the point that they are used. Clarity on that for citizens is absolutely critical.

That is why I brought SSEN representatives to the Parliament this week—so that members from across the chamber could ask them questions, put those kinds of issues to them and engage with the developers and the farmers, who are the people who are selling and speculatively opening up their land to those forms of development. In that way, members can have conversations with those people about whether such developments will actually happen.

Let us be absolutely clear that the proposed reforms to the planning system will not take away the right to consultation. Both Governments are clear that the intention is to improve and not remove that process. The current process is inefficient, and it does not meet the timescales that we require if we are to realise the great potential that we have.

Communities must have a voice in projects. If anything, the processes and the changes to them will ensure that communities have a voice at an earlier stage. In all that, it is critical that we tell communities why such projects have to happen. That is not just about the imperative of dealing with climate change, as very urgent as that is; it is important to Scotland's industrial future. Mr Matheson could have gone a bit further in explaining that that industrial development is critical to his Government's vision for the future of Scotland's economy. This is not something that is being done to Scotland—it is a full partnership between two Governments to develop an industrial base for our country's future.

To secure the domestic supply chain and industrial development, we must ensure that the grid is in place. To illustrate that, the Labour Government has today announced that the skills passport trial will take place in Aberdeen, after years of delay. After years of people in other parties just talking about it, Labour is getting on and getting the job done.

16:38

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I say to Michael Marra that the motion and the debate are about people's lives being impacted by other people's decisions and communities having the right to be heard, because, currently, they do not feel that they are respected or listened to. However, that is not what these two socialist parties that are in Government want. I am a Conservative primarily because I believe that the state should be seen as the servant and not the master.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will if it is very brief, because I will not get the time back.

Michael Marra: Does the member recognise that his Government—the Tory Government that has just left office—was fully involved in the process of setting up the industrial developments that he is now opposing?

Stephen Kerr: Let me come back to that point, because I would like to address what is meant by a just transition.

If we talk to the people of Grangemouth, they will say that they have struggled to find any justice, as they feel that they have been thrown under the net zero steamroller. The SNP and Labour have forgotten that, in making sustainable change, we must take people with us. People must not feel that they are being silenced in order that an artificial, Government-imposed deadline can be

met. That is exactly what we have from Ed Miliband and the Labour Government.

In addition, both Governments are hostile to the future of oil and gas. The SNP's presumption against oil and gas exploration and extraction is driving investors away, and Labour is taxing the North Sea basin to death. Both parties are job destroyers and community destroyers. That is the dilemma of Ed Miliband's ideological mania.

Craig Hoy: Is Stephen Kerr aware that that ideology is also damaging communities in the south of Scotland? I had the misfortune to visit an area where there is a proposal for a 455-acre solar farm that would have 50,000 8m-long solar panels but local residents say that that would be not a solar farm but a massive power station. Is that not the price that we are paying for the SNP's and Labour's misuse of—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hoy. You have two minutes left, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: That is absolutely right.

Just in case anyone is under any illusion, I note that, on Monday, in the world's most powerful country, there was the return of the phrase "Drill, baby, drill!" The global recalibration of power will be in favour of the country that uses its resources—all its resources—to create low-cost energy.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will Stephen Kerr take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I suggest that Mr Kerr does not have time to take any more interventions.

Stephen Kerr: On the issue of pylons, I do not want to see my country turned into a wirescape. In Central Scotland, we already have that in large measure. What, in the name of goodness, are we doing to our beautiful country? I do not want my country's landscape to be turned into a wirescape. What about the communities that are being invaded by those monster pylons? Small communities are campaigning against deep pockets and powerful interests.

I ask the minister to confirm that the community consultation on pylon construction, which was recommended in NESO's "Clean Power 2030" report, is not simply a cynical box-ticking exercise, because many people feel that it is being conducted in that way. Will the Scottish Government enshrine the view that people enjoy from their house and their land as part of the planning process, as is the case elsewhere in the United Kingdom? Will we finally get a fully costed alternative to overhead lines? Will the Scottish Government insist on proper consideration of undergrounding, particularly in areas of natural beauty where pylons and overhead lines would

have a disproportionately negative impact on people and communities?

Alasdair Allan: Will Mr Kerr take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr is concluding in 15 seconds.

Stephen Kerr: I will close with a quote from Edmund Burke. He said:

“When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle”

and that

“If we command our wealth, we shall be rich and free; if our wealth commands us, we are poor indeed.”

16:43

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): It is a pity that I have only four minutes for my speech, so I cannot take interventions.

There is a proposal by Scottish Power Energy Networks for a string of pylons partly across my constituency. Although I support a move to more green and renewable energy, with much of it being generated in my local area—which, of course, means increased grid capacity—I cannot support the current proposed route, which would involve an invasive network of pylons cutting through the beautiful Borders landscape. There would not even be community benefit.

The proposal is not about keeping the lights on in Scotland. When SPEN made a presentation to Scottish Borders Council in December, it was clear that the line was being driven by UK Government energy targets and that minimal energy would be transmitted the other way, so the proposal is primarily about meeting energy demands in the south.

Legislation and regulations related to electricity networks are reserved, and the National Energy System Operator is responsible for a strategic approach to transmission investment. It is for the transmission owner—in this case, SPEN—to analyse the impact of a proposal and ensure that the views of local communities, for example, are considered. I emphasise that the Scottish Government has no role in that process apart from in relation to its statutory planning and consenting processes, which come into operation at the very end of the UK energy processes.

The fourth national planning framework—NPF4—influences all planning and consenting decisions to ensure that the sustainable expansion of our electricity networks protects our most valued natural assets and cultural heritage. Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

Indeed, I have already raised my concerns about the potential disruption to the invaluable and successful South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project in the Tweed valley.

The irony is that the south of Scotland produces more than four times the electricity that it requires but does not benefit from any local electricity pricing. The proposed pylons will stream that electricity south, where, ironically, standing charges are cheaper—41.57p per day in London from January to April this year, but 64.16p per day in the south of Scotland.

Finlay Carson: Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: We need energy to be devolved, which would bring energy and planning together. That would open the door to community benefits for communities that might be affected and to local energy pricing. The Conservatives will never agree to that—so be it. I say to Mr Lumsden that this debate has produced more heat than light.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Have you concluded your speech, Ms Grahame?

Christine Grahame: Yes—I have sat down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was just checking. Thank you.

I call Liam McArthur to close on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

16:46

Liam McArthur: As Christine Grahame alluded to, the debate has perhaps produced more heat than light. Hearing Douglas Lumsden rail against corporate profits—which might come back to haunt him—while Stephen Kerr complained about oil and gas companies being taxed to death was a bit like being in “Alice through the Looking Glass”.

A speech that stood out for me was Michael Marra’s, about the responsibility that rests on us as politicians. None of these issues are easy. As I said in my earlier speech, one of the benefits that Scotland and the UK have—I will come back to that point about Scotland and the UK—is that our policy and regulatory environment is seen as being broadly stable, irrespective of what Government is in office either at a UK level or a Scottish level. That has been to our benefit and has attracted investors. However, that perception is now under challenge.

The other contribution that I found very helpful came from Michael Matheson, who linked the chronology of all of this. We are focusing on the consenting regime consultation that is on the go—and that is right—but let us understand how we got here. Michael Matheson talked about the decisions of the previous UK Conservative

Government, which did not have an unblemished record when it came to the development of renewables but recognised that, if we were to have any chance of meeting our net zero targets, we would need to step up the pace of generation development, which would be utterly pointless and fruitless were it not to be backed by simultaneous investment in the transmission and storage infrastructure. Michael Matheson was right to say that we are constantly talking about the need for a just transition but the transition will work only if our energy market is joined up and does what it needs to do. His was a very helpful contribution to the debate.

I do not think that any of us would argue that the consenting regime process is right. Finlay Carson's intervention highlighted a case that I do not know the details of but that did not sound like a particularly effective way of building public confidence, whatever else it is seeking to achieve. Reforms are needed. The minister—somewhat uncharacteristically, perhaps—appeared to suggest that lessons could be learned from what is in place south of the border. Let us see whether that new leaf has, indeed, been turned.

The point that was made about community benefit is important. Sarah Boyack pointed to some of the housing developments that we need to see as part of that. There is a degree of self-interest in those for generation and transmission companies, but a wider community benefit is to be had, too. Mark Ruskell was right to point to the difficulties around community benefit when it comes to transmission—we need to get more innovative with how that works in the future. The criticism of the Scottish Government over the delayed energy strategy is entirely valid and sets a context for the debate that we are having. Those concerns are right.

Christine Grahame's effort to turn the matter into some sort of constitutional spat whereby something is being done to Scotland by perfidious—

Christine Grahame: Will the member give way?

Liam McArthur: I will not give way, I am afraid.

To suggest that something is somehow being done to Scotland is disingenuous.

I know of nobody in the sector who is pleading for the breaking up of the UK energy market in order to address the issues that we face, although there certainly needs to be better consultation north and south of the border. The First Minister never tires of telling us how that has improved over the past six months, but it may need to improve still further.

We cannot lose sight of the reason why we are where we are. Investment in transmission and storage has run chronically behind where it has been on generation. If we are to achieve our net zero ambitions and the just transition, that investment needs to happen.

16:50

Mark Ruskell: I agree with Liam McArthur that there cannot be a just transition without transmission infrastructure.

Michael Marra is right that there has been a responsibility on successive Governments in both Scotland and Westminster to provide “clarity” on the kinds of plans and programmes that had to be put in place. That argument needed to be won with the public, but I do not think that such clarity has been provided.

Unfortunately, that has allowed a populist space to develop. The kind of anti-renewables rhetoric that I heard from a wide range of Conservative colleagues this afternoon echoes the language that Donald Trump used when he came to the Parliament to give evidence against renewable energy all those years ago.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mark Ruskell: No, I do not have time.

Some of the myth-driven rants that we are starting to hear—for example, that undergrounding is a cheap solution that can easily be put in place—could not be further from the truth. I believe that Stephen Kerr raised that in his speech. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: I advise Mr Kerr, Rachael Hamilton and others to go back and read the comments made by former Conservative energy ministers at Westminster, who underlined the fact that undergrounding will cost between five and 10 times the cost of overhead lines and that it has substantial environmental impacts, as we saw in the debate on the Beaulieu-Denny line all those years ago.

We are now seeing a shift to populist rhetoric, which is very disappointing. Douglas Lumsden tried to pull that back a bit. He said that we are in the chamber today to talk about solutions that “empower” communities. However, I did not hear any solutions from the Tories. What I heard was a call for an endless public inquiry, where they can rant, shout and drive communities into an expensive, costly and debilitating process for years on end. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: I was there at the time when the Beaulieu-Denny line was going through pre-application consultation, and it went to public local inquiry. I was there throughout all those years working with communities, and it was very painful.

The only positive thing to come out of that was that the communities that recognised that they could influence the project—that they could get substations moved and get investment in the landscape—were the communities that engaged with the utility company and cross-party MSPs, including myself; they got benefits as a result of that. There must be an understanding and an acceptance that we need transmission infrastructure, but there absolutely are wins that communities can get if they are supported by MSPs, councillors and others to engage with the companies and to win those benefits.

A number of members—including Liam McArthur, Sarah Boyack and Christine Grahame—spoke about community benefits. The recommendation of the review that was conducted in 2023 by Nick Winsor, the electricity networks commissioner, was that communities should get financial benefits from transmission, both lump sums for householders and community benefit funds. The commissioner said:

“There is every opportunity to be generous with these payments. Undergrounding power line costs between five and 10 times more than overhead lines and causes more environmental damage.”

Utility companies such as SSEN, whose representatives are with us today, that are making commitments to community benefit need to be held to their word. They will save money through overgrounding, so communities need to benefit from those choices.

I welcome the fact that SSEN has committed £100 million already. We need to work with the grain of that and ensure that communities get a good deal from what is going on, but we are not going to get that from Mr Lumsden and his colleagues. Their only interest is in division and right-wing rhetoric, and that is a disgrace.

16:54

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the previous two speakers, who have summed up the debate very well. I am not surprised that there is controversy and that people are concerned about what is being planned, as what we are trying to do is exceptionally difficult: we are trying to completely change the nature and the basis of our energy economy. We are trying to go from a position, 25 years ago, where two thirds of our energy was being generated from fossil fuels, to one where

that is completely replaced by renewables. That is not easy—it is hard.

Michael Matheson was absolutely right to detail the chronology. It was indeed the previous Conservative Government that upped the target for offshore renewables from 30GW to 50GW. Stephen Kerr described the position that we are in as being the result of “socialist” decision making. Who was the great socialist who increased that target? It was none other than that well-renowned socialist, Boris Johnson.

In listening to many of the Conservatives who have spoken this afternoon, we would be forgiven for thinking that they had been out of power for years, but the election was only in July last year. The reality is that the vast bulk of the decisions that have been made—or at least a very considerable number of them—result from their time in office. Whether we are talking about the target or its implications for what we need in terms of transmission, the grid process or applications, or the consultation processes, all those things stem from decisions that the Conservatives made or did not make in their time in government a mere matter of months ago. To come to the chamber and point the finger in every direction other than their own is frankly reprehensible, and for this reason: it is not just a difficult thing that we are trying to do; it is necessary. We need to do this.

Mr Kerr said, “Drill, baby, drill.”

Stephen Kerr: No—I was quoting.

Daniel Johnson: The simple fact is this, Mr Kerr. We have 6 per cent of the extractable resources left under the sea bed. That is what is left. If we do nothing, we are left wholly at the behest and the mercy—

Stephen Kerr: Will Daniel Johnson give way on that point?

Daniel Johnson: No, thank you. Nobody took any of my interventions, so I am not going to take any in this short debate.

Stephen Kerr: He misquoted me.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: As I was saying, we would be left wholly at the mercy of countries such as Russia. We need to act for energy security.

We have among the highest electricity costs of the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and they are made higher and more unstable because of the previous Tory Government’s decision to get rid of our gas storage. If we want cheaper electricity, we need to invest in renewables. Ultimately, successful, competitive economies are those that secure affordable access to reliable energy. That has

always been the truth. It was the truth for the UK in the 19th century with coal, and it was the truth for the United States in the 20th century with oil. This century, the successful economies will be those that secure reliable access to affordable, renewable electricity.

If the Conservatives want to reject that, they are the ones who will need to explain why this country is uncompetitive, they will need to explain to people why our electricity bills are higher than in other parts of the world, and they will need to explain to business and industry—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I am very sorry to have to interrupt you, Mr Johnson. We will stop shouting from our seats.

Daniel Johnson: This transition is necessary. It is vital. It is vital if we are going to lower bills, and it is vital if we are going to secure investment. Unfortunately, the Conservatives have revealed today not only that they are anti-business, but that they are driven only by populism.

Douglas Lumsden: What rubbish!

Daniel Johnson: Frankly, that needs to be rejected.

Douglas Lumsden: He should listen to the people.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I ask you directly, Mr Lumsden, to desist from commenting from your seat.

16:58

Alasdair Allan: We have rightly heard from members about the need to defend community voices. Our Government is taking action to strengthen the voices of communities in the electricity consenting process. As several members, including Sarah Boyack, have mentioned, the proposals that we are talking about will make it a statutory requirement for communities to be consulted before any application is made. That represents an improvement in the voice of communities, and they will be able to make their voices heard loud and clear, helping to influence proposals at the earliest possible stage.

Ministers will retain the right to reject applications if developers have not engaged sufficiently. The examination process will be more effective than before, and—crucially—just as independent. That is what putting community voices at the heart of the consenting process means in practice.

As several members pointed out in their speeches, the proposals on public inquiries seek to make the process more efficient. At present, that route takes an average of 18 months and

involves written submissions, hearings and inquiry sessions. Not only is it sometimes a lengthy option; it can also be intimidating, complex and time consuming for all participants. Liam McArthur, Michael Marra and Daniel Johnson gave examples of processes that took even longer than 18 months and pointed out—rightly, with regard to all those cases—that politicians have to be honest with the public about the problem that such a delay represents.

The consultation suggests that an independent reporter be given powers to make an examination in the most appropriate way. For example, they may specify a site inspection, further written submissions, hearing sessions or inquiry sessions or a combination of those. In addition—crucially for this debate—the reporter may still specify a public inquiry. As Mark Ruskell pointed out, however, the reform is about ensuring that a wider range of options than just a public inquiry are available to allow communities to make their views clear.

A number of members referred to community benefit. In the past 12 months, more than £30 million of benefits have been offered to Scottish communities by energy companies. However, we know that we must do more, and we are therefore consulting on our voluntary good practice principles to ensure that our national community benefits guidance is fit for the future.

A number of members are anxious about the proposal. I highlight that it is being put forward with the UK Government, and it is ultimately for the UK Parliament to legislate on it. Nonetheless, I am happy for us to debate Westminster legislation in the chamber, although I realise that the Conservatives have protested against our doing so in the past. It is important to acknowledge, however, that there is no single quick fix to the multifaceted issue that is electricity consenting.

The proposals require action, co-operation, honesty—as other members have pointed out—and, at times, compromise from all stakeholders. Our aim is to strike the right balance and, as Michael Matheson pointed out, the efforts to achieve that very end are not new. The proposed reforms are about modernising our consenting process for infrastructure, and that includes how we seek to listen to the views of affected communities. The strength of those views will be greater thanks to the proposals, and—in the Scottish Government's opinion—that will always be a core part of the consenting process.

It is right that we have this debate, and that we have heard some impassioned contributions during it. I also believe, however—to come back to the point that Liam McArthur made—that it is right that we do so in a way that recognises, and is honest about, the realities that we face, and honest, too, about finding genuine solutions for

communities and the genuine issues that community voices wish to raise.

17:03

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Communities across Angus and Aberdeenshire have been blindsided by SSEN's plans to industrialise our countryside. As Douglas Lumsden said, for the past two years, constituent correspondence on new energy infrastructure in the north-east has flooded our inboxes. No other issue—not a single issue—has come close. The First Minister said that he was sure that ministers would be happy to meet with campaigners, but where is Gillian Martin? She is missing in action for constituents. She has met SSEN, but she has not met her constituents and campaign groups.

We need more than lip service from Mairi Gougeon, who is the constituency MSP for many of the affected areas. Where is she today? She is missing in action.

Members: She is ill!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms White.

Tess White: I have attended town-hall meetings on the plans; met with constituents and campaign groups, including the save our Mearns group, Angus Pylon Action Group, the Turriff against pylons group and Deeside Against Pylons; supported a petition to Parliament on the deeply flawed consultation process; engaged with SSEN, Ofgem and the Scottish Government; and led a parliamentary debate in May last year.

The projects' location, scale and accelerated timeframe are a massive source of concern for communities. The wrong kit is being put in the wrong place, but the public have not been given the opportunity to provide feedback on alternative options, such as offshoring or undergrounding. As Douglas Lumsden said, the devolved Scottish Government, instead of looking for solutions that empower, has chosen, once again, to ride roughshod over rural communities.

Affected residents are understandably worried about the value of their homes, disruption to their businesses and the local economy, and the loss of prime agricultural land. What will happen to people—of whom there are many—such as the family who live next to Fetteresso, who will have three pylons within spitting distance of their home, when they have to remortgage and they face negative equity? Like many people, they also have concerns about the health implications of the infrastructure, which have not been explored or allayed.

The mental health and overall wellbeing of affected residents have suffered. *[Interruption.]* I know that SNP members are not really interested

in this, because they are talking over me, but my constituents are. I was recently shocked to learn that one local farmer's firearms had been removed for his own safety, and I understand that some farmers have been threatened with compulsory purchase orders. I have been told that SSEN has not even considered how the height of the overhead lines relates to the use of farming machinery. Farmers will have to mitigate their operations along the pylon pathway. What will that mean for food security, forestry and countryside management?

All of that is an extremely high price to pay for the energy transition, especially when it is the north-east that will bear the brunt of it.

As my colleague Graham Simpson said, we know what we need to do to decarbonise our electricity system—we can all agree on that. I say to Michael Marra and Labour that we and our communities do not believe what he and Ed Miliband say. They might be speaking for the cities, but they are not speaking for rural communities.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Tess White: I am sorry; I do not have time.

Stephen Kerr said that he did not want our land to be turned into a wirescape. He said that Governments should be

“the servant and not the master.”

There is nothing just or fair about the proposed transition.

The Scottish Government's pre-application guidance for transmission operators is inadequate and outdated. It fails to capture the complexities of transmission developments and the volume of projects. Sadly, SSEN's engagement with affected residents has been dreadful. The public must be given meaningful opportunities to influence the proposals. They cannot be bulldozed through by transmission operators, which is what people feel is happening now.

This issue is not just about a route on a map or targets to achieve; it is about people and the place that they call home. Scrutiny, transparency and public participation should not be seen as tick-box exercises or obstacles to overcome. They are fundamental to the democratic decision-making process, and so, too, is the right to a public inquiry. In 2023, the SNP MP Alan Brown tried to remove the right of local planning authorities to have a public inquiry in such situations. Now, the UK Labour Government is trying to muzzle the voices of communities by stifling public inquiries.

Communities must be at the heart of the electricity consenting process, but, just last night,

SSEN failed to show at Stonehaven community council's opening meeting on the plans. That is disgraceful.

Once our landscape is punctured by pylons, it cannot be restored. It has been left to the Scottish Conservatives to bring this debate to the chamber. The Scottish Conservatives would ensure that the right to a public inquiry was enshrined in the consenting process, and I urge my SNP and Labour colleagues to do the same.

Urgent Question

17:10

Neil Gray (Ministerial Code)

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether Neil Gray corrected the *Official Report* of 14 November 2024 at the earliest opportunity, as required by the Scottish ministerial code—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I would be grateful if colleagues could listen to Mr Kerr. Please resume, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether Neil Gray corrected the *Official Report* of 14 November 2024 at the earliest opportunity, as required by the Scottish ministerial code, in light of its response to a freedom of information request, dated 13 December 2024, confirming that there were no recorded minutes or notes for some events attended by ministers, including one attended by Neil Gray.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish ministerial code requires any inaccuracy in what ministers say to Parliament to be corrected at the earliest opportunity. On the same day that that inadvertent error was the subject of Opposition members' points of order, Mr Gray himself raised a point of order to acknowledge the error, wrote to the Presiding Officer, the members who raised the matter yesterday, business managers and any members who are not represented on the bureau, and lodged copies of his correspondence with the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Stephen Kerr: The whole point of this urgent question is that the FOI response on 13 December shows that Neil Gray attended four events for which there are no recorded summaries. The ministerial code states that the official record should be corrected at the earliest possible opportunity.

Yesterday, Neil Gray was forced to apologise for misleading Parliament about his statement on 14 November. He claimed that the summaries of the so-called meetings that occurred at the football matches were available, but a freedom of information response from 13 December confirmed that no notes were held for various meetings that occurred at football matches, including the four that I mentioned were attended by Neil Gray. The story was even published in a newspaper two days later, with a Scottish Government comment having been provided for it, so there can be no doubt that Neil Gray knew

months ago that he had misled Parliament. He had clearly violated the ministerial code. It is black and white. Does the minister accept that that is a violation of the ministerial code?

Jamie Hepburn: Let us make sure that the record is accurate in this instance. Mr Gray was not forced to come to apologise. He willingly came forward to acknowledge the inadvertent error that he had made. In releasing the information, he looked at the statement that he made to the Parliament. In that statement, he said that

“summary notes are available and set out the topics covered during discussions at the majority of the engagements”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 51.]

That is factual and accurate.

What we have now been able to recognise is that Mr Gray inadvertently set out something that was not entirely accurate in answering a question from Mr Kerr. That is acknowledged and has been recognised, and Mr Gray has apologised for it.

Stephen Kerr: Neil Gray would never have come to the chamber to make a statement if we had not raised the issue as a point of order earlier in the day. The FOI response shows that he knew months ago that he had misled Parliament and took no steps whatsoever to correct the record. It is clear that Neil Gray has broken the ministerial code.

This morning, John Swinney said that Neil Gray misspoke. That is not true. Neil Gray knowingly misled Parliament for months and did nothing about it, despite the ministerial code being crystal clear that he was duty bound to correct the record. That shows nothing but contempt for the Parliament and for you, Presiding Officer.

At a time when the national health service needs proper leadership, how can the public be expected to have any confidence in a health secretary who is unable to be completely honest with the Parliament and the people of Scotland, whom we represent?

When did Neil Gray first inform the First Minister that he had misled the Parliament? Will John Swinney refer the matter to the newly appointed advisers on the ministerial code? If he will not, will they use their new powers to launch an immediate investigation?

The Presiding Officer: Before I ask the minister to respond, I remind all members that language that suggests that a fellow member has been deliberately untruthful is unacceptable. Challenges, of course, can be made in very many ways.

Jamie Hepburn: In terms of leadership, let me say that, today, Neil Gray has been meeting representatives of the royal colleges of the various

medical professionals to discuss how we can continue to improve our national health service. That is exerting leadership in his role as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care.

In relation to the wider questions that Mr Kerr posed to me, I refer him back to my previous answer. In assessing what was released in the FOI against what Mr Gray had said to Parliament, and looking at the statement that he made, he was very clear:

“summary notes are available and set out the topics covered during discussions at the majority of the engagements”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 51.]

That is correct. Then, looking further at the answer that he gave to Mr Kerr, he realised that he had inadvertently said something that was inaccurate. He came to this chamber, fronted that out, accepted that he had done that and apologised to the chamber.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I have said repeatedly that the attendance of ministers at sports events, where appropriate, should be supported by the Government. The issue now is about the conduct of the cabinet secretary, Neil Gray, and his two apologies.

As the cabinet secretary referenced yesterday, he told Parliament in an answer to me on 14 November 2024:

“I will need to double check, but I believe that officials attended all the events with me and there will be a note available on what was discussed”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 53.]

On what date was the veracity of Mr Gray’s answers to Parliament double checked, and how is that confirmed in civil service records?

Jamie Hepburn: In terms of that specific question, we would of course need to revert to Mr Bibby. However, the fundamental point has been made. Mr Gray made the point yesterday that, in answering the question that Mr Bibby posed to him, he was clear that he would need to clarify whether there was, in fact, a note of every meeting. What has been released is not inconsistent with that fact either. We are referring to Mr Gray’s answer to Mr Kerr. He has accepted that he inadvertently set out something that was not the case. He has come to this chamber and he has apologised for that, and I think that most people should accept that.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Stephen Kerr mentioned the freedom of information request that was responded to on 13 December. Can the minister tell us whether Neil Gray was made aware of the initial request when it came in, the response that was going out and the Scottish Government comment that went to a Sunday paper about that request? If that all happened around 13 December, he has sat on

that information for well over a month before correcting the parliamentary record.

Jamie Hepburn: I go back to my initial answer. On being made aware of the inaccuracies yesterday, when the points of order were made, Mr Gray came back at the earliest opportunity to accept that fact and apologise to the chamber.

Business Motion

17:17

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16185, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 28 January 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Investing in Public Services Through the Scottish Budget

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 29 January 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 30 January 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Ministerial Statement: Creative Scotland Multi-Year Funding

followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: Scottish Budget 2025-26

followed by Appointment of Board Members to

Environmental Standards Scotland

followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 Tuesday 4 February 2025
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Budget (Scotland) (No. 4) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 5 February 2025
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
 Economy and Gaelic;
 Finance and Local Government
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 6 February 2025
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 27 January 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:18

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-16186, on committee membership.

I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Keith Brown be appointed as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Colin Beattie as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

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

Decision Time

17:18

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are eight questions to be put as a result of today's business.

If the amendment in the name of Natalie Don-Innes is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-16170.3, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16170, in the name of Miles Briggs, on delivering school environments where it is safe for pupils to learn and teachers to teach, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:19

Meeting suspended.

17:22

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Natalie Don-Innes is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy will fall.

We move to the vote on amendment S6M-16170.3, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16170, in the name of Miles Briggs. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16170.3, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, is: For 68, Against 31, Abstentions 25.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S6M-16170.2, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-16170, in the name of Miles Briggs, on delivering school environments where it is safe for pupils to learn and teachers to teach, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

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

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16170, in the name of Miles Briggs, on delivering school environments where it is safe for pupils to learn and teachers to teach, as amended, is: For 69, Against 30, Abstentions 26.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the ongoing concern at reported cases of violence against pupils and staff, and disruption in schools, and the need for action to help

restore positive learning environments in which all young people and teachers are safe to learn and teach in a respectful and supported setting; welcomes the publication of the joint national action plan with COSLA in August 2024, which set out a range of actions needed to be taken at both local and national levels to address violence in schools, alongside the Scottish Government's action plan on tackling violence and verbal abuse in schools; recognises the importance of the Scottish Government and local authorities working together to facilitate an environment in which all young people are safe to learn, develop and grow; notes the Scottish Government national guidance on mobile phones in schools, which empowers headteachers to take decisions on banning mobile phone use in schools; agrees with the importance of ensuring that children are protected from online harms; notes the importance of ensuring that children and young people are able to share their perspective on their education, and calls on all partners to continue working closely with the Scottish Government to improve behaviour and relationships in schools.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Alasdair Allan is agreed to, the amendments in the name of Sarah Boyack and Liam McArthur will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-16171.3, in the name of Alasdair Allan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16171, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on ensuring that communities are at the heart of the electricity consenting process, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app froze. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Cole-Hamilton. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and

Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)

(Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16171.3, in the name of Alasdair Allan, is: For 63, Against 55, Abstentions 7.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment is agreed to, therefore the amendments in the name of Sarah Boyack and Liam McArthur fall.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-16171, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on ensuring that communities are at the heart of the electricity consenting process, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting app. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16171, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on ensuring that communities are at the heart of the electricity consenting process, as amended, is: For 83, Against 35, Abstentions 7.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that communities must be at the heart of the renewable energy transition, and that it is vital that they share in the significant benefits that will be created, in contrast with how Scotland's communities have been failed for decades under successive UK administrations' energy policies; notes the ongoing representations by the Scottish Government to the UK Government around the need for energy market reform; further notes that Scotland has some of the most stringent environmental impact regulations anywhere in the world and that the planning and consenting system is designed to ensure that local communities have their say; notes that the proposed reforms have long been the established position in England, which the previous UK Conservative administration did not alter in its 14 years in office, and understands that the proposals would require developers to consult communities much earlier in the planning process, which will ensure that affected communities can more meaningfully influence the process of project development.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-16186, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Keith Brown be appointed as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Colin Beattie as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Robert Burns

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16078, in the name of Oliver Mundell, on celebrating the continued social, cultural and economic importance of Robert Burns. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the lasting impact of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns, including the significant contribution that his works continue to make at home and around the world; notes with interest and admiration the efforts of many across Scotland and the world to ensure that his legacy is celebrated; acknowledges, in particular, a number of initiatives in Dumfries and Galloway that have progressed since Burns' Night 2024; congratulates the Ellisland Farm project, which is led by the former MSP, Joan McAlpine, on receiving an initial grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund of almost £500,000 towards developing and restoring the farm and museum; believes that the restoration scheme has the potential to be a gamechanger for the region and to redefine the Burns' visitor experience; acknowledges what it sees as the growing partnership between Annandale Distillery and the Globe Inn; notes the 10th anniversary of the distillery and its Man O' Words Whisky, which takes its inspiration from Burns, and welcomes the return of the Big Burns Supper in Dumfries.

17:34

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): As people at home and around the world prepare to celebrate Burns night, it seems only fitting to mark Burns's legacy here, in the heart of our debating chamber. In yet another coup for Dumfries and Galloway, when the Presiding Officer hosts her Burns supper in the Parliament tonight, my constituent, the much-accomplished young Burnsian Ella McTeir from Sanquhar, will deliver the address to the haggis.

Having listened, at the opening of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999, to Sheena Wellington's rendition of "A Man's a Man for a' That"—which, by the end, was accompanied by Christine Grahame and by many others in the public gallery—I often wonder what Burns would have made of this place.

"O wad some Power the giffie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:"

Would he have seen a people's Parliament or something altogether different? I suspect that many aspects of Holyrood and its inhabitants would have fuelled his rich political satire. Over the years, his views and politics have, of course, been hotly debated and applied to many issues of the day. So, too, has his identity. Does Burns belong

to Ayrshire, or does he belong to Dumfries and Galloway, where he remains to this day?

This year, the hot take at Burns suppers and in homes across Dumfries and Galloway is whether Burns would have been for or against a new national park. Would he have lined up with his fellow farmers or stood in solidarity with the “wee ... cowrin, tim’rous beastie”?

Such debates get a lot of attention, but I believe that it would be wrong to dwell on where Burns divides. Instead, in a world that often seems more divided and tribal than ever, the enduring appeal of Burns is that he offers something for everyone. His universal appeal and his ability as a poet to reach beyond simplistic points of view are arguably his greatest gifts.

We have only to look at research from the University of Glasgow’s centre for Robert Burns studies to see how that translates into the real world, the influence that Burns has and—dare I say it—the commercial value that he offers to Scotland. The Pittock report is a great place to start for anyone who is doubtful of the potential in that regard.

Anyone who, like me, has a school-age child will know the reach of Burns at this time of year and his importance, for Scots more generally, as a focal point in schools, where interest in him is broadened and our many words and stories are kept alive. I am very proud of my eldest daughter, Isla, who has volunteered to recite a Scots poem at her school assembly on Friday. Listening to her practise and learn the words of J K Annand’s “Mince and Tatties” has brought me joy, and it has sparked an interest in her that I hope will last a lifetime. It also brings back fond memories of my introduction to Scots-language poetry, and to Burns himself, as I sat at the kitchen table with my mum.

In what I hope is the only negative point in this speech, it is therefore sad to note that Burns has been downgraded in the higher English curriculum this year. I am not sure what that says about us as a nation and what we believe is valuable to hand on to future generations, but, for me, it certainly raises serious questions about how we see ourselves. If we cannot learn from Burns the man and Burns the poet—if we cannot understand him as a creature of his time and one with a vision beyond it—what does that say about our country?

Now, I turn to the positives. Members from across the chamber who have sat here in years gone by could be forgiven for falling off their chairs at what I am about to say. I want to take a few moments to sing the praises of Joan McAlpine. Many Burns songs would fit the bill here, but the Presiding Officer will be pleased to hear that I will not do any actual singing. If I were to do so, there

would be a real danger of repeating an incident involving Burns himself, in which he ended up snowed in at a pub in, of all places, Ecclefechan, which is known locally as the Fechan. In the letter, he described the pain of listening to a barmaid sing as being like that of hearing an old sow meeting the butcher’s knife. He said that, in that moment, he could not decide which fate was worse: freezing to death in the Fechan cold or spending the rest of the evening listening to the Fechan barmaid. [*Laughter.*]

With that, let us go back to Joan McAlpine. She has not only shown me that there is life beyond politics but done something truly special, which goes beyond the achievements that many of us in the chamber could hope for. She has saved anew for the nation one of the most important and significant parts of Burns’s legacy: the home of “Auld Lang Syne”, his farm at Ellisland, which he helped to build and where he wrote some of his best-known works, including that song.

Joan McAlpine would be the first to point out that that has not been achieved single-handedly; it has been a real team effort. Special mention should be made of the distinguished and varied board of voluntary trustees, many of whom are in the public gallery tonight, who have given up their time to take the project to its next stage. However, there is no doubt in my mind that, without Joan’s passion and drive, the moment would have been missed and the project, which had fallen on hard times, would have simply withered and been lost.

Instead, there is now an ambitious initiative that aims to breathe new life into Burns’s legacy and create a world-class visitor destination that, when realised, will be a game changer for the regional economy across Dumfries and Galloway and will deliver a Burns trail in south-west Scotland that is worthy of his name. I hope that the Scottish Government will continue to support the project, through its agencies and its influence with wider stakeholders, to build on the initial funding and backing from South of Scotland Enterprise, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Holywood Trust, among others.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture is not in the chamber, but I am sure that Jamie Hepburn would be willing to sign him up to visit the project and see more of what Dumfriesshire has to offer. One such offering, which would have been right up Burns’s street—and, I am sure, the cabinet secretary’s—would be the chance to sample the newly matured 10-year-old Man O’Words whisky, named in Burns’s honour, from Annandale Distillery, which itself celebrates its 10th birthday this year. The whisky is served in Burns’s favourite howff, the Globe Inn in Dumfries.

The whole of Dumfries and Galloway owes a great debt of gratitude to Professor David Thomson and Theresa Church for their vision in realising those projects. We look forward to seeing what they have planned for the proposed new Burns quarter in Dumfries.

Of course, I could mention endless other projects and events relating to Burns, but I want to leave the final word with the Big Burns Supper in Dumfries, which has been revived this year after some funding challenges. Putting on that spectacle seems the very least that we can do for a man who continues to inspire and who has done more to promote Dumfries and Scotland than anyone else.

A Scotland without Burns would be less colourful, less rich and more divided. We ignore his literary works and his social, cultural and economic value at our peril.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mundell. I will be having a word with the official report, just to make sure that the spelling in that contribution stays on the right side of the line.

As Mr Mundell has reminded us, the Presiding Officer's Burns supper is taking place this evening, so there is a bit of time pressure on the debate. I want to get in everyone who would like to speak, but that will require members to stick to their time allocations.

17:42

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I congratulate Oliver Mundell on securing it.

I have been involved in the world of Robert Burns for 25 years, and I enjoy Burns season very much. I am privileged to be a past president of Dumfries ladies Burns club number 1.

I join Oliver Mundell in highlighting the many events, projects and initiatives that are taking place across Dumfriesshire and Galloway. He mentioned the schools competition, to which I will turn in a moment; the Big Burns Supper; and the collaboration between Annandale Distillery and the Globe Inn. He also highlighted the excellent work done by the team behind securing Robert Burns's farm at Ellisland.

In the schools competition that is organised by Dumfries and Galloway Burns Association, the number of entrants has increased year on year—there are more than 200 this year. The performances of poetry, song and music demonstrate the talent of the young people and the great effort that they and their teachers put in through their rehearsal time. The competition went online during the Covid pandemic, which has proved to be pretty successful. My husband was

involved in that, because he has really useful digital skills. The people involved are dedicated to keeping the memory of Robert Burns alive for future generations.

I, too, want to mention the work of the centre for Robert Burns studies at the University of Glasgow. I agree with Mr Mundell that the centre has been crucial in highlighting Burns's economic, social and cultural contributions to Scotland. Its projects promote Scotland and our culture at home and internationally, and they include so much information. I explored the interactive map of Burns suppers, which was funded by US donors. It is a thorough repository of excellent information.

I have spoken about the US connection to Robert Burns in my own immortal memories at Burns suppers. I encourage members to delve into the words that the USA's 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, used about the inspiration that he gained from reading the ploughman poet's work. President Lincoln certainly had a fondness for Burns and Scottish culture, and he asked for a passage to Scotland to be booked so that he could visit our precious country, but he was assassinated before he could travel to Scotland. However, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, visited Scotland in 1869, and she said:

"Beautiful, glorious Scotland has spoiled me for every other country".

Those are fabulous words.

One festival that promotes Burns is the Big Burns Supper—I will elaborate on that a wee bit. It is the United Kingdom's largest celebration of Burns and involves a jam-packed schedule of events spanning from 17 January to 2 February. The Big Burns Supper is supported by Dumfries and Galloway Council, the Holywood Trust, the National Lottery Community Fund, EventScotland and others. This year, Eddi Reader and Wet Wet Wet are performing, and a big Burns supper on a bus—and even an underwater Burns supper—are just a few of the events that are happening.

Along with colleagues across the parties, I hosted meetings with the Big Burns Supper and partners to ensure that the festival could go ahead this year. I appreciate the time that Colin Smyth and Oliver Mundell gave to support that cross-party approach. It is great, therefore, to see the return of the Big Burns Supper, and I thank the trustees and the team for their work. I remind members that my husband is one of the volunteer trustees.

I finish with some words from our national bard, which are written on the foundations of our Parliament—his words hold up our Parliament. Given the current struggles that people around the globe are facing, these words are pretty powerful and worth repeating:

“Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a’ that,
That Sense and Worth, o’er a’ the earth,
Shall bear the gree, an’ a’ that
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
It’s coming yet for a’ that,
That Man to Man the world o’er,
Shall brithers be for a’ that.”

17:46

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)
(Con): Deputy Presiding Officer,

“A whiskin beard about her mou,
Her nose and chin they threaten ither:
Sic a wife as Willie had,
I wad na gie a button for her.”

Do not worry, Deputy Presiding Officer—I am referring not to any member in the chamber but to Willie Wastle’s wife. At least twice a week, I am reminded of my favourite Burns poem when I pass the Linkumdoddie road end on my way to and from the Parliament.

I live a stone’s throw from where Robert Burns penned “Scots Wha Hae” in Gatehouse of Fleet and the Selkirk grace in Kirkcudbright, so I am delighted to congratulate Oliver Mundell on securing this timely debate, which presents us with the opportunity to reflect on the enduring legacy of Robert Burns as Scotland’s national bard. His influence transcends time, touching our social fabric, cultural heritage and economic landscape in countless ways.

Burns has so much more to give us than just a great excuse for a night out—or two—with family, friends and colleagues to enjoy our national dish of haggis and our national drink of whisky, at a time of year that is often referred to as ram-a-dram. I am looking forward to the Presiding Officer’s Burns supper tonight, where members of Scotland’s consular corps from around the globe will enjoy Burns’s verse and song. On Friday, I will join my long-time friend Graham Bell, the chairman of Castle Douglas Burns club—of which I have been a member for 41 years; I was chairman at one time—when we celebrate our 95th supper.

Burns has left a profound social legacy that extends far beyond his literary contributions. He was a champion of the common man, highlighting the struggles and aspirations of ordinary people. His works, such as “To a Mouse” and “A Man’s a Man for A’ That”, reflect his empathy for the common folk and his advocacy for social equality. He was an advocate for social justice, often addressing themes of social justice and human rights. His progressive views on issues such as gender equality and social reform were ahead of his time and continue to inspire social movements today.

On the 25th, people around the world will celebrate Burns night with traditional Scottish food, music and poetry. Those events not only honour Burns’s legacy but foster a sense of community and cultural continuity. At such events, and at other significant life events, we will sing, as we have heard tonight, “Auld Lang Syne”.

The “Saving the Home of Auld Lang Syne” project at Ellisland farm, where Burns penned that iconic song, exemplifies our nation’s commitment to preserving his legacy. The initiative aims to restore and adapt the historic site, thereby ensuring that future generations can experience the landscape that inspired Burns.

The Robert Burns Ellisland Trust, which we have heard about tonight—I, too, welcome members of the trust to the public gallery—has been preserving and promoting Burns’s heritage, including through immersive visitor experiences. It runs artistic residencies and educational programmes, and it brings Burns’s values into the 21st century. The creation of a centre for song at Ellisland, housing original manuscripts and artefacts, highlights Burns’s rich musical legacy, which will inspire future generations.

I will not repeat what we have already heard about the Big Burns Supper. I will say only that my five-year-old daughter, Rowan, has also been practising her Burns and will perform at Twynholm primary at some point next week.

With regard to the economic impact of Burns, I highlight once again the work of the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust, as its efforts to develop new income streams and create a world-class visitor destination contribute to the local economy. The trust’s innovative projects, such as the auld acquaintance cottage and Minecraft Ellisland, attract visitors and generate revenue.

Of course, Burns’s contributions to Scottish culture are immeasurable. His use of the Scots language and his celebration of Scottish culture have made him a symbol of national pride, and his songs and poems are integral to Scottish identity. The legacy of Burns can be seen everywhere, from our village bowling club Burns supper to the work of the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust, which is vital in ensuring that Burns’s legacy continues to thrive. Those efforts not only safeguard the poet’s former home but create opportunities for future generations to be inspired by Burns.

As we celebrate Burns, so, too, do we celebrate our social, cultural and economic landscape, so let us reaffirm our commitment to preserving and promoting his legacy for generations to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I require members to stick to their allocated speaking times if at all possible.

17:51

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Oliver Mundell for bringing to the chamber this timely debate to celebrate the continued social, cultural and economic importance of Robert Burns. This Saturday, people across Scotland and around the world will celebrate Burns night. It is an opportunity for people to pay tribute to the life and influential work of Robert Burns, Scotland's most famous and esteemed poet, 266 years after his birth. Like many of us, I fondly remember first learning about Burns as a child in primary school, where I quickly understood his significance to our country. I am pleased that my own children are now learning about our national bard. In November, I was pleased to take them to Alloway cottage, where Burns was born and spent the early years of his childhood, and to the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum. Those visitor attractions are vitally important.

On that note, I join Oliver Mundell and others in praising the important work that Joan McAlpine and her team are doing to progress the Robert Burns Ellisland museum and farm project. Ellisland farm was the first family home of Robert Burns, and it holds significant importance. The project clearly has huge potential, and I wish everyone well with their plans for it.

More generally, I know from visiting Dumfries with the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee last year just how important Burns's legacy is to the whole community. In my own home town of Paisley, we have the Paisley Burns Club, which was founded in January 1805 and is therefore celebrating its 220th anniversary this year. The first secretary of the club was Burns's fellow poet, Robert Tannahill, who was inspired by Burns to follow in his footsteps. It is vitally important that we continue the legacy of Burns, and the legacy of Tannahill, so that we can inspire young people to learn about our history and get involved in poetry and music.

I commend the work that is being done to commemorate Burns in our primary schools, by Burns clubs at home and abroad, and at places such as Alloway cottage, the Burns birthplace museum and Ellisland farm. That work demonstrates the importance of Burns to our culture and heritage. However, as Oliver Mundell said, it was deeply disappointing to hear recently that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has downgraded Burns in the curriculum, citing interest being on the wane in our schools.

I raised the matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture at the constitution committee last week; he has since written to me denying that there has been any downgrade. Burns famously said that

"facts are chiels that winna ding".

Well, ding-dong, Deputy Presiding Officer, because one can come to the conclusion that there has been no downgrade only if one ignores the fact that the SQA has made the sad decision to remove Burns as a stand-alone author in the higher English curriculum. The decision has angered many who believe that we should not be cutting away the foundations of Scottish literature, and who believe that it is a slight on Scottish culture. It has angered many who believe that it is wrong that, while our very own people's poet is recognised internationally, he is sadly less so now by the Scottish Qualifications Authority in his own country.

Graham Bell, the chairman of the Castle Douglas Burns club—who has already been mentioned—told me that the decision is "very disappointing", and commented that Burns's

"values and humanity are things that this modern world needs reminding of and schools are the perfect place."

Marilyn Rowan, who is a committee member of the St Andrews Burns Club, told me:

"To say that we, as members of the St Andrews Burns Club, are extremely disappointed with this change to the curriculum, is a gross understatement."

Burns famously wrote:

"There is no such uncertainty is a sure thing".

We should not just assume that the legacy of Burns will live on for future generations. His writings have shaped our history and the Scotland that we live in today, and that is why we must work together to support organisations such as Robert Burns Ellisland museum and farm, and our Burns clubs, to ensure that our schools and our young people have available to them every possible avenue by which to learn about one of Scotland's greatest sons.

17:55

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow Neil Bibby, and I agree with what he said about the curriculum—I will come back to that in a moment. First, I congratulate my colleague Oliver Mundell on bringing the debate to the chamber, and at what better time? It is a well-timed debate.

The question of what is and what is not taught in our schools can often be fraught with controversy, and it seems to be jealously guarded as the preserve of those who sit behind the facade of the SQA. However, when I hear that it is reported that the SQA is relegating Robert Burns from his deserved prominence in the curriculum, I really begin to wonder what is becoming of us, and what kind of people are making those decisions. What are they thinking?

To use one of the phrases that Robert Burns so skilfully deployed, this is a *nievefu o blethers*. Who appointed them to make such a critical cultural decision that will affect our children and the future of our culture? Who holds them to account for those decisions, and why is it that, when legitimate questions are asked, the answers are hidden behind a cloud of technocratic hawing?

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Stephen Kerr: I give way to Clare Adamson, wherever she is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson, who joins us remotely.

Clare Adamson: My microphone is not coming on, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are with us now, Ms Adamson.

Clare Adamson: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer—it took a time to come on there.

I thank Stephen Kerr for taking an intervention, but I remind him that at the time that the prescribed list of Scots texts was put in place, both the Conservatives and Labour were against that move. The idea was that pupils would do at least one Scots text, but would not be limited to one.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Well, I am with Neil Bibby, because I, too, grew up with the surrounding sound of Burns—in particular at this time of year—in primary school and in the junior years of secondary school, and, to be frank, I think that that is an important part of ensuring that our heritage is preserved and lives on.

Those are important questions, but they are probably for another day. This debate is probably not the setting for them, because in this week of Burns night, we should be extolling the virtues of our national bard.

Burns was a figure of national and international importance. His poetry and ideas transcend culture and talk to us through the ages; his words are a window into our own history, and into world history, at that particular phase of his life in the late 18th century. His words are accessible and fun—and sometimes downright salacious—and they tell great stories that appeal to people of all ages and at all stages of life. Some of them have a depth that is seldom surpassed, to be frank, by the poems of the modern era.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: Of course—I will happily do so.

Rachael Hamilton: Our colleague Finlay Carson quoted from “Willie Wastle”, whose “wife was dour and din”.

Would Mr Kerr also say that Robert Burns was slightly rude about women?

Stephen Kerr: I have to say that, in my experience of the writings of Burns, he was infatuated with women—his rather colourful private life is, I think, evidence to prove the case.

Burns certainly speaks to us today, and I am sure that, as we attend Burns suppers organised by our respective parties, when immortal memories will be toasted, we will all be claiming that Burns would definitely have been on our side of the aisle.

The truth is that Burns defies political definition—he defied convention and he was the great contrarian. He was a commentator and humorist, and—as I said—he had one of the most colourful private lives that it is possible to imagine. I hope that no woke revisionism goes on when it comes to Robert Burns, and I hope that there are no trigger warnings for some imagined offence. I trust that our teachers will set aside any advice from the SQA on the matter and ensure that Robert Burns and his works are always put forward in the proper context to help our people to understand and appreciate the poetry of our great national bard.

17:59

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Like others, I warmly welcome the opportunity to come together to mark the third pillar of the winter festivals that we celebrate in Scotland, together with St Andrew’s day and Hogmanay.

The legacy of Burns is immense, as the motion states and as other members have said. Every week I am reminded of that, because the Burns statue on Constitution Street in Leith looks on to my constituency office. Indeed, there are statues of Robert Burns all over the world—his international footprint is matched only by that of Taras Shevchenko from Ukraine.

As well as the passion that there is for Burns in Leith, north Edinburgh and around the world, I have a personal connection with our national bard. My father, who is from the small town of Crosshill in Ayrshire, spoke passionately about Burns throughout my childhood and he continues to do so to this day. Indeed, given that he was a professional exhibition and museum designer who designed a number of exhibitions in years past, including the exhibition in the National Library of

Scotland, he would support the efforts to create more exhibition and museum experiences for people to enjoy Burns.

My father's experience of that period developed in him—as Burns has done for many others—a passion to write in Scots and to use the style of Burns to express his own messages and the things that he thought were important. This week, we have seen one of the world's biggest polluters pull out of the Paris agreement, so I want to read a few verses that my father wrote of a modern moose's reply to the ploughman poet. He said:

"We mice, might whyles express opinion,
On 'Godly' Man's assumed 'dominion'.
For time has shown, yer sairly wantin'
In stewardin' skills—
Nae savin' nature's precious union,
But causin' her ills.

Ye wanton tykes cause devastation.
Wi tae much business exploitation,
Pollutin' water, air and oceans
For greed o' cash,
'Til soon the planet's fragile balance
Will tip and crash.

Beware then, brainy homo saps,
Wi' gadgets, phones an latest apps,
This earth is here for a' tae nourish,
Baith human and beast.
It's time you gained oor poet's savvy,
An' better shared the feast."

That connection from my family was profoundly moved in me when, in 2019, as a Scottish minister, I had the great privilege of presenting the Robert Burns humanitarian award at the Alloway cottage. As well as being an environmentalist and, many would argue, a socialist, Burns was an internationalist, and, of course, that is best encapsulated in the song "Auld Lang Syne", which is sung not only at Hogmanay, but is the second most famous song in the world, being surpassed only by "Happy Birthday".

Indeed, I will never forget when I was in China in 2003 telling my class that I am from Scotland, to which they said, "Well, where's that?", and so I whistled the tune of "Auld Lang Syne", and they instantly remembered what that was. It is that ability of Burns to bring people together that is the magic so many years on. I have found that the power of Burns to bring people together is so important wherever I have been—whether it was when I was in Paris in the British embassy in 2019, or in Brussels in the Scottish Government hub just after Brexit—internationally, domestically, in Parliaments, in embassies and in our communities. We must treasure that power, we must celebrate it, and we must not take it for granted.

18:04

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Like all MSPs who represent what we know as Burns country, it is an honour for me to speak in today's important debate. As a representative of South Scotland, it is clear to me how the influence and legacy of Robert Burns run through our history and culture—it is a legacy that can be seen all around the area where I live.

The area is full of the history of Burns: from Burns cottage in the village of Alloway where he was born, to the Robert Burns birthplace museum, the Burns monument, and the Brig O' Doon, where poor Meg famously lost her tail. The bridge itself also inspired some of his most famous words. There is also Poesie Nansie's in Mauchline where Burns met his wife Jean Armour, who bore him at least eight children, Souter Johnnie's cottage in Kirkoswald, home of the shoemaker immortalised in "Tam O' Shanter", and Alloway auld kirk, where you can find the graves of Burns's family members. There is the Tam O' Shanter inn, which, it is said, Robert Burns frequented—it was the pub that Burns's friend, who was the inspiration for Tam O' Shanter, left from that fateful night. His legacy is everywhere.

My children all went to Alloway primary school, just up the road from the famous Burns cottage. To this day, just like at other schools in Ayrshire, the young people there learn to recite Burns poems and take part in competitions. That tradition still thrives and it is a reminder of how deeply ingrained he is in the lives of young people in that part of Scotland, hundreds of years after he was born.

But Burns is not a poet just for Ayrshire and Scotland; he is an international icon. Few writers could claim that their work is sung at Hogmanay every year from Ayr to Australia, yet with "Auld Lang Syne" he achieves just that. Closer to home, his legacy carries economic weight. Tourism in Ayrshire is driven significantly by Burns's global appeal: he puts us on the map. Visitors come from all over the world to events such as the Alloway 1759 festival and Tamfest—and what could be better than a Burns supper on Burns night in Scotland?

Our young people benefit from that in a number of practical ways. For instance, pupils from Kincaidston primary in Ayr recently created a new guided walk at the Burns cottage as part of a National Trust scheme to develop career skills and improve access to heritage. Free talks are taking place at the Burns birthplace museum throughout 2025. They proved so popular in December that they sold out. If anyone is thinking of attending one of their talks, I can confirm that they do excellent coffee and homemade scones. In Mauchline, there is also the Robert Burns blue

plaque tour, which takes in various places of interest.

We spend much time in this chamber in heated debates and disagreeing about a range of different policies and political priorities. I imagine that, if Robert Burns were alive today, he would be in the thick of the heated debates. In fact, given his infamous reputation, he may possibly have been the subject of many a heated debate.

That said, it is welcome that we can all come together in chorus on this important topic and highlight the legacy of his work and genius. A farmer's son inspiring generations in arts and literature, and providing endless entertainment and enjoyment through the decades, is a truly great thing. It has been a privilege to speak on this important topic and I am delighted to give my support to Oliver Mundell's motion.

18:08

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Oliver Mundell for lodging his excellent motion, which provides a timely opportunity to celebrate not only the rich cultural contribution of Robert Burns but also the enduring social and economic legacy, and the future potential, of our national bard.

Prior to being elected to Parliament, I had the pleasure of representing Nith ward on Dumfries and Galloway Council, and chairing the council's economy committee. I remember, about a decade ago, launching the "In the Footsteps of Burns" trail, to promote the breadth of the physical legacy of Burns's time in my hometown of Dumfries. That trail of course included St Michael's kirkyard, where Burns was laid to rest at the far too young age of 37. I remember a visit to neighbouring St Michael's primary school, where pupils were asked what Dumfries was famous for. One wee lad answered, quick as a flash, "It's the deathplace of Rabbie Burns". He maybe was not wrong, but of course it is also where Burns thrived and lived, albeit for far too short a time.

That trail takes you past the wonderful statue of Jean Armour, Burns's beloved and loyal wife, to the house that Burns lived in on stinking vennel—a street that, fortunately, has had a name change since Burns's time. It then works its way to Scotland's oldest working theatre, the Theatre Royal Dumfries, where Burns was a frequent visitor, and to his favourite howff, the Globe Inn, where he was an even more frequent visitor. That is a Burns tradition that I have followed for many years—although I suspect that if I etched verses on one of the Globe Inn windows, as Burns did, rather than have it displayed, I would be barred.

The ownership of the Globe Inn now sits with David Thomson and Teresa Church, the owners of

Annandale Distillery, who have a real vision for a Burns quarter in Dumfries, including a visitor centre.

The Burns footsteps go beyond the town—they go to the Brow well, which is renowned for its healing qualities, although, in truth, bathing in the freezing waters probably did Burns more harm than good. The footsteps also lead to Ellisland farm, the home that Burns built from 1788 to bring together his family, as Neil Bibby said, for the first time and where he penned what are arguably his finest works, including "Auld Lang Syne".

Ellisland Farm is well worth a visit—if members have not been, I ask them to please go. However, the plans by the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust to preserve Burns's legacy by widening access with more events, artist residencies, and educational opportunities and, ultimately, to create a world-class visitor attraction, have the potential to be truly transformative. I give the trust, led by Joan McAlpine and her staff team, Adam, Sarah and Ailsa—who, along with a number of trustees, are here this evening—my full support on their journey. It is great to hear similar support from members during the debate. The potential is enormous, but delivery of that potential will need on-going support from the Government and other agencies, not just at the development stage but in the future.

In the meantime, there is already much to do in Dumfriesshire when it comes to Burns, including, as we have heard, the fantastic Big Burns Supper. Unfortunately, that festival did not take place last year due to the Government's decision to end the winter festival funding. Although it returns with a great line-up this year on a smaller scale than in the past, it needs that on-going support in the future.

Neil Bibby and Stephen Kerr talked about the downgrading of Burns on our curriculum. We should be building up Burns's legacy. I make that appeal to the Government, as I did in last week's culture debate.

We have lost a lot of festivals in Dumfries and Galloway in recent years. Sadly, I fear that we will lose more in the weeks ahead. Scotland's rich cultural offering is more than big festivals in the central belt, and that needs to be reflected in more regional support with festival funding, including of the Big Burns Supper.

Oliver Mundell is right when he says that Burns was maybe all things to all people—that would probably make him a Liberal Democrat. However, his legacy is enduring, and the potential to grow that legacy is enormous. At this point, the Presiding Officer is probably going to ask me to sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Had I known what you were going to say, I might have asked you to sit down 30 seconds earlier. Craig Hoy is the final speaker in the open debate.

18:12

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Oliver Mundell for bringing the debate to the chamber. I will use my brief contribution to focus on the benefits that Burns brings to the hospitality and tourism sectors in Scotland—not least because he was partial to a wee nip, himself.

His life and his legacy are woven through the whole region that I am proud to represent—South Scotland. That legacy draws tourists to the south and brings together locals and visitors alike, particularly at this time of year, when we gather together to celebrate the life and work of Robert Burns, not just here in Scotland but, as I found when I lived in Asia, across the world.

Nowhere are we more likely to keenly celebrate the life of Robert Burns than in South Scotland. In Alloway in Ayrshire, Robert Burns's birthplace museum is just a short walk from the Burns cottage. The museum celebrates Burns's life, work and legacy. One of the most poignant items on display is the William Burns family bible, which lies open on a page on which William has understatedly written:

"Had a son Robert 25th Jan 1759."

In Dumfries, in a former mill building by the River Nith, we have the Robert Burns Centre, which is also a film theatre that shows the best in contemporary cinema. Today, as many of my colleagues did, I met the trust team at the Robert Burns Ellisland museum and farm, who have set out a bold vision to save the home of "Auld Lang Syne" and to create an enhanced visitor attraction with accommodation and a focus on the arts and education.

Burns's presence continues to influence local festivals, with the annual Robert Burns festival in Dumfries drawing visitors every January. At this time of year, people come together across Scotland in our hospitality venues—restaurants, pubs, and community and sports clubs—to eat, drink and listen to some of Burns's famous pieces and works. As colleagues have said, where better to do that than in the welcoming Globe Inn in Dumfries, which offers fine dining and lovely historic rooms, and where Robert Burns ate, drank, recited, slept and otherwise entertained affairs of the heart.

The life and works of Robbie Burns offer a welcome boost for the hospitality industry at what is genuinely a very difficult time for it. In January,

the Burns suppers are much needed by our pubs and restaurants—this year, more than ever.

The sector faces very difficult times, partly because of decisions that the Scottish National Party Government has taken this year in relation to support for the hospitality sector. In fact, I would say that, this January, the memory of Robert Burns is probably doing more to support and sustain Scotland's hospitality sector than its present-day Government is doing.

Before I close, I would like to highlight another connection with Robert Burns. His younger brother Gilbert lived in Bolton, which is a tiny hamlet very close to the town of Haddington in East Lothian. Gilbert was a well-known figure in the town and, in 1808, he became an elder of the beautiful St Mary's church. Indeed, Agnes Burns, Rabbie's mother, was buried alongside her son and her daughter Annabella in the parish kirkyard, within a railed enclosure, which still draws visitors to East Lothian today.

Every year, local publican Paul Kinnock at the Tyneside Tavern remembers Rabbie and Gilbert at the Grant's Braes Burns brunch—try saying that after a couple of nips. It is a jolly lunch that I have had the pleasure to chair in the past and to attend most years, at which pub regulars get together to remember the great man and, of course, his wee brother, too.

Rabbie Burns was a pub man. Just a stone's throw from here, he visited the Sheep Heid Inn in Duddingston and the Beehive Inn in the Grassmarket. I suspect that, in the latter, a pint now costs considerably more than it did then. That is another reason why I urge the Scottish Government to make sure that it gives support to Scotland's hospitality sector.

Burns's life and legacy are intertwined with the hostelries of south Scotland. He continues to contribute much to our tourism and hospitality sector. That is why I welcome Oliver Mundell's debate and his motion.

18:16

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): That other Scots poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, was once moved to write of Robert Burns:

"Mair nonsense has been uttered in his name
Than in ony's barrin liberty and Christ."

I cannot earnestly say what he might have made of this evening's debate, but my assessment is that it has been a good one. On that basis, I join others in thanking Oliver Mundell for bringing his motion to the chamber for debate, as we approach Burns night this weekend.

As well as being a much-loved celebration of our great bard, that evening has its roots in community. The first Burns supper was held in July 1801, when nine of Burns's close friends got together to mark the fifth anniversary of his death. Today, for many people across the world, Burns night is a time to savour Scottish traditions, to recognise him as a symbol of national pride—as Finlay Carson rightly referred to him—and to celebrate the globally recognised writer. The global recognition that Sharon Dowey spoke of was underlined by Emma Harper, who cited the importance of Burns to Abraham Lincoln's thinking.

This Burns supper season is one that I suspect many of us will honour this year, perhaps starting with the PAMIS Burns supper this evening. I can say that tickets to the Cumbernauld SNP Burns supper on 8 February are still available for sale. Colleagues are welcome—some more so than others, perhaps—but if people would like a ticket, they can let me know.

Whatever might take each of us to any such event, it is right to mark the life of a person of such significance to our country's history. It is for no small reason that the centrepiece of any Burns supper is "The Immortal Memory", written in honour of him.

Estimates suggest that more than 40 million people consider themselves to have Scottish ancestry, but our diaspora goes beyond bloodlines. The Scottish Government continues to nurture its Scottish connections and to engage with Scotland's diaspora through key heritage events around the world, such as those on Burns night. Burns night provides the Scottish Government's international network with invaluable opportunities to promote Scotland's international interests by showcasing Scottish traditions; the best of Scottish produce, culture and values; and Scotland as a great destination for tourism.

A programme of events will take place across Scotland's international network that will allow colleagues to engage with varied groups across Scotland's broad diaspora communities, including the heritage diaspora, the globalscot network and alumni, as well as trade partners and other in-country stakeholders. The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture will attend events in Brussels and Bergen.

Closer to home, I am delighted that, as Oliver Mundell and other colleagues have set out, the Big Burns Supper is now back. It is bigger than ever and will extend over three weekends. I was particularly interested in the inclusion of an underwater Burns supper, which Emma Harper mentioned. I have been to many Burns suppers that have involved more liquid than was probably

good for those in attendance, but perhaps not quite in that vein. However, I think that it is testament to our Scottish culture that we can constantly innovate our traditions.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that Scotland continues to enjoy a thriving culture sector, with this year's budget taking us halfway towards meeting our commitment to investing an additional £100 million a year in the sector by 2028-29. Our culture, including Robert Burns, continues to draw visitors to Scotland from around the globe. There were 234,000 visitors to Robert Burns-related attractions in Scotland in 2023, which was 70 per cent higher than in the previous year. The power of Burns as a driver for our economy is illustrated by the 2020 University of Glasgow study that was mentioned by Oliver Mundell and Emma Harper, which estimated that Burns contributes more than £200 million to Scotland each year via tourism products and festivals.

Finlay Carson: I appreciate your giving way, minister, and I appreciate your glowing testimony of the influence of Robert Burns in Scotland. However, do you agree that it is a load of painch, tripe and thairm that QMS has downgraded the influence of Burns in Scottish education?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Jamie Hepburn: I think that that was a reference to the Scottish Qualifications Authority, although the member mentioned Quality Meat Scotland. I can say that the Scottish Government does not prescribe which texts or resources should or should not be used to support learning. The SQA has advised that Burns remains a vital part of Scottish set texts, including options for higher English, and is included in the national 5 curriculum. It is also interesting that Mr Kerr wants teachers to ignore SQA guidance, but the SQA has assured teachers that any text, including works by Robert Burns, can still be used for the critical essay in national 5 or higher English courses.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I do not have a lot of time, but I will give way to Mr Macpherson.

Ben Macpherson: Does the minister agree that, as Oliver Mundell emphasised, we should all appreciate the number of primary school children who learn about Burns? I will be doing that this week.

Jamie Hepburn: I agree with Mr Macpherson. Emma Harper referred to the extensive range of activity through schools competitions that should be celebrated.

I turn back to the remarks that I was hoping to make. I am also delighted to hear about the progress at Ellisland farm. I commend Joan McAlpine—a former colleague of many of us, whom I am pleased to see in the gallery—for her vision and leadership, and I commend the wider work of the Burns tourism partnership. I understand that Richard Lochhead will visit Ellisland farm later this week. It is poised to become an international artistic and literary destination. It is the farm that Burns built and where he wrote much of his work, including “Tam O’Shanter”.

We have focused on Dumfries and Galloway an awful lot, and there has also been reference to Ayrshire, as there should be. However, having mentioned “Tam O’Shanter”, it would be remiss of me not to recommend a visit to the Rozelle house museum and galleries, where a display of a series of fantastic paintings by Alexander Goudie depicting the poem can be seen. I was able to see the series myself before the recent travelling Cabinet was held in Ayr in November. I suggest that colleagues visit it, if they have not already had the opportunity to do so.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I am not sure how imminent the Selkirk grace is at this Burns supper, but if I have time, I will give way one more time to Mr Oliver Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: Before we move on to Ayrshire too quickly, I wonder whether we could get on the record the Scottish Government’s absolute commitment to finding stage 2 funding to realise the vision of Ellisland.

Jamie Hepburn: That is beyond my direct remit, but I will make sure that the relevant minister picks that question up and gets back to Mr Mundell.

I will move on to touch briefly on whisky, which, although it is not essential, is an integral part of the experience of any Burns supper. I can say to Mr Mundell that, if the cabinet secretary cannot come to Annandale to sample the new Burns-related whisky, I can think of at least one minister who might be delighted to receive an invitation and consider visiting.

I thank members for their contributions, and I thank Oliver Mundell for his motion celebrating the legacy of Robert Burns. I conclude by citing the national bard once more from the same source as Ben Macpherson. Burns once wrote of the human condition:

“An forward tho’ I cannot see,
I guess an’ fear”.

Although there might be some fundamental truth to that generally, I am sure that I am not alone in believing that, forward though we cannae see, the place of Burns is of great importance to us in Scotland and beyond, and it remains secure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I am sure that Stephen Kerr has been busy booking his travel to Cumbernauld. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:25.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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