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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

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# Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 27 May 2025

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our leader today is Imam Dr Yahya Barry of the Shah Jalal mosque.

**Dr Yahya Barry (Shah Jalal Mosque):** Deputy Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament and dear people of Scotland, we are living in a time of polarisation and division. Among the greatest risks that we face as a society are misinformation, disinformation and the loss of trust in one another. There is also fear—the fear of getting it wrong. However, our moral compass—our inner voice of right and wrong—remains as clear as it was in our childhood innocence.

We were born into a world full of trials, but also full of potential—the potential to rise, to reconcile and to renew. As a black African Muslim, Gambian-born, London-raised and Saudi-educated Swedish national who calls Scotland home, I see in this land something that is profoundly hopeful: its breathtaking beauty, the warmth of its people and its courageous civic spirit that opens participation to all.

Here in Scotland, I serve as an imam, yet I also work in film and television, and I have worked in the museum sector and in the creative industries. I have seen that one's identity does not need to be boxed in. We all have the capacity to contribute meaningfully.

From my Islamic tradition, two concepts speak clearly to this moment. The first is sincerity. The Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, said, “Ad-deenu an-naseehah,” which means “Religion is sincere counsel.”

True faith calls us to be sincere in our advice, especially to those in leadership. Let this moment be a witness that within this heart of mine rests a prayer, a sincere hope and good wishes for all gathered here and for the nation that we share. May it flourish in justice, peace and goodness.

We are one humanity, joined not only by proximity or law, but by shared values, common concerns and our yearning to live with meaning and purpose.

The second concept is justice. My theology says:

“Indeed, God commands you to uphold justice and excellence.”

My theology teaches me this principle: that divine support—victory, protection and blessing—is granted to the just, regardless of their creed. That is what I believe. Justice is not the exclusive claim of one religion or community; it is the divine measure by which all communities are assessed. It is with hope that I say that, as long as you, the leaders of this land, continue to uphold justice, you need not fear anything. You have every reason to hope for God's aid, victory and blessing.

May Scotland continue to be a beacon of dignity, fairness and hope, and may each of us carry forward this duty with humility, courage, sincerity and grace.

## Topical Question Time

14:04

### Youth Work (Investment)

**1. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether its current investment in youth work is sufficient, in the light of reports of an increase in youth violence and the loss of local youth services in recent years. (S6T-02550)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** The Scottish Government continues to fund youth work in a variety of ways, including through the block grant that is given to local authorities, affording them significant autonomy in allocating resources for youth work in their area.

Recognising the important role that local authorities play, the Government is increasing the resources that are available to local government in 2025-26 by more than £1.1 billion. In addition, the Scottish Government provides targeted funding to the youth sector via the cashback for communities programme. Since its inception, the programme has committed £156 million to supporting around 1.4 million young people across all 32 local authorities in Scotland.

**Martin Whitfield:** I offer my deepest sympathies to the families and communities that have been affected recently by youth violence across the whole of Scotland.

Respected organisations such as YouthLink Scotland have reported more than £20 million in cuts specifically to youth work services since 2016. Does the minister accept that that reduction in provision has directly weakened the support networks that so many young people rely on, particularly those who are most at risk?

**Graeme Dey:** I associate myself with Martin Whitfield's initial remarks.

It is a fact that youth services are not run by the Scottish Government. As I have outlined to him, there is substantial funding going into local government to protect those services and additional moneys are provided by cashback for communities.

**Martin Whitfield:** It is disappointing that the minister is unaware of the specific amount that is spent on youth work.

Does the minister recognise that youth work lacks any formal legal status in Scotland, which leaves even vital local services at risk of being cut or deprioritised? In that context, given the overwhelming support from the sector and the

Scottish Youth Parliament for my proposed youth work (Scotland) bill, which would enshrine youth work provision in law, will the minister meet me to discuss the fundamental importance of youth work's role not only in tackling youth violence, but in the lives of our children and young people?

**Graeme Dey:** As I have already outlined to Martin Whitfield, the evidence of the importance that the Scottish Government places on youth work is there—it is in the funding that it provides for that work, to local government and by other means. Of course I would be delighted to meet Martin Whitfield.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Will the minister outline some of the very good and important youth work that the Scottish Government has supported, including through the cashback for communities programme, which specifically supports young people to divert them away from crime and antisocial behaviour and teaches the consequences of violence and carrying weapons, including knives?

**Graeme Dey:** It is important to say—I should have said this earlier, because I know that Martin Whitfield did not mean to imply otherwise—that the vast majority of young people, both those who engage with youth work and those who do not, are law-abiding citizens. They would not indulge in the kind of behaviours that the member has rightly pointed out, and I know that he did not mean to imply that they would.

Phase 6 of the cashback for communities programme runs from 2023 to 2026 and has funded various projects, including youth work, employability support, creative arts and sports projects. Additionally, the Government has provided more than £2 million of funding over the past three years for community-based youth work through national third sector youth work organisations to reach young people outside of school.

**Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** The minister needs to take responsibility for the cuts that his Government has made to youth work at the same time as serious assaults by teenagers have increased by 600 per cent. YouthLink Scotland's chief executive officer says that there is a direct link between the number of council youth workers in Scotland falling by 50 per cent in eight years on the Scottish National Party's watch and the increase in youth crime. Does the minister agree with him?

**Graeme Dey:** On the point of accepting responsibility, I think that it ill behoves a Conservative member of Parliament to stand here today and talk about cuts in funding when the Conservatives, if they had got their way, would

have utterly slashed the Scottish Government's funding by between £700 million and £1 billion, as I remember. I suspect that Sharon Dowey supported that position.

I make the point once again that it is local government that delivers those services. Local government has had an uplift in its funding, contrary to what the Conservatives would have had us do, and the responsibility sits there. Of course, as I have said to Martin Whitfield, I fully recognise the importance of local government, and I will be delighted to meet him to discuss his bill.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Young people are exponentially more likely to be victims of antisocial behaviour than to be perpetrators of it. Having worked for YouthLink for four years and having been a volunteer youth worker for nearly 20 years, I have seen the transformative effect that detached and sessional youth work can have on young people in our communities.

Martin Whitfield is absolutely right that the sector has been decimated by £20 million-worth of cuts by the Government. There is a double-edged sword, too. The reduction in workforce caused by our not training community education workers any more and the decline in volunteering since lockdown have had a massive impact on the sector. What more can the Government do to encourage people into youth work in the first place?

**Graeme Dey:** Alex Cole-Hamilton made a good point at the end—youth work is a very important line of work. I am happy to take that away and consider it. Through prioritisation in encouraging young people into particular workstreams, I think that there is more that we can do. However, I again go back to the point that it is not the Scottish Government that is cutting funding—that is a choice of local government.

### **Violence Against Teachers (Aberdeen)**

**2. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that violence against teachers in schools in Aberdeen has risen by 25 per cent in the last year. (S6T-02545)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** Scotland's classrooms should be safe and consistent learning environments for all. In August, the Scottish Government published, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, our joint action plan on relationships and behaviour in schools, which includes actions to reduce violence in schools. The plan is jointly owned with local government, in recognition of the shared legal responsibilities of national and local government. Local government,

as the employer of school staff, has responsibility for addressing concerns in specific local authority areas.

In the coming weeks, we will publish new guidance to support school staff in responding to behaviour, including the use of consequences. We will also publish new guidance on developing risk assessments for violent, aggressive or dangerous behaviour.

**Liam Kerr:** The violence and abuse in our schools are not new, and they are constant. In the north-east, we have seen truly terrifying examples in recent weeks at Hazlehead and Laurencekirk. Of course, local authorities and COSLA have a role, but solutions that lie at Government level have been proposed by countless people. They were proposed in the debate that I led in March 2024, by the Educational Institute of Scotland in its November 2023 report, and recently by teachers themselves. Which of those Government-level solutions has the Government fully implemented since all those reports were produced?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I thank the member for his interest in the issue. We debated the topic at length when he served in a previous position. On the action that the Government has taken, there has been a range of progress. Between November 2023 and March 2025, we made good progress against all 20 of the actions that are set out in the behaviour action plan. That includes new guidance on addressing gender-based violence in schools, which we know is increasingly challenging, and updated mobile phone and anti-bullying guidance.

There has also been enhanced evidence gathering on relationships and behaviour as part of the school inspection process, which the member might recall that I discussed at length in a previous debate. The chief inspector has been leading that work. At the end of an inspection, that feedback highlights key strengths and areas for improvement, which helps to support schools in reflecting on and enhancing their approaches to promoting positive relationships and managing behaviour. Professional learning on relationships and behaviour has also been developed and is available to staff in schools.

Over the next year, we will deliver a number of actions to support our schools and young people and their families. I will give a further update to Parliament on the work on consequences before the end of this term.

**Liam Kerr:** Despite many voices begging the Government to get a handle on the issue and the reams of paper and warm words that we have had, violence in Scottish schools has been rising for years. The cabinet secretary has referred a number of times to the behaviour action plan. That was published 10 months ago, yet the NASUWT

states that it is having “little impact”. In fact, the number of pupils being physically abusive and violent in schools has increased in the past 12 months.

What resources for councils, schools and other relevant agencies have been budgeted for specifically to deliver the action plan when the consequences section is published? What does the cabinet secretary think the statistics on violence in Scottish schools will be by this time next year, as a result of her plan?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The member raises a number of points. He referenced the NASUWT, which I look forward to meeting at one of my regular bilaterals later today. The issue about impact that he raises is one that I have discussed with him at length. Earlier this year, jointly with Councillor Tony Buchanan from COSLA, I wrote to all directors of education to encourage information sharing and awareness raising with headteachers, because we need the national action plan to help to inform better approaches in our schools.

The member talked about the increase in the figures, and I note the issues in Aberdeen. He will recall that, in late 2023, I was clear in Parliament—and I have been since then—that we want to encourage our staff to report incidents. We know through the behaviour in Scottish schools research that, in the past, there has been a reticence among staff to report.

The member raises issues about funding. He will recall that, in 2023, I announced funding of £900,000 to provide support to our staff. Of course, the Scottish Government’s budget provided extra funding for more teachers in our schools and in relation to additional support needs.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** Any violent incident against a teacher is unacceptable, and we must do all that we can to reinforce the importance of behaving respectfully at school and in the community.

Cabinet secretary, do you also agree that the vast majority of children and young people behave respectfully? As pupils are reaching the end of the school year and starting to transition into the next one, and as many young people are having to overcome stressful exam experiences, we should say thank you to them and highlight our appreciation of who they are and what they contribute to our lives and society.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Please always speak through the chair.

**Bill Kidd:** Sorry, Presiding Officer.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I agree with the member’s point. I thank our young people, who have had an

extremely challenging few years due to their education being disrupted by the pandemic, which has had an impact on our schools.

As Mr Dey said in response to a previous question, we need to remember that, just like adults, the vast majority of our young people behave well and are a credit to their schools and society, so they should not be tarnished due to the behaviour of a minority. That is confirmed by our behaviour in Scottish schools research, which found that most staff said that children were well behaved “most or all” of the time.

As cabinet secretary, I have had the privilege of visiting many schools across the country, and I am always really impressed by the young people whom I meet. Although I do not deny the challenges that we face with relationships and behaviour, particularly post-Covid, I have always been clear that we should not demonise our young people, who need our support.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Do the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs’ comments that were broadcast at the weekend, which were that violent children should remain in mainstream classrooms, reflect the official position of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills or of the First Minister?

If it is the policy, was it agreed with teachers and their unions? If it is not the policy, will the cabinet secretary take the opportunity to apologise to Scotland’s teachers, parents and pupils for the confusion and concern that those comments have caused?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I am not sighted on the specific commentary that Mr Kerr is alluding to, but the general point, which was made in First Minister’s question time last week and by the justice secretary, is that schools are sometimes the safest place for some of our young people who come from chaotic and challenging backgrounds. It is important that schools provide consistent support.

More broadly, the member and I have discussed over a number of months, if not years, some of the challenges in Scotland’s schools and how we can better support our front-line staff, which is hugely important. In response to Liam Kerr, I mentioned the extra funding that we are putting in via the budget for teacher numbers and additional support needs. Those things make a difference at the chalkface, but it is also imperative that the national action plan, which I spoke about previously, helps to inform improved practice in our schools, which is why we are working in conjunction with COSLA to do exactly that.

**Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba):** Experienced educators, such as the retired Edinburgh headteacher whom I met this morning, track the root cause of escalating violence in



schools to the erosion of clear and unambiguous values-based behavioural policies that are based on consequences.

Will the Government now admit that the overreliance on restorative approaches has failed and eroded behaviour in our schools, and will it now fully commit to urgently restoring clear behavioural expectations with consequences in order to protect our teachers and pupils' safety and to raise attainment?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I am not sure that I would associate myself with Ms Regan's comments on a values-based education system. In Scotland, we very much have a values-based education system that is rooted in social justice, which is encapsulated by our approach to curriculum for excellence.

There are consequences for young people in our schools, much as there might be consequences for members of the Scottish Parliament for their behaviour. It is therefore appropriate that we engage directly with headteachers and listen to them accordingly. I have not seen the commentary from the headteacher that Ms Regan alluded to, but I am more than happy to engage with her on that point if she can share more information with my office.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes topical questions. There will be a brief pause to allow front-bench members to change over before we move on to the next item of business.

## Community-owned Energy

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, on growing community-owned energy in Scotland. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I note that a number of members who had indicated that they wished to speak in the debate are not in the chamber, which is more than disappointing.

14:20

**The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin):** I am grateful for the opportunity to open today's debate and to shine an important spotlight on community-owned energy in Scotland.

The Scottish Government is committed to growing our economy in a way that also ends our contribution to climate change. Our drive to bring down emissions comes with huge potential for wealth creation, not least in our communities. To deliver a just transition, we must continue to work with communities, businesses, industry and the people of Scotland to plan for a future in which Scotland is a leader in low-emission systems and technologies, with all the jobs and reduction in the cost of living that can come from that.

It is essential that our communities reap the benefits of the transition, which is about the outcome—a fairer, greener, more resilient and prosperous future—and the way in which we get there. The transition will be in partnership with our citizens and based on an understanding and acceptance of the reasons why it is a priority for the nation's health, wellbeing and vibrant economy, for us and our children for decades to come.

Community energy plays a particularly important role in empowering communities to take ownership of their energy future. Communities owning their own wind, solar and other renewable projects puts them at the centre of the revolution in power generation, while bringing in valuable revenue that can be directed towards community priorities, such as tackling fuel poverty, upgrading local infrastructure and supporting community events.

The Scottish Government has a long history of supporting the delivery of projects in community-led renewable energy, energy demand reduction and energy supply. The impact of community energy over time is demonstrated by the work of the Point and Sandwich Trust on the Isle of Lewis. That project began in 2005 as a public discussion on the possibility of developing a large community-owned wind farm on common grazing grounds.

The project developed from there, with support from a community and renewable energy Scotland scheme—CARES—loan.

By 2015, installation had been completed and the turbines were energised, and it became one of the biggest community-owned wind farms in the whole of the United Kingdom. Today, it produces around £900,000 a year in net income for the local community. Once capital costs have been repaid, it is expected to generate up to £2 million a year. Those funds support projects in and around the local area, providing valuable benefits for the community.

The Scottish Government is determined to build on these community energy successes with our new community energy generation growth fund, which will provide up to £8 million to boost community energy in Scotland. That includes £4 million that the Scottish Government has secured from Great British Energy to support community and local energy in Scotland, alongside £4 million of Scottish Government funding.

That programme for government commitment will help to grow the pipeline of community energy in Scotland, enabling more communities to benefit from owning their own renewable energy projects. The community energy generation growth fund is a significant expansion on last year's pilot and will help to deliver the social and financial benefits of the energy transition directly to Scotland's communities.

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** Has any consideration been given to how benefits will be spread to communities that might not, for example, be located next to a large wind farm, but might still be in need of investment? Indeed, consumers are paying for some of the transmission from wind farms.

**Gillian Martin:** There are a number of things at play. The member will be aware that, after a great deal of encouragement from the Scottish Government, the UK Government has put out a consultation on community benefits from developments that are happening in renewables. That is one area in which communities can benefit. With community energy projects, there is the option for developers to go to communities and propose community benefit as a solution—or maybe an offer—as part of their good neighbour principle.

Even if that does not happen in an area, communities can come together to contact the community and renewable energy Scotland scheme to ask for advice on how they can build their own community energy plant of whatever description. The CARES model has been shown to be very successful, so much so that it is one of the reasons why I asked the UK Government to

take money from the local power plan and put it into CARES rather than setting up a new agency.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** The cabinet secretary is setting out reasons why community ownership has significant benefits and there is very little dissent from that principle. Renewable energy has been growing dramatically for many years in Scotland. If the model that has been pursued so far has been a success, why does the cabinet secretary think that there is not a more significant share of the overall renewable energy industry in community, public or shared hands? Why do we have a very private sector-dominated industry?

**Gillian Martin:** There are a few reasons for that. Historically, communities felt that they almost had to be engineers or to have an expert in their community, and one of the reasons why we set up CARES was to share information with communities on how to implement projects. We are 55 per cent towards our target of renewable community energy generation by 2030. In large part, there has been a real step change in the number of projects because of CARES.

Of course, there are still other barriers—I will mention them in other parts of my speech—and there is a lot that we can do to bring them down. Patrick Harvie's position is absolutely right. I want the barriers to communities' ability to take forward projects to be looked at and eliminated as much as possible.

The £8 million community energy generation growth fund will boost community energy and it is a significant expansion on last year's community energy pilot. Going back to Patrick Harvie's point, we have seen success with the funding that has been given to CARES in work with communities to overcome some of those barriers. That is why we did the pilot and put the additional £8 million into it. The fund will support community groups across Scotland to develop their own wind and solar photovoltaic projects. Applications for funding are now open and will close on 25 June. Full funding guidance, including information on how to apply, can be found on the Local Energy Scotland website, which includes a list of Local Energy Scotland officials in an area with whom communities can get in touch in the first instance.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** Does the cabinet secretary believe that councils have an important role to play in supporting community organisations?

**Gillian Martin:** It is the essence of community wealth building and community empowerment that local authorities work with those in their communities who want to take up some of the opportunities in community-owned energy. I know that a lot of councils have dedicated officials,

particularly in the community empowerment space, who will be able to assist. CARES is also a vital resource and, as I have said, the Local Energy Scotland website has named individuals for each area, and communities can contact them by phone or email. That has proven to be very helpful.

The growth fund pilot that took place last year supported a wide range of activities, including feasibility studies, securing grid connections, planning and installation and build costs. Arran Community Renewables received almost £0.5 million to develop its community solar project. CARES funding supported vital work on grid connection, planning application and project management costs. The project has now been granted planning consent for a 6MW solar farm, which will be wholly owned by the community and will contribute to a benefit fund for the island. Once complete, it will become Scotland's biggest community-owned solar farm. It has been reported that it will produce enough renewable energy to meet up to one quarter of the island's domestic power needs.

Another solar project in Wallacetown in South Ayrshire demonstrates the positive impacts that community energy groups can bring to the local area. The community identified three publicly owned school buildings in Wallacetown that could host solar PV panels on their roofs. CARES support has allowed them to progress through the pre-installation phase, and the installation is due to begin this summer. The project plans to generate energy that will be used within the schools that are hosting the solar panels, which will offset their energy costs, with surplus electricity going back into the grid. Income raised from that will be used by the community to help those within the community who are feeling the worst impacts of fuel poverty.

The project is also committed to community building and education. That began with Newton primary school, whose students designed the logo for the project. All three schools have had the opportunity to learn about the solar panels that will be at their schools, with photovoltaic kits provided. I imagine that quite a lot of the renewables engineers of the future will be coming from those schools as a result. Wouldn't that be nice to see? The project has already been recognised by the University of Strathclyde as one of the community challenge projects, and students have undertaken a group project to support the development of the proposed plan for Wallacetown to be a net zero village.

That is what CARES is all about: supporting communities to participate in, drive and benefit from the energy transition to net zero emissions so as to see the real benefits of the renewable energy

sector. We are determined to ensure that all communities, including the most rural, benefit in that way.

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** What protection do your plans give to communities that do not want any more wind power infrastructure or any more battery storage?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Always speak through the chair.

**Gillian Martin:** This debate is about communities that want to have their own community-owned schemes, rather than being anything to do with planning or consents. If the member has specific concerns on planning and consents for developments, that is a separate subject, which he can write to me on. I am happy to answer all his questions on that, but I am concentrating now on community energy, which is proving to be a great boost for the communities that take forward projects.

Community energy also has a role to play in supporting off-grid communities such as the Knoydart peninsula. Knoydart is not connected to the national electricity grid and generates all its own electricity through a single hydroelectric turbine. Knoydart Renewables Ltd, or KRL, supplies most of the energy in Knoydart, and it is responsible for maintaining a 28kW hydro-power system. CARES recently provided funding to refurbish Knoydart's hydro-power scheme. That work means that it will be able to meet the peak power requirements for the community for another 40-plus years, and that has allowed new properties to be built and to be connected to the islanded electrical network.

Those projects, which are led by a wide range of communities, with their different geographies and priorities, demonstrate the impact that community energy can have. However, community energy is not the only way in which our communities can secure benefits from the energy transition. Reflecting on Maurice Golden's question to me, shared ownership, where communities take a share in a commercial renewable energy project, can also offer communities significant opportunities, and we are committed to supporting communities to access such opportunities.

CARES offers support for communities that are looking to invest in shared ownership, providing free-to-use online guidance and resources. The scheme can help communities to access funding and contractors for project management, financial matters and legal matters, and it can ensure that all communities have all the information to decide if that sort of ownership is right for them.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I very much welcome the cabinet secretary's outlining that support. Would she agree that we should also be

thinking about support for local authorities, so that they can be pioneers in Scotland? We have very few local authority schemes at the moment.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back for some of the interventions, cabinet secretary.

**Gillian Martin:** I am open to any suggestions that would mean having more local authority schemes. If there are any barriers in the way, I would like to investigate what they are with the particular local authorities concerned. I will come on to Ms Boyack's Labour amendment in a minute, because I think that there are some opportunities for discussion there.

We are progressing work on the commitment in the onshore wind sector deal to publish a framework of practical approaches to support and encourage community shared ownership models. That will assist communities, developers and funders to engage in shared ownership opportunities.

The UK Government recently published a working paper seeking views on the current voluntary approach to community shared ownership and barriers to the uptake of shared ownership. I encourage all members to look at that paper—it is a consultation of sorts—and to publicise it to their communities. We will consider the proposals in detail to ensure that they consider Scottish communities and give them the chance to benefit from investing in commercially owned renewable energy projects.

I come to the Labour amendment, which we support. The Scottish Government is committed to exploring ways in which we can maximise the opportunities that are offered by the sustainable procurement duty. That will support the development of sustainably sourced energy in Scotland and, where possible, how we incorporate locally sourced energy into the electricity that is supplied via our national framework agreement for the supply of electricity. The current framework agreement is due to expire in March 2029, so we will ensure that the next-generation framework agreement reflects the desire of the public sector in Scotland to maximise the opportunities that are offered by power purchase agreements.

Through community energy and shared ownership, as well as community benefits and the wider economic benefits from renewables, we are absolutely committed to maximising the benefits that communities see from renewable energy. Community energy supports our net zero ambitions, but it does more than that. It puts communities at the heart of the energy transition, empowering them to support their own priorities and reflecting each community's long-term needs and aspirations in a way that is just and fair. Our

£8 million community energy generation growth fund will mean that there will be more action in this area.

I look forward to participating in the debate on such an important topic.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland must increase community-owned energy production, and supports communities being aided to achieve this; welcomes that, since its inception, the Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) has advised over 1,300 organisations and provided over £67 million in funding to support over 990 projects; notes that the new Community Energy Generation Growth Fund will provide up to £8 million to boost community energy in Scotland, and believes that the development of renewables at all scales in Scotland should benefit consumers, communities and the economy.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, so those who take interventions will certainly get the time back.

14:36

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** I think that there will be a lot that we agree on this afternoon. Community-owned energy is becoming an increasingly important element in our energy production in Scotland. Local power production schemes are fast becoming a means by which our more rural communities become energy efficient and less reliant on more carbon-intensive means of energy production. They serve to bring autonomy to our rural communities, giving them a stake in their energy production, environmental sustainability and resilience for when the main grid fails due to weather or other calamities.

I join the cabinet secretary in recognising the work that has been done by Community Energy Scotland. I have spoken to many community groups that have spoken highly of the support, advice and guidance that the agency has given them, and I have spoken to MSPs about the support and advice that CES has given us through meetings in which it has patiently explained its ambitions for and frustrations about community energy production throughout Scotland. Rarely have I heard such warm words spoken of a Government body.

We know that 1.1GW of community and locally owned renewable energy capacity was in operation in Scotland in December 2024 and that the Government has a target of 2GW by 2030. That is a laudable target, although the Scottish National Party's record of achieving targets on environmental issues has not been great so far. However, I will suspend my pessimism on this occasion.

Community Energy Scotland wants the Government to distinguish between community and locally owned and solely community-owned schemes. It wants to see a separate target of 1GW of energy per year produced by community schemes, as well as the 2GW target for community and locally owned schemes that has been set by the Government. Although that might seem like a small change, it is fundamental to ensure that those schemes are run for and by communities, instead of having the possibility of larger companies taking the benefit without ensuring community support. The change would also enable us to access additional funding from the UK Government, which is focused on delivering 8GW of community energy by 2030. By bringing ourselves into line with that target, we can achieve a lot more, instead of by following the usual SNP mantra of being different for difference's sake.

While I am speaking about the relationship with the Labour Government, I want to pick up on an announcement that has been made by both Governments, each claiming it as its own. We are talking about an £8 million scheme, and I believe that it is actually £4 million from the UK Government through GB Energy and £4 million from the SNP Government. I would like to ensure that that is clarified. If it is £4 million from the Scottish Government, is that new money or has it just been repurposed from another budget line?

**Gillian Martin:** I can confirm that that is shared funding from both Governments. It has not been repurposed; it is new money. It is for the expansion of the capacity of CARES off the back of the pilot work that we did.

**Douglas Lumsden:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that important clarification. We often hear that funds have gone from one place to another, so it is good to hear that that is actually new money. However, rural communities will wait to see what benefit it actually brings in the form of inward investment and economic benefit.

My pessimism well and truly returns when it comes to the jobs promised by GB Energy. It promised 1,000 jobs, but that will take years and years.

At the heart of all the announcements are small local communities that see the potential in small local energy schemes. They want to do their bit; they see an opportunity and have the drive and passion to take it forward, but they find the process incredibly daunting. There is little in the Government's motion to suggest that that will be easier in the future, only that more money might be available.

The community groups that I have spoken to highlight some key challenges when it comes to

getting schemes from idea to delivery. A report from ClimateXChange in 2024 found three main barriers: a lack of resources, a lack of skills and a lack of community input. Nothing that the cabinet secretary has said today will change any of those things.

First, there is a lack of resources. Taking a project from idea to execution can take five years or more, which, for a community group, is a huge amount of time and resources to which few can commit. Money will not necessarily make a difference to that, although it might allow groups to buy in expertise when they need to, given that they are often volunteer groups of committed individuals who have busy and changing lives. The personnel can change frequently and it is difficult for them to see a project through, given the amount of time that is required even to fill in the necessary paperwork.

Secondly, there is a lack of skills. The ClimateXChange report refers specifically to the lack of skills within local authorities to spearhead projects, stating that

"local authority stakeholders note that there is still often a lack of skill for local energy projects in general."

That is, of course, in addition to a lack of expertise in local communities.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I understand the member's point about skills and knowledge but, as a constituency MSP, I have had a number of retired engineers from the oil and gas sector come to discuss potential projects in all aspects of renewables. I put that out there so that the member is aware of it.

**Douglas Lumsden:** I absolutely agree with Audrey Nicoll. A lot depends on skilled people, but they are not always there for the duration because the process is so long.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I never thought that I would hear myself saying this, but I agree with Douglas Lumsden. It is quite difficult for certain communities to navigate their way through the processes before us. It must be extremely difficult to benefit from these schemes in areas where people are less privileged.

**Douglas Lumsden:** There is more that we can do; if we can give our local authorities more help so that they, too, can help in that process, that would be a good thing.

Thirdly, there is a lack of community input. As I said earlier, many local energy projects are not community projects and can lack community input. Companies or housing developers are acting to develop schemes but are not including the views of the local community in their plans.

I previously mentioned the time that it takes for energy schemes to go through the planning process. The planning process for a small community wind farm is the same as for a major wind farm, and the planning process for a small hydro or tidal scheme is the same as for a big scheme. There is no proportionality in our local authority planning system.

The Scottish Conservatives want local communities to have much more say over energy projects in their area and far more proportionate planning guidance for community-owned schemes. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary agrees that the Government should consider that area in the future.

The Government's motion focuses on generation, but why not encourage more community ownership of energy storage? We are seeing an explosion in battery storage, but most schemes are being pushed through against the wishes of local communities. There is a gold rush, with developers rushing in to make a fortune by buying cheap energy and then selling it for a fortune when the wind is not blowing, and there seems to be little regulation or control. If sites are being inflicted on communities against their will, why not give those communities a stake so that it is not only the energy finance companies that benefit and communities can benefit, too?

I have spent much of my speaking time looking at the Government's motion, whose wording the amendments do not seek to amend but only to add to. I want to address the main point of our amendment, which is about how the energy is transferred into the grid. As part of its pathway to 2030, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks is proposing to build 500km of monster pylons throughout some of the most scenic areas of Scotland, and Scottish Power is planning an 80km route through the Borders, which is almost as scenic.

Deeside Against Pylons spokesman John Rahtz said:

"Our communities feel that the North of Scotland is bearing a disproportionate cost for this short-sighted proposal which is driven by cost."

Tracy Smith of Save our Mearns said that SSEN is "bulldozing through the north east".

We recently had a debate in the chamber on bringing Scotland into line with the Aarhus convention, in which we called for legal aid for communities and an environmental court to give communities a greater say when it comes to such developments, but the cabinet secretary seems to think that we are in compliance with the Aarhus convention.

This morning, I asked the cabinet secretary about changes to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and how it will affect communities. Community groups have written in and said that they will no longer take part in Scottish Government consultations as they feel ignored. The response from Scotland Against Spin says:

"we are not going to waste our time making the same arguments that have already been ignored once and which will no doubt be ignored again."

**Gillian Martin:** I said to Mr Lumsden this morning that the legislative consent memorandum actually mandates community engagement, whereas at the moment that is voluntary. It puts in law the need for companies, developers and transmission owners to engage with communities.

**Douglas Lumsden:** Once again, the cabinet secretary takes the bits that she likes but ignores the other parts. The Government is taking away the right to a public inquiry and reducing the time limit. This devolved Government should hang its head in shame. Campaign groups feel ignored as Government ministers—

**Gillian Martin:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The record will show that I said in committee this morning that the right to a public inquiry stays. Mr Lumsden is deliberately misleading the chamber.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, could I ask you perhaps to rephrase that last comment, please?

**Gillian Martin:** From what Mr Lumsden has said, I fear that he is not taking on board the facts that I laid out this morning at committee.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That was not a point of order. Please continue, Mr Lumsden.

**Douglas Lumsden:** I am sure that everyone knows that the right to an automatic public inquiry is being removed from our local communities. That is what is set out in the new legislation that is coming through, and shamefully so.

This devolved Government should hang its head in shame. Campaign groups feel ignored—that is what it is coming to—as Government ministers refuse to meet them but are happy enough to cosy up to developers. It is a David versus Goliath situation. That is why the proposed reduction from three months to six weeks of the time limit to lodge an objection to onshore energy is a disgrace. The cabinet secretary cares more about pleasing renewable energy companies than she does about standing up for local communities.

We therefore make the call again and ask the Scottish Government when it will not only put more money into community schemes but actually

resolve the systemic issues that are preventing communities from standing up to large-scale developments that are ruining our countryside.

The Scottish Conservatives want our local communities to be empowered to grow energy schemes in a proportionate way, with sensible planning and community buy-in to the process. We want them to be properly funded and assisted to not only propose schemes that are advantageous to them but oppose schemes that are detrimental to them. We do not want to see monster pylons littering our countryside with little regard for local concerns, scenery, agriculture or economic growth. It is time for this devolved Government to listen to communities and not sideline them so as to appease its renewable energy company chums.

I move amendment S6M-17648.3, to insert at end:

“recognises that community consent needs to be at the heart of energy production; notes with concern that pylons and other electricity infrastructure are increasingly being built without the support of residents, and calls on the Scottish Government to give these communities more say over local energy production.”

14:49

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I welcome today's debate because the issue of community energy is a crucial one for us to debate. As a Labour and Co-operative member, I am proud to be a member of the Edinburgh Community Solar Co-operative. I will come back to that later.

The debate is not just nice to have; it is absolutely key that we maximise our fantastic land, wind and water resources to the benefit of communities. Moreover, this is about empowering our local communities, and should also be about creating local jobs and investment, and delivering community wealth building. If we get it right—if we have effective planning—we will, potentially, also tackle our nature and climate emergencies. The issue is absolutely crucial.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government will support our Scottish Labour amendment. I constructed it as an add-on amendment. My aim is to be constructive, although, if members read our amendment, they will understand that it is about our need to go much further. I will focus on that today.

So much more needs to be done—and can be done—to ensure that more community-owned, co-operatively owned and municipally owned projects can be delivered. I totally agree with the point that Douglas Lumsden made about the huge amount of time that it takes for individual communities to do the work. It is not just a commitment of a year or two. Getting a project through is a commitment lasting years: the community needs to work up the

financial and investment side, get the project through planning, and then run it. It is a huge commitment.

We should not underestimate the challenge for local authorities, because they have had lots of cuts to their funding and they do not have the necessary dedicated staff. We need to learn from successes in areas in Scotland where community projects have been owned by authorities, so that we can spread that approach through working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities. The geography of our local authorities in Scotland means that they all have opportunities, but there are risks that need to be assessed, investment is needed and officers need skills. We need to share more. That is why I mention working with CARES, and what more Co-operative Development Scotland could do to share best practice. There is much that needs to be done.

One reason why we need to focus on why community energy has to happen relates to the discussion about having a joined-up approach. At the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee last month, we discussed constraint payments. Last year, £393 million was paid in such payments—when we had to turn wind farm turbines off—98 per cent of which was as a result of wind turbines in Scotland. We need to use that electricity now. We need to think about creating local power but we also need to think about how we use that power. For example, we could power electric vehicles, buses and trains.

**Maurice Golden:** On increasing demand in order to reduce the amount of constraint payments, what is the member's position on an electric arc furnace here in Scotland?

**Sarah Boyack:** I am not going to begin to answer that question. Let us have that conversation afterwards.

Another area that I think we have not focused on enough is heat in our communities—heat for our buildings and heat networks. The capacity is there. If we have ever more renewables, we need to think in a more joined-up way. That could involve pumped hydro storage, as well as providing a source for the use of that electricity.

Our amendment references the heat strategies that local authorities submitted last January. There is an opportunity for us—and there are huge opportunities for not-for-profit heat networks—to keep prices affordable for consumers.

Local authority or community ownership would give us more accountability. Denmark has been following best practice for decades. Throughout that time, Denmark has not just had local authority-owned heat networks; they have also

decarbonised. That is a win-win that we are not making the most of.

We have examples. Aberdeen Heat and Power was established in 2002, and I have visited it several times.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)** *rose—*

**Sarah Boyack:** I will take an intervention if it is very brief.

**Emma Harper:** I will be really brief. I apologise, Presiding Officer, I pushed the wrong button.

Does Sarah Boyack think that anaerobic digestion of dairy farm by-products and co-products, which generate a lot of heat, could be part of what we need to look at to support agriculture in getting to net zero?

**Sarah Boyack:** There are all sorts of opportunities that we are not maximising. That has been part of the discussion at the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in relation to project willow and Grangemouth. It is about more joined-up thinking in communities and nationally.

I will give another example. The Midlothian project at Shawfair is a joint-venture partnership between Midlothian Energy Company and Vattenfall, which will power 3,500 houses. The council is leading that. It is using the private sector to deliver, but there is accountability. However, we are not seeing such projects across the country. Local authorities need to push down the costs of those projects, share best practice and make sure that there is a joined-up approach.

In the Lothians, I have mentioned the Midlothian project, which is just on the other side of the Edinburgh boundary, but a huge amount of work is being done in East Lothian, too, and work is also being done by the City of Edinburgh Council.

We need a more joined-up approach. The work is very innovative, and both the Scottish Government and the UK Government should think about how we get projects going and then share that best practice with councils.

I was at an event in Galashiels last month at which people talked about Scotland beyond net zero. I have talked about urban areas, but district heating can also be a win-win in rural areas, using electricity that is produced locally but also giving councils the opportunity to use that electricity too. Again, I refer to the example of Denmark.

I also want to comment on the huge benefits for communities. I welcome the cabinet secretary's reference to the Point and Sandwick Trust. The Scottish Trades Union Congress published stats today that show that community-owned wind farms benefit communities by a factor of 34 when compared with privately owned wind farms. We are missing out there. That is why I welcome the

extra money from both GB Energy and the Scottish Government. However, it is now about how we spend that money, because communities need support now, not in a couple of years—and it is not a nice to have, but critical.

The other thing that needs to happen is land reform, so that communities get the chance to have priority access to the land when it becomes available and do their own projects. I know that my colleague Rhoda Grant has been working on that.

Community energy is also about the range of tech that could be used. I have mentioned wind, and there are also solar and hydro schemes that could be used right across urban and rural Scotland. We should have a solar plan—we have one for wind—and we should have 2030 targets. I gave the example of the Edinburgh Community Solar Co-operative. Why do we not have such projects across Scotland? It does not make sense to me. It took years for the council to agree the project, but our schools and leisure centres now have solar on the roofs. That is good for the environment and it generates income for the council.

Why is that approach not taken across Scotland? I think that it is because it is too complicated, so we need to support local authorities. It is not even about new buildings; we can retrofit existing buildings. I am glad that the cabinet secretary is now talking about supporting our amendment, and I want to highlight that retrofitting could be an additional factor that would help us to open up solar. There could also be solar in rural communities alongside agriculture. That could be more integrated—and, again, those projects could be community owned.

My next point is critical, as it is about procurement. I have spoken to people who have set up community projects that cannot get access to the Scottish Government's electricity supply contract. We need to reform procurement, given the huge opportunity that we have.

One of my former colleagues, Allan Wilson, is involved in a community project. He highlighted the difference that it would make if projects had the opportunity to access such contracts through procurement. It is a big missed opportunity if communities cannot access that £700 million contract. Why is that? If the minister were supportive of giving them that access, I would be very keen to meet her and discuss the changes that are needed, given the feedback that I have had from local communities. It is not a nice to have, but a must have. We need change.

Lots more could be done. I am keen that a constructive approach is taken today, because community energy is not a nice to have. As one of the representatives from Point and Sandwick



made clear, the project has been transformational in their community—but it has taken years and years.

I will make two final points. Why we do not use the Scottish National Investment Bank, and why we do not think about using pension investment—that is, long-term, safe investment? We need to think about new investment opportunities and make the case for using the National Wealth Fund and GB Energy. These are safe investment projects that will be successful over time. However, we need local authorities, co-operatives and communities to be empowered to make the most of them.

There is way more that we need to do. The Scottish Government has reached just over half its target for 2030, so an awful lot more will need to be done in the next four and a half years. The Scottish Labour amendment identifies the key ways in which we might make that happen.

I move amendment S6M-17648.1, to insert at end:

“; welcomes the £4 million in funding from Great British Energy to fund half of the Community Energy Generation Growth Fund; believes that, as well as community groups, councils and public sector organisations are well placed to host, or collaborate on, community renewables projects, community heat projects, municipal ownership and co-operative models; further believes that land reform should mean the chance for communities to be able to have priority access to land when it becomes available; notes that there are a range of different technologies that could be utilised for community-owned energy projects, including wind, solar and hydro schemes among others, in both urban and rural Scotland; acknowledges that the Scottish Government could help to grow the sector by opening up the government electricity supply contract to community generators, which are currently denied access to the market, whether directly through conditions of tender or indirectly through procurement; calls on public bodies to create space for community ownership where possible by making public land and buildings available to community energy groups, and calls on the Scottish Government to work productively with the UK Government to create further opportunities for communities to own a meaningful stake in energy infrastructure through partnering with Great British Energy.”

15:00

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I add my voice to those of members across the chamber who have expressed how welcome the debate is. Of course, by their nature, the amendments do not all come from the same point of view, but I note that they all seek to add something to the motion rather than to delete anything from it. That demonstrates that there is at least some consensus on what the Scottish Government has to say, even if Opposition parties think that more needs to be said.

Unlike the Conservative amendment, the Scottish Labour and Green amendments bring

positive ideas to the table, which is the intention behind both of them. The amendment in my name sets out the positive steps that will need to be taken if we are to maximise the public, environmental, social and economic benefits of having community, public and shared not-for-profit ownership of our energy infrastructure.

We are at a critical point in the transition to a sustainable energy system, but we are also at a point at which people are struggling with their energy bills. Political parties across the UK are beginning to be too willing to accept pushback against the idea of an energy transition, and some parties are either heeding or even peddling the misinformation that is coming from anti-climate action or anti-net zero voices, including those that are funded by the corporate fossil fuel giants.

Therefore, we are at a pretty dangerous point in relation to how our political landscape is dealing with the energy transition. Most members of the public want climate action, and they embrace the idea of a future that prioritises renewables. However, it is critical that we recognise the need to continue to earn, and to reinforce, that support for an urgent transition. To do so, we must ensure that people benefit from it, but many are rightly cynical about the profit motives of an overwhelmingly privatised energy system.

A key part of the energy transition must be not only replacing the past century's dirty fossil-fuel power generation with renewables but rebalancing the ownership of our energy system. It is a case not only of putting the power to generate electricity into local communities, but of putting its ownership into their hands. In short, we should not swap a bunch of fossil-fuel multinationals for a set of renewable multinationals. We have an opportunity to transform ownership of our energy system, and to transform its economic benefit, too.

None of this is new, and none of it is rocket science. It is all stuff that other countries have done successfully for years, decades or even generations before now. Many other European countries have high levels of public, community and not-for-profit ownership of energy infrastructure. I am pleased that the debate gives us an opportunity to focus on the issue. However, as I said in my intervention on the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy, we must recognise that, despite the long-term growth in renewables, which is extremely positive in its own right, we have not seen a substantial part of that growing renewables sector being put into community hands.

I express my thanks to Community Energy Scotland, the Scottish community coalition on energy and Social Enterprise Scotland for their briefings in support of the debate. They make it clear that, although some corporate, privately

owned projects make community benefit payments available, the benefit that comes from community ownership projects is many times more substantial than those community benefit payments. All the benefit that flows from such projects can be put back to social and environmental use in the community, thereby providing a direct social benefit in addition to the direct benefit of increased renewable capacity, as well as a change in the relationship between people and the energy that we consume. That cultural change needs to go hand in hand with the practical infrastructure changes if we are to continue to earn, reinforce and retain public support.

There is a great deal that we need to do more of, both in providing access to capital for new projects and in repowering existing projects. Publicly owned assets can be used to lever in the capital that is needed.

As several members have remarked, we also need to make public land available for community energy. Public bodies that are responsible for managing large swathes of Scotland's public land, such as Forestry and Land Scotland, already host large numbers of renewable energy projects, but few of those projects are community owned. Such bodies have an opportunity to step in and increase the transfer of energy assets into community hands at the point of lease renewals.

A recent opportunity to do that on the Cowal peninsula in Argyll and Bute was missed. Cowal Community Energy was not able to enter the tendering process, which was designed to attract bids from corporate players. When the cabinet secretary or the minister responds to the debate, I hope that they will respond on that particular issue. Are they aware of how that barrier came about? What could they do to prevent such opportunities from being missed in the future?

**Sarah Boyack:** The member's amendment makes a point about

"diversifying the ownership of existing energy assets".

Would an example of that include, when repowering is taking place, a company thinking about possibly donating one or two of the turbines to the local community so that the local community could own those turbines? We have the example—if we go way back—of Fintry, where the local community negotiated an element of that wind farm. The issue is not about nationalising projects; it is about having a share in projects and working constructively to give communities that opportunity.

**Patrick Harvie:** Both repowering and lease renewal for land can be trigger points or opportunities to achieve that. We perhaps need to go a little further than simply encouraging the private sector to maybe donate a little and instead

make it a requirement, so that we see a significant increase.

There is also an opportunity to improve the situation through the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. I hope that the bill will be amended at stages 2 and 3 so that we can take advantage of that opportunity.

Before I close, I will say something about heat. There is also a huge opportunity in the urban landscape for the transformation of our energy system. It is a real necessity that we achieve that, which creates an opportunity for benefits in areas that do not have access to wind farm sites, for example.

Denmark is 50 years ahead of Scotland in that regard, and it has shown that a non-profit approach can achieve the transformational change that it has put into practice. That approach creates community benefit—it puts the community benefit first—but it can also earn and retain public support, and we need to do much more to make that a reality in Scotland.

The energy transformation that is required is not only about rural communities, although it is significant in those rural communities that have wind and solar developments, where we need to retain public support for infrastructure, rather than demonising infrastructure, as some seem tempted to do at the moment. However, our urban landscape also needs to transform, and the public and community ownership of energy infrastructure in our urban landscape is equally important.

I again express support for the Labour amendment, and I hope that the Government is supportive of the Green amendment.

I move amendment S6M-17648.2, to insert at end:

"; acknowledges that any significant increase in public, community and shared ownership of energy infrastructure will require new and increased forms of support from the Scottish Government, including making public land available for energy projects and diversifying the ownership of existing energy assets; considers that community ownership of heat networks offers further opportunities to maximise the social, economic and environmental benefit of heat decarbonisation, and calls on the Scottish Government to build on its relationship with Denmark to draw on its experience of both shared ownership of renewables and developing heat networks built and operated on a not-for-profit basis."

15:09

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats this afternoon.

Last week, when I was speaking in the debate on island communities, I highlighted the feelings of those in Shetland who consider that the

community interest in not being best served by the Viking Energy wind farm. I said:

“The irony is not lost on Shetland, where we see the Viking wind farm reportedly generating as little as 17 per cent of its capacity and being paid enormous sums to constrain production as it is considered that the energy infrastructure is not able to cope with higher generation.”—*[Official Report, 21 May 2025; c 45.]*

Those constraint payments reportedly reached almost £10 million by December 2024, dwarfing the Shetland Community Benefit Fund, which its website states pays out a little more than £2.2 million annually.

The feeling at home is that if we live with it, we should benefit from it, just as we did from agreements reached with the oil industry 50 years ago.

Although reaching our net zero targets is a benefit to all communities globally, locally, compensation payouts for years of disruption have been overshadowed by a lack of foresight and infrastructure readiness as Viking’s generating power is reduced.

My Liberal Democrat Highland colleague Angus MacDonald MP has successfully shepherded party policy for plans that would deliver community benefits from renewables, and he held a debate in Westminster advocating fair compensation for local communities that host renewable projects. Similarly, early this year, Shetland Islands Council councillors backed a new set of principles around community benefits that are to be used in future negotiations with energy developers.

Community buy-in is critical and offshoring energy infrastructure such as with wind turbines has been heralded as a great opportunity. Often, however, such advocates should be careful not to run into the trap of disregarding the fishing sector.

Our fishing fleet, as well as consisting of generations of family businesses, provides us with nutritious, low-carbon, high-protein food. Squeezing out the fishing industry from traditional fishing grounds for renewables harms island and coastal communities. We must ensure that the Scottish and UK Governments and developers have a greater awareness and understanding of the reality of spatial squeeze, of the potential long-term consequences for that traditional industry and of the impact on marine ecosystems.

Just as there is objection to infrastructure on land, there is objection to infrastructure at sea. There is no place to banish this infrastructure to either.

**Sarah Boyack:** I recently saw a briefing about the impact of sea-based turbines and how they can benefit fishing communities in the long run as they can create potential food sources for fish on

the sea bed. Is it not a question of ensuring that all the projects properly assess the opportunities and then deliver them when they are being built, so that nature and our fishing industry benefits?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, Beatrice Wishart.

**Beatrice Wishart:** We need to see scientific evidence of that, and it needs to be robust. I note that moving fishing vessels off traditional grounds is causing considerable concern to members of my constituency.

Where infrastructure must exist, it should be built with consideration and communication with all stakeholders and communities.

Shetland is home to the 4.5MW Garth wind farm, on the island of Yell, which has produced more than 90,000MW of energy to date. That £8.3 million investment is a community wind farm that is undertaken by the enterprising North Yell Development Council. The funds that are generated enable the organisation to invest in community projects, including in the industrial estate extension and in the development of the marina at Cullivoe pier. It has enabled the employment of three full-time members of staff and funding to various local community groups. The wind farm is an asset that brings benefits to the North Yell community and will continue to do so for years to come. It is an exemplar of what can be achieved in relation to practical community benefit.

Shetland Heat Energy and Power—SHEAP—has delivered district heating to homes and public buildings, including the hospital, schools and leisure centre in Lerwick, for the past 25 years. It is based on a Danish model. Customers have been spared soaring energy costs in recent years. Its income from sales of around £1 million a year stays in Shetland. The project, which was once considered unusual, is now being taken rather more seriously in policy circles.

We know that our energy infrastructure is ageing, that we will have to transition from legacy fuels and reduce demand and that we need an energy mix for the foreseeable future. Shetland is ready to contribute on all fronts from the development of renewables and from continued oil and gas supply. I believe that those who are making national energy decisions fail to recognise the importance of gas from Rosebank, which would be exported through the west of Shetland pipeline system. It would pass through Sullom Voe and end up in the UK grid, thereby reducing reliance on imported gas. That contribution to the UK’s energy security should not be ignored.

Generating power locally makes sense in so far as it reduces the inevitable loss of power between generation and destination.

If communities are presented with manageable renewables projects, as opposed to vast arrays that dominate the horizon, they are more likely to be in favour of a project, especially if it will bring benefits for the community. The benefit of adding sustainable jobs in local places is a selling point to communities that are presented with such projects. As the energy sector transitions, we must support our workers and ensure that we do not see a repeat of communities being decimated as people are cast out of their jobs.

Much more, of course, needs to be done in terms of housing and making it easier to upgrade properties with energy-efficiency measures such as greater insulation and modern heating systems. Community benefit funds can help to enable progress on that front.

Increasing community-owned energy generation projects is a sensible path forward. The Scottish Government should work to ensure that any barriers to the development of such projects are minimised so that they can support the supply chain and resource availability.

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

15:16

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I admit that I find this area—communities finding varied routes to benefit from green energy projects such as turbines, solar panels, battery storage and hydro—quite confusing. Maybe that is just me. However, I have a suspicion that the communities that could benefit will not, as I have said before, be in deprived areas, where folk could do with cheaper energy or funding for their area through the community benefit system.

With the exception of community benefits from wind farm developments that have been negotiated by communities with developers, I do not know of any communities that have utilised those routes. I will continue my investigation. Projects in my constituency that have come from community benefit funding, such as the Oxtown Community Shop and the redevelopment of the Crook Inn and associated buildings high in the hills at Tweedsmuir, are examples that come immediately to mind, but they have been going for some time now, and involve very skilled members of those communities.

Therefore, I am pleased to read that under CARES, the Scottish Government is committed to updating the good practice principles for negotiating community benefit. I would be interested in hearing from the Government what the updating will be, why, and whether the principles will be simplified.

**Gillian Martin:** I can provide Christine Grahame with some clarity. We have put out our good practice principles—they are out now. However, as has been mentioned already in the debate, a legislative consent motion went to committee this morning that was about mandating community engagement.

None of those are delivered by CARES. CARES is about supporting communities that want to have a community energy project. Given that Christine Grahame has said that she has not been able to find any examples of its work in her constituency, I would advise her to look into Local Energy Scotland, which has dedicated staff for her area. They might be able to advise her on what is already happening, and she can put her constituents in touch with those staff if they want to support any new developments.

**Christine Grahame:** Lesson learned, cabinet secretary—thank you very much for that.

Returning to the issue, there is the rare opportunity for a community to have the option of buying shares in a wind farm development. However, I think that that is more of a wish-list item, because the capital required to do that would be substantial, and, frankly—although I am probably going to get told off again—I do not know of any community in my constituency that has bought shares in a private development. I note, though, that the cabinet secretary made reference to Government support. Perhaps in her summing up that can be clarified.

I have what might be a daft question, but I will ask it anyway. Would it be possible for a local authority, or in this case the Scottish Government, to give planning authorities the flexibility to introduce either community benefit or share options as—and I emphasise this—a condition of planning consent? At the moment, it is voluntary and negotiated. I do not know the answer to that, but I think that the cabinet secretary is about to rise and tell it to me.

**Gillian Martin:** The Scottish Government has been calling for the mandating of community benefits. We did not have any luck with the previous UK Government, but the current UK Government has put out a consultation. I think that it went out last week, and I look forward to seeing its results.

**Christine Grahame:** I note that the issue is, of course, reserved. However, we are talking about having something whereby there is some sort of muscle, by giving communities the power to have ownership and enabling local authorities to exercise planning conditions.

I have to say that some companies seem to be in more of a negotiating mode with communities. For example, through the Longmuir renewable

energy and biodiversity project in my constituency, Galileo Empower is developing proposals for a renewable energy and biodiversity project on land approximately 4.5km north of the village of Stow. That is only in the initial stages, but the proposals are for up to 10 turbines, with co-location of solar photovoltaics and a battery energy storage system. The developer also proposes a renewable electricity discount scheme, known as REDS, which will result in cheaper electricity generated by the project being distributed to locally designated areas. In addition, a 10 per cent community ownership stake will be provided. The project is in the early days, and I am unclear whether that 10 per cent has to be bought by the community or is just part of the contract.

That brings me to CARES, the community and renewable energy scheme. I note that, since its inception, it has advised more than 1,300 organisations and provided £67 million in funding to communities throughout Scotland. However, now that the scheme is reopening again and various communities can bid for support from the £8 million Government fund, which closes in September and is capped, I recommend that my constituent communities do not waste time but apply PDQ. That fund could help communities to install wind turbines and solar panels or develop other types of renewable energy generation, such as hydro, which would meet local needs.

I will end on the wider benefits of community ownership. I think that Patrick Harvie referenced the fact that the local economic return from a community-owned wind turbine is 34 times greater than that from a privately owned one. That is much better even than the current community benefit arrangement. Such schemes would, of course, get higher public support, as 62 per cent of people back community-owned energy projects in their areas.

A report referenced by Social Enterprise Scotland said:

"in terms of sheer size, the benefit payments from community owned wind farms far exceed the payments from private wind farms."

I hope that today's debate opens up opportunities for communities in my constituency, and I will certainly be publicising those.

15:22

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am pleased to speak in the debate, which is on a subject that is of great importance to my Highlands and Islands region. As others have done, I recognise the benefit of community owned energy and of the projects right across the region, particularly where they help to increase and support local resilience, which is

important. However, I will focus on the Scottish Conservative amendment and the challenges that communities across my region face from energy infrastructure.

There is a growing frustration and anger from those living and running businesses across the Highlands and Islands who feel under siege from large-scale energy projects being forced on our communities. For years, many have been subjected to wind farms from which they see little or no benefit, as power flows past their homes but their bills keep on rising. In Shetland, fuel poverty is an ever-present issue for many households, despite the islands hosting onshore wind farms producing hundreds of megawatts. As Beatrice Wishart mentioned, the Viking wind farm was supposed to power around half a million homes, although, as she rightly said, some of the concerns over those figures have not been met. However, that does not keep bills in Shetland down.

New onshore wind farms continue to be given the green light and existing sites continue to grow, despite millions of pounds of taxpayers' money being spent every year on constraint payments. In 2024, those payments rose to £380 million. That money is not going into local communities; it often goes into the coffers of multinational companies and, in many cases, national Governments, such as those of China, the United Arab Emirates, France and Ireland.

**The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan):** I absolutely accept the importance of the issue that he raises about constraint payments. I am sure that he will agree that the authorities at UK level need to be involved in the debate that he has just raised, because it relates to issues that are all reserved.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** A lot of those issues are around planning, so they are the responsibility of the Scottish Government, which cannot keep washing its hands of every issue. The minister's Government has responsibility for this issue, and I will come on to a little later.

The issue is not just the turbines but the pylons, transformers and huge battery storage sites, as others have mentioned. Communities are having invasive industrialisation forced on them. A week or so ago, I met residents who are being impacted by proposals for a substation at Fanellan. Some want to sell their homes but are being told that interest in their property is being reduced because of the proposals; others want to stay and fight the proposals, which they are concerned are for a site in the wrong place.

As I raised with the SNP Government in a question only last week, those residents and others across the country simply do not have the

money, resource or expertise to contest such plans. They are up against massive companies with huge financial and legal resources, so how do they compete with them? I asked the minister that exact question. I asked him what support does

“the Scottish Government provide ... for local communities to access legal and regulatory advice, or does it expect local people to foot the bill to protect their homes and their local communities?”—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2025; c 15.]

His response was to just deflect, which I guess answers the question for those communities. You have to protect your own communities, because the SNP Government certainly will not.

The same issues are faced by communities across the Highlands and Islands. At Glenelg, there are plans for a new route for power lines, which threatens one of Scotland's most iconic views—one enjoyed by thousands of people every year as they take the Glenelg ferry to Skye. The issue is not only the infrastructure but those undertaking its development. Two large accommodation camps are planned around Broadford on Skye, which will bring hundreds of workers into small communities, which local residents fear do not have the facilities and amenities to cope with them. The community's very nature risks being impacted—and impacted for many years.

In my recent surgery in Dalwhinnie, those who are impacted by the Earba pumped storage hydro project highlighted their concerns. Such concerns are common among so many across the region. What will the impact be on those who live near the project? How will local roads, which are sometimes single track only, cope with increased traffic volumes? How will the work be co-ordinated with other major projects, such as the dualling of the A9—if that happens—in order to avoid the perfect storm of disruption? The most frustrating, and most commonly asked question, is: why can local communities not be kept better informed by developers and Government?

For many of the communities that I have spoken of today, the issue is about not only planning but democracy and power. Many of us in the Highlands and Islands support renewable energy in principle, but what we oppose is the current model, which puts corporate interests and national targets over community voices. To hit those targets, the SNP is pushing a top-down energy policy that is leaving residents and local communities feeling ignored, sidelined and sacrificed. There is a serious democratic deficit, with planning decisions often overriding local objections; local consultations and engagement are tokenistic at best; and too many residents learn of new projects only when the approval process is already well advanced.

Anger is so great because there is a feeling that the unprecedented concentration of proposed energy developments would never be tolerated in the central belt, that our communities are being exploited in a way that Government politicians would never allow in their own areas, and that our communities and homes are threatened by a wave of central-belt environmental imperialism.

I remind everyone of what the Scottish Conservatives are calling for today in our amendment:

“Community consent needs to be at the heart of energy production ... pylons and other electricity infrastructure are increasingly being built without the support of residents ... and the Scottish Government should give communities more say over local energy production.”

There is nothing in the Scottish Conservatives amendment that any MSP who is truly representing their constituents' wishes should oppose. They should support our amendment or answer to their constituents if they do not.

15:29

**Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP):** Like a number of those who have made contributions so far, I have witnessed at first hand the benefits of the CARES scheme in my constituency, and when I was the energy secretary, I saw at first hand the installation of Archimedes' screws, wind turbines and solar panel facilities.

One of the benefits that I have noticed over recent years has been CARES renewable energy projects in which a local community has managed a community asset in order to generate its own energy and become much more energy efficient. The scheme has a lot to commend it. I welcome the fact that the UK Government is now moving down a route in which it is looking to support community energy programmes much more extensively in England and Wales. The CARES programme is very good, and we should continue to develop it.

It is also worth reflecting on some of the challenges with the CARES programme. In my constituency, some of the challenges relate to a lack of knowledge about what is available, being able to develop a project and understanding how to go about doing that. That brings me to the issue that some of the community assets that have been transferred are in communities where, to some degree, there is a lack of capacity to take on a complex renewable energy project. We can see at first hand the benefits that communities get from such projects, but some of the communities that would benefit the most from them are the ones that struggle to have the capacity to take on what can be fairly complex projects. Although I know that Local Energy Scotland does a tremendous amount of work with communities and community

groups, the issues can be complex not just from a technical perspective but, often, from a funding perspective, because such projects involve multiparty funding. There can be funding through the CARES programme or Scottish Power's community programme, and other philanthropic organisations might be making contributions to the project. Aligning all that funding can, at times, be challenging.

I want to reflect on some of the wider issues relating to community energy and the ability to expand and develop shared ownership of energy assets. We are at a crucial time in our energy transition. We have an abundant amount of renewable energy potential and a significant pipeline of renewable energy projects that are in development or being progressed. Although we can see the value of those projects, the renewable energy industry faces challenges and questions from communities and the public about what benefit they will get from those assets. That is understandable, because some of the communities that experience the greatest levels of fuel poverty are the ones where assets are being built. That might be wind turbines, or it might relate to the transmission network, which has an impact on those communities, too. There is a genuine issue with communities feeling that, too often, things are being done to them rather than with them in the transition of our energy sector. We need to do much more to address the concerns that communities have and the challenges that they face.

Greater community ownership will assist us in achieving that. It does not necessarily need to be whole ownership; there could be shared ownership of some of the significant assets that are being built. We need to consider not just small onshore wind farms but offshore assets and significant assets such as hydro pump storage. How do we ensure that communities have genuine ownership of such assets alongside the commercial developers of them? The evidence shows that, if we can achieve that much more effectively by embedding the principles of community wealth building in relation to such assets, communities will be much more willing to see the benefits that they could get from those assets. It might be that they bring money into the local area, and shared ownership of assets has, in some cases, resulted in reduced energy costs for the local community—I am happy to share information on those schemes with Christine Grahame. Therefore, shared ownership can help us to overcome some of the challenges.

As others have mentioned, progress has been made in other countries. For example, the Community Energy Scotland briefing shows starkly the way in which Denmark has been able to embed community ownership of wind assets

since 2008; 52 per cent of its wind assets are now community owned. The figure is less than half a per cent here in Scotland. Although we have been making progress, we could do much more. The industry recognises that it is helpful to communities if they feel that they are partners and have some ownership.

The final point that I would make is about the way in which we can use Scottish Government-owned facilities and assets. How can we utilise the land that is owned by Forestry and Land Scotland and Scottish Water to support local communities considering community energy-based projects? Collectively, we are doing well, but we can do better. I have no doubt that the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary will be determined to make sure that we drive that forward in the process of widening out the way in which the CARES programme is operating.

15:35

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** Community Energy Scotland and the Scottish community coalition on energy have provided a briefing for the debate. The points that they make are well worth putting on the record. They say:

"We have abundant renewables potential and considerable capacity in the pipeline; however, the industry is facing challenges, including securing sufficient investment and public support. At the same time, energy bills and fuel poverty levels are still far too high, and many people feel powerless when it comes to the energy transition. We recognise that many communities feel that it's being done to them, not with them or for them.

Community ownership of energy addresses all of these challenges:

It puts communities in control, enabling them to make choices about location and design of developments that suit their own needs;

It provides greater financial benefit for local economies. Community-owned turbines provide 34x more funding per Megawatt to the local community than privately-owned turbines;

Community and shared ownership increases public support for renewables. 62% of the public would support community-owned energy in their area. This should translate into improved investor confidence and support project delivery.

Without increased community and shared ownership, Scotland's net zero target may be at risk. But if we can grow community ownership, we can increase support for clean energy, while powering true community wealth building. We can ensure a just energy transition for Scotland's communities."

Community Energy Scotland and the Scottish community coalition on energy argue that

"The Scottish Government can support the growth of community energy in Scotland by:

1. Setting a statutory target for community energy; we recommend 1GW of wholly community-owned energy by

2030. This should be distinct from the 2GW target for local- and community-owned energy. We should ensure that Scotland plays its part in meeting the UK target of 8GW of community energy by 2030. This will allow us to leverage in more UK Government funding.”

It is crucial that both Governments work together on that.

The briefing continues:

“2. Making space for community energy on public land. Forestry and Land Scotland alone hosts over 1GW of wind capacity on its land, all in private ownership. There is a significant opportunity for a portion of this to transfer into community ownership when the current leases expire. The recent test case at Cruach Mhor on the Cowal peninsula was a missed opportunity for full community ownership. Scottish Government should issue guidance to land-owning public bodies that they should give local community bodies the opportunity to acquire new or ‘repowering’ leases before putting them out to tender on the open market. (Repowering is when the technology needs upgrading before continuing to operate.)

3. Setting an industry-wide good practice benchmark for shared ownership offers; we recommend 20% as the minimum stake offered to local communities. This would bring Scotland in line with Denmark, where a policy of 20% minimum shared ownership since 2008 has led to around 52% of wind in Denmark being citizen-owned (compared to 0.2% in Scotland), and has allowed the country to move faster in decarbonising its energy mix. Scottish Government could set a voluntary benchmark by updating its Good Practice Principles for Shared Ownership, and renewables projects on public land could be required to meet this benchmark.

4. Enabling local authorities to buy energy directly from community energy groups. This would mean lower costs for the local authority and a guaranteed income for the community group, retaining wealth in the community. The next revision of the National Framework Agreement for the Supply of Electricity should enable local authorities who use the framework to buy a percentage of their power from local communities.

5. Provide multi-year funding for community energy and heat projects. The recent increase in Scottish Government funding for community energy is very welcome, and will allow more communities to access additional private ... finance. However, projects are being held back by short funding timescales. Longer timescales to utilise the funding, which enable the majority of construction work to happen outwith the winter months, would unlock more growth in the sector. There is also a need for a new support programme for community-led development and ownership of heat networks, to meet growing community interest in this area.”

I hope that the Scottish Government will consider those five proposals and will give serious consideration to the points that are being made.

14:52

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I am delighted to take part in today’s debate on growing community-owned energy in Scotland—and to have the chance, once more, to talk up Aberdeen. With “Energy” in the title of today’s debate, let me start, as I do every time that happens, by reminding folk that Aberdeen, part of

which I represent, is the energy capital of Europe and the future net zero capital of the world. More relevant to today’s debate, Aberdeen is home to Scotland’s first urban community hydro energy project, the very well named Donside hydro. The Donside hydro is owned by Aberdeen Community Energy, which was set up by the Donside community association with the aim of helping to make Donside village a sustainable community.

At this point, as the MSP for Aberdeen Donside, I feel it is important to note that the Donside hydro, the Donside community association and Donside village are all in the constituency of Aberdeen Central. It is really not confusing at all.

The Donside hydro does not just have a fantastic name; it won the Scottish green energy award in 2016 and it is Aberdeen’s first community energy scheme. Unfortunately, it is also currently our city’s only community generation project. That needs to change.

Scotland is an energy-rich country, and Aberdeen has been at the heart of it for half a century. Far too few folk are getting the benefits from that energy, however. Over 50 years, we have seen billions of pounds of oil and gas revenues make their way to Westminster and to private shareholders. In the energy capital of Europe, far too many of my constituents are living in fuel poverty, far too many are struggling to pay their energy bills and far too many are scared to put on the heating when it gets cold outside.

The move to net zero will give us a chance to do some things differently. It is not just about how we harness the energy, but about how the benefits from our doing so are shared. They must be shared in a way that benefits all and not just the few.

I have seen enough of how community energy projects can work in the north-east to know that we need to do more. In Donside—that is the bit in the constituency of Aberdeen Central—the Archimedes screw scheme generates clean renewable energy for homes and businesses. It is a scheme that shows how renewable energy is generated and supports education around that, and it produces a fund that supports local community initiatives.

Elsewhere in the north-east, in Alexander Burnett’s constituency of Aberdeenshire West, Huntly has taken a similar approach but with a wind turbine instead of a hydro project. It has used its proceeds, along with much funding, in an impressive way.

Those are both great examples of Scotland’s natural resources benefiting local communities. I want to see more benefit from our vast renewable resource for communities, consumers, the wider



economy and, I hope, at some point soon, my constituents.

Before I comment on the amendments to the motion, I feel that it is important to recognise that every single amendment is an addendum and that there is a lot of common ground among members when it comes to community energy. I will now focus on some of the ground that we do not have in common.

Douglas Lumsden has previously made no secret of his position on pylons, but here is the thing: not that long ago, if you had said that Scotland would be able to export its wind and sell it to England, you would have gotten some very strange looks. We now have that opportunity—we just need to install the infrastructure. I fully accept that that infrastructure should support lower bills. People should see a more tangible link between pylons going up and their electricity bills coming down. Unfortunately, a lot of that comes down to the UK Government and to GB Energy.

That brings me to the Labour amendment. I will never say no to money being made available to communities in Scotland, but with billions of pounds being taken out of Scotland's energy industry by the windfall tax, I am sure that the UK Government could afford to loosen the purse strings just a wee bit more.

Unfortunately, none of the technology that we have discussed today can harness energy from hot air, so I will draw my remarks to a close. We know that the future of energy is renewables, and community ownership puts renewable energy generation into the hands of folk and communities across Scotland. I will always support and fight for the idea of Scotland's future being in Scotland's hands, and I look forward to seeing more locally generated power benefiting communities across Scotland in years to come.

15:47

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Despite energy featuring so heavily in debates in the chamber week in, week out, I have learned a lot while preparing for today's debate. It has been really helpful to understand a bit more about the community energy landscape, the opportunities that are created by Scotland's community energy generation growth fund and the challenges that are faced, and how we can respond in general terms with regard to developing community energy opportunities.

We have already heard that, as well as generating renewable energy through large-scale projects, it makes sense to have smaller-scale projects bringing together households or businesses—or both—to create community energy schemes. As members would expect, there are

many wind and hydro projects in rural areas of Scotland, making the most of our natural resources to reach our interim target of 2GW of renewable energy capacity in local ownership by 2030.

Wind turbine projects seem to be the most common option, even if they are sometimes a bit controversial. Hydro schemes seem viable but limited, due to requiring communities to be located near a watercourse. There are many other options, too, including district heat networks. The city of Aberdeen hosts several district heat networks, including in my constituency, supplying low-cost energy to homes, public buildings and businesses. With strong political leadership, funding and policy clarity, heat networks offer opportunities to maximise the benefit of heat decarbonisation. One business in my constituency produces significant heat as a byproduct of the process that it uses to produce fishmeal. That heat could contribute to the local district heat network scheme but, to date, that has proved to be unsuccessful.

I welcome the Scottish Government's new £8 million community energy generation growth fund, which will support local communities to install wind turbines and solar panels or to develop other types of renewable energy generation, such as hydro, to heat and power local homes and businesses. Significant progress has already been made thanks to the work of CARES, which we have heard about and which has provided more than £67 million of funding to more than 990 community projects. I enjoyed listening to Michael Matheson outlining some of the benefits that CARES has already delivered in his constituency and beyond.

I am grateful to everyone who assisted me in thinking about some points that are worth further exploration and some challenges that I do not think are insurmountable.

The first challenge is definition. The "Community Ownership in Scotland User Guide", published in 2024, defines a community according to its geography, but the problem for developers is the risk that someone will be left out. There will always be a line on the map and a community on the wrong side of that line.

Are community groups the right target for community ownership? As we have already heard, not every community has the experience, expertise or desire to engage with those opportunities, so how can we enable communities to consider community energy projects in the first place? Which models work well, are outcome-driven and can genuinely be delivered by communities? Will they be able to raise the capital to invest or to buy up to, say, 10 per cent of a project? Is there flexibility that can make investment more attractive, for example by offering

the option of making, say, a 5 per cent investment?

Other speakers have highlighted the potential role of local authorities in supporting community energy projects, whether by the provision of land or by investing in projects—if, indeed, they are permitted to do so.

**Sarah Boyack:** The point is that we have loads of experience, and what we need to do is package that up and share it with communities, so that they can make the choice that will work for them, regardless of community size or where they are in Scotland.

**Audrey Nicoll:** I agree 100 per cent. There may be a specific piece of work to look at how we can do that, and I would be happy to be part of that work.

We have already heard about the possibility of communities investing in projects outwith their geographical area. Not all communities are created equal with regard to their ability to create energy, so is there scope to develop a system to share the funds that are generated by our renewable energy? Communities may feel that something is their project and that they are the ones impacted by it, but such restrictions might cut off communities that could benefit from additional investment and revenue. How might investors respond when presented with a project that includes an obligation to sell a percentage on to a community partner? I think that many investors would welcome that opportunity, but how would that sit with their obligations? That links to Patrick Harvie's well made distinction between community ownership and community benefit.

What sources of investment would community projects require, over and above funding? I note that the UK Government's recent call for evidence on community energy projects cited funding as the biggest barrier, so the announcement of funding from the Scottish Government is really welcome.

I also note the commitment by GB Energy to provide £20 million over the next financial year to support community projects, and hope that we will see tangible benefits coming to Scotland. There is no doubt that community energy projects have the potential to leave a lasting legacy and that developers, Governments and the public want to be part of that.

I commend the work of Community Energy Scotland, the Scottish Government and the many other organisations and stakeholders that work in that space. It is important that communities understand the likely parameters and economic realities of community investment or shared ownership schemes, which will help to strengthen the social contract around renewables, ensuring that it is truly just, fair and lasting.

15:55

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)**

**(Con):** Like many colleagues who are here today, I support the principle behind the motion, which is the expansion of community-owned energy in Scotland. However, principles must be matched by practice, and that is where I am going to rain on the cabinet secretary's parade, because in Dumfries and Galloway that is simply not happening.

The Scottish Conservative amendment rightly states that

"community consent needs to be at the heart of energy production",

yet I do not believe that that principle has ever been taken seriously in my region, and it is still being routinely ignored.

In just the past three years, the energy consents unit has approved 30 wind farm, pylon and battery storage schemes in Dumfries and Galloway. Many of the wind turbines are over 150m in height, and some exceed 200m. They are not small-scale, community-led projects but industrial-scale developments that are often driven by external developers with little local accountability.

Meanwhile, our planning system is overwhelmed. Dumfries and Galloway Council's planning department is under immense pressure, with delays and backlogs that prevent proper scrutiny. Applications must be assessed strictly in order of receipt, regardless of scale or urgency—an approach that benefits developers and not communities.

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** Does Finlay Carson share my concern that communities—particularly in the south-west, but across the south of Scotland, such as those who are affected by the Scoop Hill development outside Moffat—find that developers come back time and time again with applications that are variations on the same theme? Developers have to win only once, whereas the community has to stand up to developments repeatedly.

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

**Finlay Carson:** I absolutely agree. It is exhausting for people who live in the footprints of wind farms. They win one battle and then another challenge comes along.

In that vein, I note that section 36 applications for developments over 50MW bypass local decision making entirely, and councils can only object or not object. If they do not object, the Scottish Government can approve the project without a public inquiry. That process sidelines local voices and centralises power in Edinburgh.

Public opposition is widespread. Community councils and residents have submitted hundreds of objections, citing landscape degradation, wildlife disruption and cumulative visual impact, yet those concerns are too often dismissed without explanation. Even well-organised campaigns such as Save Our Hills Dumfries and Galloway and Galloway Without Pylons are struggling to be heard. Right now, they are fighting a totally inappropriate application for wind turbines right on top of one of the region's jewels—the historic area of outstanding natural beauty that is Glentworth.

**Audrey Nicoll:** I point out—this seems to get missed in the chamber quite a bit, regardless of which side of the debate members are on—the number of stakeholders that have a say and exercise control over the whole system with regard to pylons, consenting and the expansion of the grid. It is not just the Scottish Government.

**Finlay Carson:** I appreciate that, but right now these applications are being dealt with by the energy consents unit in the Scottish Government and, more often than not, local opinions are being ignored.

Fifty community councils across the region have called for a moratorium on new wind farm consents. They point to data from NatureScot that shows that southern Scotland has more proposed onshore wind developments than any other part of the country. According to the Scottish Government's figures, south-west Scotland hosts 21 per cent of all the onshore wind turbines in Scotland. That is a disproportionate burden by any measure. Studies show that the impacts on property values and tourism are very negative.

However, in March, the energy minister insisted that the Government should focus on renewables, without offering any clarity on how much industrialisation is too much for rural Scotland. We already have overcapacity in Galloway and there is no clear plan for when or where that industrialisation will stop.

**Douglas Lumsden:** On what Finlay Carson was saying about community groups, does he share my concern that no Scottish ministers seem to meet community groups that are opposed to much of the overdevelopment, but they are happy to meet companies such as SSEN or Scottish Power Energy Networks?

**Finlay Carson:** Absolutely. That is a real concern. The excuse is that they cannot get involved in individual planning matters but, right now, I am happy to invite the minister down to Galloway to speak to those groups, not on a specific planning application but on the widespread proliferation of wind farms across the region and the detriment to local communities.

The issue of overcapacity is why, earlier this year, I called for a moratorium on further renewable applications in my constituency. However, I am not holding my breath.

Since May 2022, the energy consents unit has approved more than 235 major energy infrastructure projects, including wind farms, pylons and battery storage. Only eight were rejected.

The Scottish Government points to schemes such as CARES and the new £8 million community energy generation growth fund. However, those initiatives are not reaching the communities that will be most affected by large-scale developments. In Dumfries and Galloway, true community ownership remains the exception, not the norm.

If the Government is serious about community energy, it must reform the planning system, to give local voices real power; it must stop treating regions such as Dumfries and Galloway as energy sacrifice zones; and it must redistribute funding to genuinely community-led projects, not developer-driven schemes with tokenistic benefit funds.

The Scottish Government must stop paying lip service to my constituents. Ministers recently approved a massive pylon route through some of the most beautiful landscapes in Scotland, ignoring both local objections and the reporter's recommendations following a public inquiry that cost the taxpayer nearly £200,000. That decision was a blatant disregard for local democracy. A just transition must be one that listens to and respects the communities that are most affected.

16:02

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Please accept my apologies, Presiding Officer, for not being present at the beginning of the debate.

I cannot help but make at least a passing mention of the history of Norway's community-owned energy sector—in its case, the entire oil and gas sector, as well as a hefty chunk of hydro. Decades ago, the Norwegians took a groundbreaking decision to ensure that their Government, on behalf of the people, would have strategic ownership of oil and gas developments from the 1980s onwards. The result of that is that, today, the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund is worth more than £1.7 trillion. The biggest debates in Norway's Parliament are on how much can be spent without overinflating the economy.

At the same time, the UK Government used North Sea revenues to subsidise tax cuts and the destruction of huge swathes of our industrial base. Not for nothing was unemployment benefit known in the 1980s as "oil money".

Clearly, the days of drilling for hydrocarbons with no regard to the wider environmental implications are gone. However, Norway shows what real community ownership on a national scale looks like, as opposed to having revenues frittered away by a Parliament far, far away. We can take the successful model of Norway but decentralise it and put communities in charge of their own energy destiny, and work with them to ensure that the benefits of the green industrial revolution lie with them, rather than being expropriated elsewhere.

In the south, a number of wind farms are at various stages of the planning process, and it is fair to say that, as we have just heard, none enjoys universal popular support; however, all enjoy some public support. There are different objections to each development. The Sandy Knowe wind farm at Sanquhar in my region has developed a good record of community engagement and action and has worked together with local residents as a matter of normal business. However, I believe that the common thread through all the proposals that are currently on the table in the south is the lack of community involvement and community ownership.

**Finlay Carson:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Emma Harper:** I will in one second.

Some feel that they are being frozen out of the benefits and management of renewables, while being expected to thole the presence of all those wind turbines. That point was reflected by Michael Matheson when he stated that communities feel that they are being done to, and not done with.

I will take the intervention now.

**Finlay Carson:** It is a very simple yes-or-no question. Does Emma Harper think that there are too many wind farms in Dumfries and Galloway?

**Emma Harper:** I can see the argument that there are too many wind farms in Dumfries and Galloway. However, I also think that we need to reflect on where we are in relation to achieving net zero, developing a renewables sector and getting communities to benefit from all that. There is not an easy yes-or-no answer when we are looking at how we support our communities and the environment, and how we tackle biodiversity, the nature crisis, the climate crisis, and all that—that is a whole other debate.

Some members will be aware of the goat culling west of Newcastleton, which has caused outrage locally, as the new owners of the estate try to clear the majority of a goat population that has been there for more than a millennium. Oxygen Conservation purchased the Blackburn and Harsgarth estate two years ago, and has made a

big play of its plans for rewilding across the 11,000 acres. However, in the middle of its rewilding pitch to the community is buried a reference to building the UK's biggest onshore wind farm. When I raised with it its intentions for the estate, Oxygen Conservation revised its estimate and said only that there would be a wind farm, not that it would be the UK's biggest.

I do not necessarily have an objection to marrying up rewilding and large-scale native tree planting with a renewables scheme, but it is clear from all the Langholm locals who have been campaigning against the goat culling actions of the owners that they have not been engaged with properly about the prospect of another wind farm being erected in their back yard.

I do not envy the planning authorities or the Scottish Government in making decisions about wind farms or the infrastructure that supports them. I am proud that we have a Government that takes the transition to net zero seriously, and that has put in place a framework to make that happen.

**Craig Hoy:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Emma Harper:** I do not think that I have time.

Getting the balance between having a national or international focus and hearing the very real concerns of local communities is, at times, a thankless task. That is why I think that community ownership of wind power, and across all renewables, has to be a top priority.

I do not want people to feel that they have lost control of their land and their economic and sustainable development future to corporations from other places that are just greenwashing and providing less than a potential community benefit fund while extracting the maximum profit possible.

Community ownership means the full involvement of the entire community from the beginning of the process: from conception to planning to development. It means the full financial benefit of renewables development flowing to local communities, rather than just a small portion of the income.

Dumfries and Galloway has 47 community or locally owned projects funded under the community and renewable energy scheme. Those are not only wind farms but projects that are harnessing the potential technology of anaerobic digestion and biogas from the agricultural sector, creating the potential to hook up households off the gas grid or to create district heating systems. I am interested in how we can pursue anaerobic digestion to support our dairy farmers across the South Scotland region.

I hope that the £8 million fund established by the Government will grow over the years, empowering

communities across the south and the whole of Scotland, and building a future that ensures that our communities and the people of Scotland have a direct stake in, and get a direct benefit from, the net zero society that we are bringing to fruition.

16:08

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** At a time when people feel more disconnected than ever from those whose decisions shape their lives, and too many people believe that power sits too far from those who it affects, it is timely to debate the imbalance of power that exists in the energy sector.

Too often, communities feel that the drive to net zero and the growth in renewable energy is something that is done to them, not for them, and certainly not with them. It is a sector that is dominated by large, foreign-owned multinationals, many of which are publicly owned—just not by us. It is also a sector in which not only the wind farms, but, increasingly, the supply chain jobs and the profits, are offshored.

By 2019, my home region of Dumfries and Galloway, with 2 per cent of Scotland's population, hosted 11 per cent of Scotland's onshore wind turbines. However, we did not get 11 per cent of the jobs, and not a single one of those turbines was built in the region or, indeed, anywhere in Scotland.

At the same time, the region has some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country. Many of those cold, damp homes sit next door to the very wind farms that are exporting electricity far from the communities that host them. That disconnect is fuelling a growing resentment towards net zero policies, which is worrying, and it is being exploited by those who want to scrap climate action altogether.

We will not meet our climate targets unless we do far more to take communities with us. One of the best ways to do that is to give people a real stake in their energy future, including community ownership over decisions, infrastructure and benefits. Community-owned energy is about more than providing clean power; it is about changing the relationship between people and the decisions that shape their lives. It is also about moving communities from being bystanders to being active partners and owners. It involves building an energy system that works for people rather than one that just makes corporate profits.

That means challenging the idea that the most that a community can hope for is a benefit payment that is decided by someone else. I appreciate that community benefit payments are not insignificant. South of Scotland Enterprise has estimated that, over the next 35 years, community

benefit funding from onshore wind in the south could total nearly £900 million. At a time when public sector budgets are being squeezed, such payments are making a difference to communities. However, how that funding is implemented often reinforces the imbalance of power. Developers decide the amount and the conditions, and funding often arrives too late to enable communities to plan strategically. As a result, money is spent, but it is not always spent well.

That is why I very much welcome the UK Government's recent proposals to reform community benefit arrangements, making them mandatory, with clearer standards, earlier engagement and greater transparency over how benefits are calculated and delivered. I hope that the Scottish Government will work with the UK Government to ensure that those changes are implemented effectively in Scotland.

**Gillian Martin:** I am glad that the member has mentioned the actions that are being taken to mandate community benefit. Does he recognise that the Scottish Government had been calling on the previous UK Government to do that for many years, but no action had been forthcoming?

**Colin Smyth:** I very much recognise that. It is good to see that the change to a Labour-led UK Government has made that difference already.

If we want to go beyond damage control and genuinely reset the relationship, we need to give communities meaningful ownership. Scotland has failed to develop the kind of mixed economy in energy that we see elsewhere in Europe. For example, in Denmark, more than 50 per cent of onshore wind farms are owned by communities, co-ops or councils. In Scotland, the equivalent figure is barely 1 per cent. That is not enough to encourage community ownership—it needs to be delivered.

The Scottish Co-operative Party's "Scotland's green energy future" strategy sets out how to do that, by putting communities rather than corporations at the heart of energy transition. Its proposals, many of which are echoed by Community Energy Scotland, offer a practical and ambitious road map that not only supports the doubling of funding for CARES but proposes the creation of a ring-fenced fund within the Scottish National Investment Bank for large-scale community projects. It also calls for reform of the Scottish Government's energy procurement strategy to give community generators a route to market. Crucially, it calls for investment in early-stage capacity training and support, so that communities have the ability and capacity to take advantage of ownership opportunities.

The Scottish Co-operative Party also calls for fast tracking of applications and the waiving of

planning fees for community schemes, enabling pension fund investment and strengthening shared ownership in the offshore wind sector. Crucially, it proposes scaling up retrofit co-operatives to tackle fuel poverty directly. Public land and buildings also need to be made more available to community energy groups to unlock new opportunities and remove unnecessary barriers. As we have heard, land reform must guarantee communities the right to access land when it becomes available, especially for local renewables. We need to empower councils and public bodies to lead or partner on projects, whether they be projects for electricity generation or community-led heat networks. Together, those measures will not just grow community energy but will begin to rebalance the power within our energy system, so that the rewards of renewables stay in the communities that host them.

In my foreword to the Scottish Co-operative Party's "Scotland's green energy future" policy paper, I said:

"We shouldn't view our net zero targets as a barrier to sustainable economic growth. They are the path to it ... But the fruits of that labour must be fairly shared."

That is the challenge that lies in front of us.

Positive action is already under way through Great British Energy, which has committed £4 million to help launch the community energy generation growth fund. That is a clear example of what public ownership can do to support communities.

The race for the green jobs of the future is under way. Scotland can lead, but only if we stop repeating the mistakes of the past. That means building an energy future that is not just clean but more democratic, more locally owned and fairer—a future where local people have a real say in how energy is produced and where the benefits stay in the community. We will deliver a just transition only if that transition is community led.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We come to the final speaker in the open debate. You have a generous six minutes, Mr Ewing.

16:15

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** I, too, apologise for being slightly late. I should, of course, have emulated my late mother, Winnie, who more often than not turned up at least an hour before any engagement was due to begin—she would often turn up for public meetings when the doorkeeper was in the process of unlocking the door to the hall. As a result, there were very few doorkeepers in community halls throughout the Highlands and Islands who were not canvassed by Winnie Ewing.

I will begin by referring to a learned article in *The Times* by the distinguished historian and energy analyst, the Pulitzer prize-winning Daniel Yergin, who is one of the world's experts on energy. He made the point that it took two centuries for coal to replace wood as the main source of heating, and it took one century for oil and gas to replace coal. The point that he was making was that transitions take time, and they often take longer than politicians would wish. There is a tendency to set targets that, very often, are unrealistic and unachievable; I will not go through the examples from this session of Parliament, because it would use up the rest of my speech. However, it was Chris Stark—who used to work for me when I was energy minister—who said that undeliverable targets get in the way of genuine action. I think that there is a risk of that.

In this debate, there have been many interesting contributions from all sides—from all parties, I believe—and I think that there is agreement that community projects and community ownership are very desirable. I am not going to repeat what has been said, as that would be a waste of debating time, other than to say that the point has been made by many, including Christine Grahame and others, that the financial value of community ownership has been found to be 34 times greater than the value of community benefit paid at the standard rate of £5,000 per megawatt. The source of that information is a 2021 Aquatera report for the Point and Sandwich Development Trust, which I have here—to give credit where it is due.

That point is undoubtedly true, so the fund that the minister has announced today is welcome. The case studies show small projects in Dundee, Drymen—or near Drymen—and Glasgow. Those projects are welcome, but I think that members want to go much, much further than that. I agree with them, and I agree with the suggestions that have been made about the involvement of local authorities, although I think that private companies should be partners, not enemies—that is essential for success.

When I was energy minister—I made this point before to the minister—we had a scheme that used the renewable energy entrepreneurship fund to finance a community share and then lever in private capital by way of a loan from the Triodos Bank, the Co-operative Bank or the Close Brothers Group. That allowed those ventures to be funded very substantially by the private sector on the security of the future income stream that would come from the development. I would like to see the Government building on that model in future.

However, what I want to say in this speech, in my generous time—

**Douglas Lumsden:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Fergus Ewing:** Yes, of course.

**Douglas Lumsden:** On the point that Fergus Ewing was making about funding—which is a point that Sarah Boyack made earlier—does he feel that the Scottish National Investment Bank might be a route for some communities to get funding to get their projects off the ground?

**Fergus Ewing:** I agree with Mr Lumsden and with Ms Boyack. I think that the Scottish National Investment Bank and GB Energy should work together. The Scottish Government and the UK Government must work together. The wind that we generate in Scotland needs a market. It does not stop at the border—in fact, electricity does not know where borders are.

**Alasdair Allan:** Will the member give way?

**Fergus Ewing:** I know that the minister and Michael Shanks are doing some good work together.

I am happy to take Dr Allan's intervention.

**Alasdair Allan:** The member anticipated what I wanted to say, which is that there has indeed been very positive working between the two Governments. He raises the prospect of CARES working with the UK Government. CARES is doing exactly that, and we hope that that will long continue.

**Fergus Ewing:** I hope that the time for taking that intervention will be added to my already elastic time quota, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I entirely agree. I am saying that, with regard to integration, there should be a rewiring of British Government on how it deals with the issue. It is just too important for us to be squabbling about it politically, particularly when there is a wider consensus among most of the main parties.

I again suggest that there should be a standing committee, chaired by the UK energy minister, that involves the Scottish ministers and other devolved Administrations, companies and the plethora of public bodies that Audrey Nicoll referred to. However, there must be one leading body to drive the whole thing along; otherwise, it will get stuck in the maw of regulatory bodies not doing their job quickly enough.

The barrier, though, as the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce survey found this week, is that investment in the renewables supply chain has been relatively flat for the past five years. There is an astonishing consensus that oil and gas should be supported. A recent survey showed that 91 per cent of business supported that and that, according to True North, 70 per cent of the Scottish population support it.

The sooner all Governments recognise that oil and gas and renewables need to work together,

and that the skills of oil and gas will be required for renewables, the better. The Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce survey found that those skills are being lost to Britain. How can we deliver net zero when, as Russell Borthwick said, we are seeing the deindustrialisation of Britain? It is not possible.

That challenge must be met, and the grid development will take longer than we wish it to. The alarming signs of Ørsted pulling out and of SSE cutting planned development by £3 billion are warning signals that we cannot ignore. We must not be alarmist, but we must all work together across Britain to overcome those barriers.

I think that there is a consensus here among the main parties. Would not it be great if we could have a grand coalition, with the parties of the extremes being marginalised as a result? Maybe that is the only way to deal with the extreme parties, one of which is making grounds without having a single person who is a household name in Scotland—that is quite extraordinary.

I can speak for another six minutes if I have got that, Deputy Presiding Officer, but I suspect that—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That would be stretching the elasticity too far. I can give you another minute, Mr Ewing.

**Fergus Ewing:** Well, I suppose that that gives me time for what is commonly called a peroration.

I profoundly believe that there is a tremendous opportunity ahead for Scotland and Britain, but only if we cast aside our political differences, recognise that we will need oil and gas for some time to come, and agree with Chris Stark that, by developing our own oil and gas as much as we can by 2050, the reduction in North Sea gas will be 95 per cent rather than 97 per cent. The difference is negligible. We are arguing about something that is of relatively small importance—except that the beneficiaries are fracking and Donald Trump.

Things are going to take longer. We need to proceed with urgency, but we need to recognise that the barriers are very serious and that they require grown-up working together.

I will finish off this extended peroration with two Latin tags. By all means, let us *carpe diem*, but, at the same time, let us follow the motto of the late Emperors Augustus and Titus: *festina lente*.

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

16:24

**Patrick Harvie:** What a pleasure to follow that.

This has been an interesting balance of constructive debate, consensus and some disagreement. Alex Rowley, Michael Matheson and Emma Harper were among the many members who very clearly expressed the connection between the infrastructure challenges that we face and the attitudes of the public, in a sense setting out that the direct energy benefit of that renewable energy infrastructure needs to be connected to an economic and social public benefit. If we do that, we will earn, retain and lock in public support for the transition.

Members made that connection, but they also referred to the gulf between where we are now in Scotland and what those countries that have been truly successful with community ownership have managed to achieve. Denmark and Norway in particular were mentioned on a number of occasions by different members. We need to recognise what those countries have done to achieve their level of success if we are going to learn those lessons.

I want to recognise those points of consensus and common ground, but there have, of course, been differences, too. There is no doubt that I disagree with some of what was said by some of the conservative voices—mostly, but not wholly, in the Tory party. I disagree with those who have voted for climate targets over many years and who now, recognising that we are behind schedule on climate action, suggest that we slow down rather than speed up.

I do not agree with those who seek to demonise renewable energy infrastructure, when we could be seeing it as an opportunity to transform the ownership of our energy system.

I do not agree with the SNP voices that express opposition to the windfall tax on fossil fuel profiteers. That industry has done a huge amount to bring about the climate emergency and to promote climate-denial conspiracy theories but very little to invest in its own workforce, despite knowing that the transition has to come along. The windfall tax is one way of ensuring that that highly profitable industry actually pays for some of the transition, and that will not happen without tax playing a role.

**Finlay Carson:** Does Patrick Harvie recognise the real concerns of local communities that face an endless stream of applications for inappropriate wind farm developments on their doorsteps? Those concerns have to be recognised as part of any transition to renewable energy.

**Patrick Harvie:** The planning process needs to make the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate developments of any kind, whether they are for renewables or anything else. It is for the planning process to do that. That is very far

from saying that we should not be maximising the opportunity that comes from Scotland's renewables potential.

I also disagree with the Liberal Democrats' support for Rosebank. That project will neither improve energy security nor reduce energy costs; it will merely eke out the old, failed, polluting and profit-driven energy system of the past a little longer, while keeping emissions on the rise.

I was much more enthusiastic about Beatrice Wishart's comments about Shetland Heat, Energy and Power, which I have had the chance to visit—I even got the opportunity to operate the grabber at the energy-from-waste plant. I will be even more enthusiastic about that project once it has moved away from waste and on to more sustainable energy sources. However, it is the kind of project that we should see a great deal more of around the country.

Christine Grahame talked about her concern that better-off communities might be better placed and more likely to benefit from community ownership. That is a challenge with the current model. It makes the case for moving away from that model, in which communities have to negotiate for mere community benefit, and instead shifting power into community hands. That would include the formation of publicly owned community energy companies, whether they are owned by the community or the local authority.

I would like us to think about the energy system that we to aspire to. What will it look like in the future, once we have made the transition to a genuinely sustainable energy system that also places a great deal more emphasis on community ownership? Whether the energy is wind, solar or storage, and whether the communities are rural or urban, what will those communities look like? They will be communities that have at their disposal not only power in the sense of energy sources, but political and economic power. Far more of the income that is generated from the energy system will be invested back into the community, including, for example, in energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation. Why on earth should we not see an energy system that pays for those costs rather than leaving them to the public purse while the private sector takes the profit from the energy system?

In that energy system, we will see much more reliance on local energy companies to lock in the benefit, using publicly owned land, buildings and assets. There will be much more reliance on public borrowing capacity to invest in systems that will generate profit for the future that is in public hands.

Many have made the case that remote rural communities and villages or islands are natural



places where we have the opportunity to put local resources to good use, and there are many examples of where that has been attempted. However, I want to make the case that we can see our urban communities in the same way, whether at a community scale or even down to the level of an individual tenement block. We can see those as green energy islands in their own right, with people investing collectively in the energy challenges of retrofit but also in the energy opportunities of installing renewables and storage in a way that cuts people's bills and creates good local jobs in the community. That opportunity needs to be relevant to every community of every scale in all parts of Scotland, rural and urban.

We have an opportunity to learn from the best of what other European countries have done. I know that the intention is there, but we are not yet seeing that happening on the scale that it needs to happen. I look forward to seeing a recognition of that in the closing speech from the Government.

16:31

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

Energy is a key resource, and community ownership of energy has empowered communities and provides resources for on-going investment in community wellbeing. I welcome the investment that has been announced by Great British Energy and the Scottish Government in the community energy generation growth fund. That is very much appreciated, but we possibly have to go further than that.

Alex Rowley talked about fuel poverty, which is often the crux of the matter. Community-owned energy provides an opportunity to tackle fuel poverty. Renewables are often developed in areas of the highest fuel poverty but, when that is done by private investors, local communities do not really see the benefit. Community ownership could be a vehicle to provide that. Community owners such as the Galson Estate Trust are looking at how to retail their community-generated energy at an affordable price to local people in their community, many of whom suffer from fuel poverty.

A number of members have rightly mentioned Point and Sandwick Trust, which has also led the charge in that regard, by helping members of its community to become more fuel efficient and therefore to cut their fuel bills. We see community generation doing that all the time.

Sarah Boyack talked about the amount of money that is paid in constraint payments. When those payments are made, the energy is being wasted at the moment. She suggested that the energy should be used for not-for-profit heat networks, which is an excellent idea. We need to

pursue research and development in relation to storage and alternative methods of transmission to ensure that none of that energy goes to waste and that it goes where it is most needed.

Sarah Boyack and many other speakers talked about community benefit. The Aquatera report for Point and Sandwick Trust said:

"In cash terms, the average payment from the community owned wind farms in our study is £170,000 per installed MW per annum compared to the private industry standard of £5,000 per installed MW per annum."

That is a huge difference. There is 34 times more benefit from community-owned generation than from privately owned generation. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will take someone from Forestry and Land Scotland aside and point out which model provides the best community benefit and return.

In answer to a question, the Scottish Government admitted that no wind farms in our national forest and land are community owned or community run. Of the 25 operational wind farms that are on Scotland's national forest and land, which are managed by Forestry and Land Scotland, none is community owned, in whole or in part. That means that 1,300MW are being generated through private ownership.

Alex Rowley, Patrick Harvie and others cited the example of the Cruach Mhor wind farm, which is on Forest and Land Scotland land in the Cowal peninsula. The community was keen to take on the farm when it was put out to tender again, but its bid was totally rejected by Forestry and Land Scotland. I ask the Scottish Government to ensure that there is a presumption in favour of community ownership in scenarios in which a community organisation is willing to take on such a project.

Like Colin Smyth, I am a proud Scottish Co-operative Party member, and I am therefore committed to co-operative ownership. Co-operative Development Scotland, which is a wing of Scottish Enterprise, is supposed to support the growth of co-operatives and community-owned businesses. It could play an important role in assisting the development and scaling up of community energy organisations throughout Scotland, but that is being limited due to inadequate funding and resources. The Scottish Government should specifically commit to increasing CDS funding, which is ring fenced from the Scottish Enterprise budget, so that it can do that work.

We could also look at having a co-operative retailer for community energy, because one issue is that all the retailers are multinationals. How do community generators sell their energy into the grid at an affordable price in order to challenge fuel poverty? Community Energy Scotland tells us

that all community-owned wind turbines that are operational will need to be replaced by 2038. Therefore, we need to get alongside communities and help them to meet the challenges. We need to look at how we can secure grid connections for developing community projects, which is a big issue, because community projects cannot develop a number of projects and then sign up to grid connections. They must have the grid connection before that point, so they are not being counted when it comes to grid infrastructure. That needs to change.

We need to look at funding. Colin Smyth talked about the Scottish National Investment Bank. The Co-operative Party's "Scotland's green energy future" asks whether SNIB should have a dedicated fund. We need community investment.

Audrey Nicoll talked about communities that have money to invest but not the land to develop. Could they invest in other community-owned wind farms or renewable generators? Douglas Lumsden talked about planning and how the same regulations were in place regardless of the planning application's scale or ownership. That is something that we need to look at.

A number of people talked about doubling the funding for CARES and ensuring that communities have confidence in the scheme. Michael Matheson made the point that communities need to be nurtured and have confidence in investment, because huge risks are involved in it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I encourage you to come to a conclusion, Ms Grant.

**Rhoda Grant:** Many other excellent points have been made in the debate, and I could speak for another seven minutes in order to highlight them.

Community energy provides 34 times the community benefit of privately owned energy. Therefore, we need to ensure that that benefit is returned to our communities. I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all arms of government have a presumption to contract and support community energy producers.

16:39

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** Last week, the Climate Change Committee published its advice on Scotland's carbon budget. It is clear that net zero is achievable by 2045, but only with

"immediate action, at pace and scale."

That action includes electrification such as heat pumps in our homes and electric vehicles on our roads. In fact, in the Climate Change Committee's balanced pathway to net zero, electrification

accounts for about half of the reduction in emissions.

As we near 2045, managing energy demand will become ever more important. As part of the just transition that we all want, we need to not only increase energy generation but ensure that the benefits of new projects and technology are shared widely and fairly. Therefore, I welcome today's motion, which is correct in saying that

"the development of renewables at all scales in Scotland should benefit consumers, communities and the economy."

The cabinet secretary highlighted the community and renewable energy scheme and local development officers, who will be critical in increasing the amount of community and locally owned renewable energy. We can all support that goal, and greater community participation and ownership of energy can help to achieve it.

With that in mind, I will highlight a few of the contributions to the debate, which has been largely consensual—we have even had a sheep and some goats.

Douglas Lumsden challenged the Scottish Government to ensure that the £8 million that has been allocated by both Governments delivers. He suspended his pessimism about delivery not quite for his entire speech but at least for part of it. He also argued for proportionality in the planning process.

Sarah Boyack described community benefits as being critical to addressing the climate and nature emergencies, and she highlighted the role of local authorities in facilitating that.

Patrick Harvie stated that we are at a dangerous point in our energy transition and made the case for a reduction in corporate ownership.

Beatrice Wishart spoke about issues with the Viking wind farm and advocated for fair compensation for those who host energy projects. She also stated that fishers should have access to their traditional grounds.

Jamie Halcro Johnston, along with many other members, raised the issue of constraint payments, as well as what he described as "invasive industrialisation".

Fin Carson continued on that theme by stating that he feels that the communities that he represents have been ignored and that decision making is, ultimately, too centralised.

Therefore, despite the general degree of consensus, a variety of views have been expressed.

Scotland is blessed with abundant natural energy resources, which, if they are properly harnessed, can provide clean power, help us to

reach net zero and create jobs and wealth in our communities. Before I get to community benefits specifically, I want to look at the high-level picture. If we are serious about promoting community involvement, we have to recognise that policy has fallen short. For example, we missed the target to produce 1GW of energy from community and locally owned energy companies by 2020; back in 2010, Scottish Renewables estimated that offshore wind could create 28,000 direct jobs over the coming decade, but, by 2022, the number was less than 4,000; and, last year, Scotland's 2030 net zero target was abandoned. Those failures matter. They damage the Government's credibility and risk undermining public confidence in climate action, which plays straight into the hands of populists who peddle climate scepticism and easy answers.

If we want more community ownership and participation in energy projects, we need to make a strong case for it. Let us consider wind power. In Denmark, community ownership stands at 52 per cent compared with just 0.2 per cent in Scotland, according to the Green Economy Coalition. There are financial benefits, of course—we have seen that across Scotland. Whether they be micro hydro or community wind, the projects generate funds for business support, biodiversity schemes, active travel initiatives and youth and hardship support schemes, all of which have tangible benefits, rooted in a place, that people can see and feel.

There are other benefits beyond the financial. A recent study on ScienceDirect looked at wind farms in the Netherlands and found that higher levels of shared ownership saw projects spend less time in planning, with fewer appeals. That speaks to a simple truth. When people have a say and a stake in something, they want to see it prosper. Communities should not be left to feel that energy transition is something that is being done to them. They should be able to embrace it as an opportunity that they can shape and share in.

Of course, we have to recognise that not every community can host energy projects, especially those in dense urban areas, but that does not mean that they have to lose out.

**Sarah Boyack:** There are opportunities in our urban areas. We could have projects like the Edinburgh Community Solar Co-operative right across our urban areas, and we could have community heat networks in urban and rural areas. It is about taking a joined-up approach and seizing the opportunities, and it is not just about rural areas—the whole of Scotland needs to benefit.

**Maurice Golden:** I recognise that there are opportunities, but the community benefits of Whitelee, the largest onshore wind farm in Europe,

have generally been around East Renfrewshire, when just down the road is Castlemilk, which is an area that really requires those benefits. However, I take the member's general point.

We have all heard from constituents who are struggling with their energy bills. Some of the causes, such as global geopolitics and supply chain shocks, are outwith our control, although circular economy policies can mitigate those somewhat. Concerns that net zero might push bills higher are real, and we need to listen to and act on them. We need to be honest and say that bills will come down with net zero, but only in the long term. If we do not do that, we will allow the climate sceptics to hijack those concerns and turn them into a broader backlash against net zero.

No one who is serious about climate action wants to impoverish people or place unsustainable demands on households. On the contrary, we want climate action to deliver thriving, wealthy and sustainable communities. Community ownership of energy is an opportunity to help to deliver that, but only if we move beyond promises and deliver the funding and frameworks to make it happen.

16:47

**The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan):** I thank members for their contributions to a vitally important debate. As other members have mentioned, it has been a debate on which there is a great deal of common ground across the chamber. There was much of that in evidence today, both in the summing-up speeches that we have just heard and throughout.

As we have heard, communities are crucial in our transition to net zero and they must receive the benefits of our renewables revolution. I will begin by trying to answer a question from Christine Grahame, who asked how many communities have bought shares in a wind farm. The picture as at December 2024 was that there were 140 installations in Scotland where shared ownership was either in place or under discussion. The Scottish Government is committed to growing that number and to growing the community energy sector in Scotland, as demonstrated by the community energy generation growth fund. There are many opportunities to be seized, and there is huge potential for communities to own—

**Rhoda Grant:** Would the minister look at the situation with Forestry and Land Scotland? Could there be a presumption in favour of communities that are interested in taking over developments when they come up for re-tendering?

**Alasdair Allan:** The member makes an interesting point. A related earlier point was about repowering opportunities, which is something to which I know Forestry and Land Scotland will want

to give due consideration. Of course, Forestry and Land Scotland financially contributes to the public good through its own activities. There is a discussion for us all to have in the future, however, particularly on the issue of repowering.

The Scottish Government is committed to growing community benefits. Throughout the debate, we talked about the benefits that community energy provides, including community benefits. As Colin Smyth pointed out, both climate change targets and supply chain benefits are important in that regard.

Alongside growing community energy, we must also ensure that communities are able to access community benefits from commercial renewable energy developments. Those are an important tool to ensure that people and communities benefit from the just energy transition that we all seek to achieve.

Emma Harper pointed to successful strategies for communities, some of those being lessons from other countries, and, like other members, she reminded us of the need to get to net zero. That is always a factor in what we seek to do. There are levers in our hands to achieve net zero, but some levers are not in our hands.

I listened carefully to Patrick Harvie's comments about local control and culture change. In the past 12 months, more than £30 million-worth of benefits have been offered to Scottish communities, supported by our voluntary good practice principles. We agree that, as a Government, we must do more. *[Alasdair Allan has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

We recently consulted on our good practice principles for onshore and offshore renewable energy developments to ensure that our national guidance is fit for the future. The consultation closed on 11 April. We are currently analysing the responses and information to inform a refresh of the guidance.

**Patrick Harvie:** As the Government analyses the responses to that consultation, can the minister tell us what the scale of the Scottish Government's objective is? He has heard support from his own back benchers for community ownership on something approaching the scale of what Denmark has achieved. I know that that cannot be done overnight, but is it the Government's intention to achieve something of the same order over the longer term?

**Alasdair Allan:** The member has acknowledged that that particular target may not be achievable overnight, but the evidence that we gather will, I believe, ensure that our community benefit targets and arrangements are sustainable, meaningful and ambitious, and that they will help to support our just and fair transition to net zero.

I will add to that point something that is perhaps relevant to the member's question and which takes us back to my earlier comment. The First Minister has asked officials to take forward with stakeholders other opportunities—created by repowering—for communities.

The Scottish Government cannot do all that work alone. We must work with our stakeholders, developers, communities and, as I alluded to, the UK Government, to make progress.

**Craig Hoy:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alasdair Allan:** I must make a little progress just now—I might come back to the member.

I welcome the UK Government's recent working paper, which seeks views on the introduction of a mandatory community benefit scheme for low-carbon energy infrastructure—a question that is currently reserved to the UK Government.

As Fergus Ewing recognised amid the thundering delenda ests of his peroration, there are several areas in which the Scottish and UK Governments can co-operate. Although he pointed out—in Latin—that we must “festina lente”, or hurry slowly, the Government recognises that we need to move a posse ad esse: from potentiality to actuality.

The Scottish Government has long called on the UK Government to consult on mandating community benefits for onshore renewables, and I welcome that consultation as a step forward. We will continue to engage to ensure that Scotland's interests are fully represented. That represents our long-standing leadership in championing community benefit from renewable energy developments. Jackie Dunbar mentioned the importance of tackling fuel poverty as being at the heart of all those efforts, and Alex Rowley referred to that issue, too. They recognised that, in many cases, areas of fuel poverty are also the areas that host projects.

The Scottish Government is committed to growing the community energy sector in Scotland, and the community energy generation growth fund represents an exciting step forward in the development of the community energy pipeline in Scotland that we all wish to see.

We have seen, through CARES, that communities are enthusiastic to do more. I know how important community energy projects are in supporting local economic investment and empowering communities to take ownership of their energy future.

**Craig Hoy:** Obviously, there is community ownership, but issues are now arising in relation to the costs of decommissioning energy projects, both onshore and offshore. Does the minister

share my concern about community ownership that, unless a pot of money is put in place for decommissioning, in 20 or 30 years' time, the Government could become, in effect, not the lender of last resort but the funder of last resort, funding the decommissioning of community-owned and other structure-owned renewable energy projects?

**Alasdair Allan:** Craig Hoy refers to offshore projects, for instance. The Scottish Government has very developed procedures in place to ensure that, as taxpayers, we do not find ourselves in the situation that he describes. However, he raises important issues that will be faced by many communities when it comes to replacing infrastructure in the future.

This will come as a surprise to Douglas Lumsden, but I agree with his point about the importance of the efforts that are made by volunteers in communities and the fact that that can place a great strain on individuals and communities. I wish to recognise the exceptional efforts that have been made by the community in North Yell, which Beatrice Wishart referred to. I have visited it, and it is a formidable organisation.

We continue to advocate and act for Scotland's communities to ensure that they receive a just and equitable outcome from our energy transition. Whether that is through community energy, shared ownership or community benefits, it is essential that communities see a positive and lasting legacy.

A number of members asked how smaller local authorities are to cope with large-scale planning issues and the scale of work that is involved. The Scottish Government certainly seeks to support local authorities that are in that position.

**Sarah Boyack:** Will Alasdair Allan give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The minister is just concluding.

**Alasdair Allan:** The Scottish Government seeks to work with the UK Government on future reforms of the planning system to ensure that communities are consulted at an earlier stage.

The Scottish Government remains firmly committed to growing community and locally owned energy in Scotland, helping our communities to develop energy projects and supporting Scotland's progress towards net zero.

## Urgent Question

16:58

### Parliament Facilities

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what its response is to the open letter to the Presiding Officer, signed by cross-party MSPs and staff, regarding the interim position on the use of facilities in the Parliament building.

**Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** I thank Patrick Harvie for raising the question, because it is important that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, for whom I speak, has the opportunity to set out the rationale for this collective and cross-party decision and to provide assurance that it is committed to offering an inclusive experience for all those who work at and visit Holyrood.

Although we have been made aware of the open letter's existence via media reports, we have, in fact, only just received it this afternoon, so the SPCB has not yet had a chance to consider it. We will, of course, consider the letter and will be happy to provide a response. In the meantime, our having considered this sensitive issue, I would like to make the following general points on the SPCB's behalf, if I may, in response to Mr Harvie's question.

The SPCB remains deeply committed to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for all those who work at and visit Holyrood. That includes people in the trans and non-binary community, as well as those with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. In fulfilling its various roles and responsibilities, the SPCB must balance the needs and requirements of all those with a range of protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and must also take all necessary steps to ensure that Parliament complies with its legal responsibilities in a timely manner.

As stated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the law, as set out by the Supreme Court, is "effective immediately" and those who have duties under the Equality Act 2010 should be following the law and looking at what changes, if any, need to be made to their policies and practices. The SPCB has, for many years, provided a wide range of inclusive facilities at Holyrood, including gender-neutral facilities.

In the light of the Supreme Court ruling, our advisers have considered an interim stance—and I emphasise the term "interim"—that supports the SPCB in continuing to meet its legal responsibilities and to do so in a way that provides

clarity and is inclusive for all those using our facilities. A detailed equality impact assessment was undertaken to assess the impact on people with each of the protected characteristics, and that was published, together with the SPCB paper, as part of the interim stance. That shows how we are balancing requirements across all groups, based on the facilities currently available at Holyrood, to create the optimal range of facilities for all users, again balancing the different protected characteristics.

Members will be aware that the next phase of work, which will look at changes in the medium to long term, includes a wide consultation with staff, members, members' staff and other stakeholders. That will include consultation with external groups and organisations that work regularly and closely with people with all the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010. That will include stakeholders with insight into, and experience of, gender reassignment as well as other groups with protected characteristics, because the SPCB is required to balance the rights of all those with a protected characteristic.

I am just about to come to the end of my answer, Deputy Presiding Officer.

That further phase will also enable us to take account of the new EHRC code of practice when that is published, later this year.

I hope that that is helpful.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I call the member, I advise any members who wish to ask a supplementary question but who have not already pressed their request-to-speak buttons to do so now.

I hope for more brevity in responses to supplementary questions.

**Patrick Harvie:** The cross-party letter, which has been published online, has the support of 17 members from four political parties and 31 members of staff. It expresses serious concerns about the decision that has recently been made and draws attention to the comments made by Lord Sumption, a former Supreme Court judge, who said that the Supreme Court's judgment has been misunderstood. In his words:

"It is important to note that you are allowed to exclude trans women from these facilities, but you are not obliged to."

I am concerned that, in making the decision to take an exclusive and exclusionary approach, the SPCB risks taking us back to the breach of human rights that existed prior to the creation of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and to a position that, as little as 10 years ago, was the obsession of the extremist fringe of the United States Republican Party.

It is not enough to use words such as "inclusive experience" or "welcoming environment". Does the corporate body recognise the impact that the decision has already had on those who are being told that they are no longer permitted to use basic facilities such as toilets on the same basis as everyone else and who now feel unwelcome and demeaned in their own workplace?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We also need more brevity in questions.

**Christine Grahame:** Some of the language that Mr Harvie has used is rather unfortunate, because I hope that the corporate body has acted in a tolerant, sensitive, delicate and balanced manner.

The Scottish Parliament has always sought to reflect its founding principles, to be an open and accessible institution and to promote participation and equal opportunities, and we remain deeply committed to those principles and to providing—I know that Mr Harvie does not like the word—an inclusive environment where all, including those in the trans and non-binary communities, feel supported and welcome to work and to visit. The Parliament has, for many years, provided a wide and varied range of facilities across the building, including a number of single-occupancy spaces that are available for, and used by, everyone.

**Patrick Harvie:** If that is the intention and what the corporate body wishes to achieve—I do not doubt that it may intend that—I have to say that the decision that was made recently fails to do that.

The member mentions the code of practice on which the EHRC is currently consulting. That code of practice suggests that birth certificates could be required from people merely because they are suspected of being transgender. I have to say that I feel almost nauseous using that language, because I am old enough to remember how other queer people felt when we had to worry about whether we were suspected of being who we are in our society.

Can the corporate body promise us that nobody will be required to provide birth certificates or other paperwork merely because someone intolerant suspects them of being transgender?

**Christine Grahame:** I am sorry if that issue is being raised. As a service provider and an employer, when we make facilities available there is an expectation that people will choose a facility respecting what we have done to balance different rights in line with our legal responsibilities. Our staff are always able to provide advice on the facilities that are available at Holyrood. I assure the member that this is not going to be policed by the corporate body. Like other public sector bodies, we have a complaints process, which staff can advise on and which is set out on our website,

for those who wish to complain, and we will consider any complaints. However, we are certainly not monitoring the use of public facilities as a corporate body.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A number of members wish to ask supplementary questions. I hope that they will be suitably brief and the responses likewise.

**Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** I know that the guidance will have been drawn together with a desire to comply with the recent Supreme Court ruling and with the best of intentions, but it has created a degree of segregation that we have not experienced under the Equality Act 2010. How does the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body intend to resolve a situation in which trans and non-binary people are reporting that they feel excluded from their nation's Parliament?

**Christine Grahame:** When I refer to complaining, that goes for complainers of all characteristics.

There is nothing in the interim stance that will take away from the rights of anybody entering this Parliament. We await the full guidance from the ECHR on what can and cannot be done. This is simply the interim stance. I ask those concerned to bear with the corporate body until we are able to do a full consultation. We aim to balance fairly and with justice and sensitivity the rights of all users of this Parliament.

**Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** The people of Scotland expect politicians to focus on what matters—rising household bills, their children's education, getting a general practitioner appointment, fixing the roads and keeping communities safe, yet the priority for out-of-touch SNP, Labour, Lib Dem and Green MSPs is an urgent debate about the Holyrood toilets. Does Parliament agree with the Scottish Conservatives that this is a farcical waste of time?

**Christine Grahame:** That is simply not a question for the corporate body. The urgent question was accepted and I am obliged to respond to it.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** What consideration was given to the difference between the facilities that are available to the public and the facilities that are available to members of parliamentary staff but also staff who are employed by MSPs?

**Christine Grahame:** Officials consider the SPCB's various responsibilities as an employer, workplace provider, service provider and public authority, which adds to the complexity of fulfilling our obligations in ensuring that Holyrood is as inclusive as possible for all. Many of our staff use

facilities in the public areas of the building and many members of the public use facilities in the private areas, particularly during events, meetings and evening receptions. The SPCB's interim stance as set out in the EqIA seeks to balance those different requirements.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Christine Grahame suggests that the decision was taken on the basis of the need to balance the legal responsibilities of the Parliament related to the Supreme Court judgment. However, as we heard from Patrick Harvie, the former Supreme Court Justice Lord Sumption has made it clear that there are no legal responsibilities for the Parliament. He said that judges did not take a side and that the judgment does not provide an obligation to create single-sex spaces—it is a matter of choice for institutions. The EHRC has been challenged on how it will police that. We have heard about the use of birth certificates. I understand that the SPCB does not expect this to be policed, but others may. Can I ask that no parliamentary staff member will be put in the position of having to challenge a toilet user in the future?

**Christine Grahame:** As, I am sure, all members do, I expect that members and the public will treat each other with respect throughout their engagement—casual or formal—in the building. That would include the situation set out in the remarks that the member just made.

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** The decision seems premature and inconsistent with the Supreme Court ruling. The consultation that Christine Grahame mentioned should have happened before any decision was made. How will the SPCB ensure the dignity of trans and non-binary staff who are working in the Parliament? Does it recognise that this unexpected and surprising policy change has put them in an impossible situation and, potentially, a hostile working environment?

**Christine Grahame:** I certainly hope and expect that it will not put anyone in the Parliament into a hostile environment. That is not the culture in this building, and it has not been so in my 20-odd years here. As I have said, this is simply an interim decision—an interim practical choice—being made to comply with the Supreme Court ruling. A full consultation is now going ahead, and I fully expect that, at the end of that, members will see that the important balance between the rights of individuals, whatever their position, is dealt with appropriately and with sensitivity.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We have reached the time that has been set for decision time. Three more members wish to ask a question. I will get their questions in, but they will need to be brief.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** Contrary to the view that this subject is simply a load of nonsense, many members are far more concerned about the wellbeing of those who choose to make the Parliament their workplace. We owe them dignity and respect. Given the answer to a previous question, I ask the corporate body simply to ensure that the aforementioned complaints procedure must not and will not be used as a means of prejudicing anyone in the Parliament, nor to force the disclosure of any details of their private life, including their status relative to their gender.

**Christine Grahame:** I would have to write about how the complaints procedure works on the face of it; I have not accessed it. However, I can certainly tell you that it has previously been used by a member of the public to make a complaint about somebody accessing facilities in the public area, which was dealt with appropriately by the officials and the corporate body. Certainly, if there was any sense of its being used for abuse, the corporate body would be mindful.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Always speak through the chair, please.

**Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** Members may be aware of a lively internet conspiracy that I am a trans woman. If a complaint is made about my using a women's toilet, how does the SPCB expect me to demonstrate or prove my ability to use that toilet? Should I bring my birth certificate? Should I subject myself to a medical examination? Please be clear.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Always speak through the chair.

**Christine Grahame:** No one is asking anyone for any proof of anything. I fully intend to use the gender-neutral toilets.

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** Will Christine Grahame say whether the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body's decision was unanimous and, if so, whether that means that the Green member of that body both supported the measures and wrote a letter in opposition to them?

**Christine Grahame:** The letter that was written is a private matter. I am not in a position to disclose it. The recipients may disclose the contents of that letter if they wish.

Decisions by the corporate body do not ever go to a vote; they are made simply by consent.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the urgent question, and it is time to move on to the next item of business.

## Decision Time

17:13

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-17648.3, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, on growing community-owned energy in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

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

17:13

*Meeting suspended.*

17:17

*On resuming—*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We come to the division on amendment S6M-17648.3, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, on growing community-owned energy in Scotland. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I believe that my vote has been cast as a no vote. However, it appears that my vote on behalf of Gillian Mackay has not. Could I check whether her vote has been registered?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Gillian Mackay's vote has not been registered, but I will register it as a no. Thank you, Mr Greer.

I call Clare Adamson to make a point of order.

Try again, Ms Adamson.

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app appeared to freeze. I would have voted yes. I am not sure whether my vote has been recorded.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will make sure that it is recorded, Mr Hoy.

I call Clare Adamson to make a point of order.

I am sorry, Ms Adamson, but I am afraid that we are getting neither audio nor visuals.



**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Presiding Officer, can you hear me now?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can.

**Clare Adamson:** Thank you. On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to cast my vote. I would have voted no.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Adamson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

#### For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Dowe, 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)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)  
 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)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (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)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]  
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (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)

#### Abstentions

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

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-17648.3, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, is: For 27, Against 81, Abstentions 4.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-17648.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms McNair. 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)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don-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)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]  
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]  
 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)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (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)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 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)  
 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)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)  
 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)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-17648.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, is: For 84, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-17648.2, in the name of Patrick Harvie, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

#### For

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 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)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 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)

Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 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]  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-17648.2, in the name of Patrick Harvie, is: For 29, Against 85, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, on growing community-owned energy in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Wishart. 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)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don-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)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]  
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (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)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 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)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)  
 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)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on motion S6M-17648, in the name of Gillian Martin, on growing community-owned energy in Scotland, as amended, is: For 86, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament believes that Scotland must increase community-owned energy production, and supports communities being aided to achieve this; welcomes that, since its inception, the Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) has advised over 1,300 organisations and provided over £67 million in funding to support over 990 projects; notes that the new Community Energy Generation Growth Fund will provide up to £8 million to boost community energy in Scotland; believes that the development of renewables at all scales in Scotland should benefit consumers, communities and the economy; welcomes the £4 million in funding from Great British Energy to fund half of the Community Energy Generation Growth Fund; believes that, as well as community groups, councils and public sector organisations are well placed to host, or collaborate on, community renewables projects, community heat projects, municipal ownership and co-operative models; further believes that land reform should mean the chance for communities to be able to have priority access to land when it becomes available; notes that there are a range of different technologies that could be utilised for community-owned energy projects, including wind, solar and hydro schemes among others, in both urban and rural Scotland; acknowledges that the Scottish Government could help to grow the sector by opening up the government electricity supply contract to community generators, which are currently denied access to the market, whether directly through conditions of tender or indirectly through procurement; calls on public bodies to create space for community ownership where possible by making public land and buildings available to community energy groups, and calls on the Scottish Government to work productively with the UK Government to create further opportunities for communities to own a meaningful stake in energy infrastructure through partnering with Great British Energy.

## Common Ground Forum on Deer

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16194, in the name of Elena Whitham, on the Common Ground Forum on deer. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite those members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Elena Whitham.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises the recent Nature of Scotland Award for Innovation to the Common Ground Forum for its work addressing challenging conflicts and relationships in the deer management sector; welcomes that the forum has brought together stakeholders, including land managers and conservationists, to build consensus and common understanding; notes what it sees as the importance of effective deer management, both in achieving nature restoration and the viability of rural businesses in many parts of the country, including in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, and notes the view that all sides of the deer sector should continue to embed the Common Ground Forum's approach.

17:28

**Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** I thank colleagues from across the chamber who signed my motion, enabling us to debate and celebrate the award-winning work of the Common Ground Forum, which has been instrumental in giving a collective voice to the deer management sector. That innovative approach has effectively managed conflict and traditionally difficult relationships in order to bring together key stakeholders, including land managers, conservationists and practitioners, to build consensus, and common understanding and purpose, where possible, with the ultimate aim of promoting a more collaborative approach to upland deer management. Let me tell members—that has been no mean feat.

The Common Ground Forum was born out of an approach that was made by the Association of Deer Management Groups to the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest in late 2020. After tentative discussions, it grew and more parties became involved, and a total of 50 protagonists—sceptical, but curious—from all sides of the deer sector gathered together for a two-day event that was facilitated by civic mediators, the Centre for Good Relations. I welcome Abdul Rahim, one of the centre's mediators, to the public gallery this evening. A wide range of stakeholders attended the event, including traditional deer managers, environmental non-governmental organisations from Scottish Environment LINK, forestry interests, community groups and academics, plus staff from

NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Deer management in Scotland relies on collaboration between land managers across landscapes that are diverse and often expansive. For decades, different objectives for landholdings have created tensions, in particular—and acutely—between sporting and conservation interests. In many instances, unfortunately, that has resulted in broken relationships and conflict.

However, I am pleased to say that the Common Ground Forum is tackling the issue head-on. Over those initial few days, while most of us felt that resolving the deer management conflict was a long shot, a wee germ of hope that it just might work started to be felt across the board. Confidence has visibly grown in the years since, with clear signs of progress among those who have engaged in the forum's work as word about it has spread. The forum's focus is now on embedding its approach to bring about more positive relationships for the long term—a process which will, it is hoped, make the forum obsolete in three to five years' time.

Those who are involved have seen how the forum can contribute to a vision of a greener, healthier and economically vibrant future for deer management. The forum takes no side in the debate about deer and avoids attempting to assess disputes from above or outside. Instead, the sole focus is on enabling the stakeholders themselves to own and transform their relationships with others, so as to build self-sustaining solutions.

That is key to how such forums operate effectively. It is not about being an arbitrator—it is more about being a facilitator and helping the group to find their common denominators, thereby creating a collegiate voice that can be amplified. That is hugely important in dealing with complex legislation and consultations, and it enables the group to present to ministers and committees a common purpose and ask.

More than 250 stalkers from different backgrounds across Scotland have directly engaged with the process to discuss the future of deer management, and to make their voices heard in Parliament to help shape the future. Through a series of workshops and events, the forum has engaged with more than 500 people from across the deer sector and related community and land management interests. So far, 148 individuals and 42 organisations have signed up to the common ground accord, which sets out principles for respectful and constructive dialogue. That is a key factor in the forum's success.

Capacity building has also been a key strand of the forum's work, and 27 change makers have

been trained in understanding conflict and how to manage it. Deer management group chairs have also gathered twice to discuss handling conflict in their role, with further day-long gatherings scheduled. That approach has been transformative, and we can see real signs of progress at policy and advocacy level, with stakeholders who hold different perspectives and objectives coming together to develop and propose joint messages and solutions on shared interests such as venison, deer welfare and funding models.

A recent independent evaluation of the process, which was undertaken for a PhD by Callum Leavey-Wilson, has provided a candid report on progress to date and highlighted where relationships might still need to be addressed a wee bit.

I first became aware of the forum when Tim Eagle, who I see is in the chamber, sponsored a lunchtime event in the Parliament last year; I must say that I came away from that event enthused and dismayed in equal measure. I was blown away by the approach that was being undertaken, but dismayed that there were not more MSPs in attendance. However, those of us who were there assured the forum's members that we valued the work that they were undertaking, and that we were keen to find ways to engage further to hear their take on proposed legislative changes affecting deer management.

I am glad to say that there have been real signs of progress at a policy and advocacy level, with work undertaken by Scottish Environment LINK, the Association of Deer Management Groups, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association and Scottish Venison in discussing changes to deer policy with ministers and members of the two relevant parliamentary committees.

That joint advocacy was based on discussions that were held by the Common Ground Forum on difficult subjects—it is important to think about those difficult subjects—such as the changes that were proposed at that time to the close season for female deer. The shared messaging has focused on shared interests in developing Scotland's venison market—I think that members across the chamber all agree that we need to develop that market; the ways in which new regulatory powers are introduced; and the funding models that will be essential to delivering Government strategy for climate and nature.

Currently, the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill looks to the deer sector to make changes to deer management to enhance biodiversity and store carbon through peatland and native woodland restoration. It is in everyone's interest to maintain workable relationships across the deer sector so that management can function

effectively in our upland landscapes. That will not just be a benefit for nature and the natural carbon cycle; it will accelerate and build over time as soils and habitats restore themselves under reduced pressure from browsing animals, with deer being a prominent part of that.

However, it is crucial that we remain mindful of the need to protect, if not increase, deer-related jobs in rural communities through the period of change ahead. Whether they are focused on traditional sporting or conservation interests or both, the skill and the dedication of deer managers of all backgrounds are essential to delivering the changes that we need across the country.

By bringing those key professionals together, the Common Ground Forum is reducing the conflict affecting working lives and is supporting deerstalkers to co-develop their own solutions to the challenges ahead. That is an approach that we should champion and support at every turn, including by ensuring that the forum is resourced appropriately. I would like to hear the minister say a wee few words about that in his response later.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Tim Eagle.

17:35

**Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** You are now coming to the end of your long day in the chair, Deputy Presiding Officer. You have done a great job.

I thank Elena Whitham for bringing the debate to the chamber today. One of my very first engagements in the Parliament was with the Common Ground Forum. I had been asked by another member to host, as they had another engagement at the last minute. I remember feeling slightly nervous as I walked in, having heard of the group but not having had much involvement with it before. That nervousness left quickly, as I found inside the room a wide group of people from various backgrounds—yet all with a shared vision for moving deer management forward in Scotland. I was very grateful that Elena was in the room with me to help me that day.

As Elena Whitham mentioned, the Common Ground Forum is a collaborative initiative, uniting more than 100 stakeholders from Scotland's upland deer management sector. Established in October 2023, the forum aims to foster mutual respect and consensus building to achieve sustainable and integrated deer management, aligning with Scotland's environmental and rural development goals. The seven commitments that bring the group together under the accord work to ensure that all are heard, all are listened to and solutions can be found. It is a great structure, and it has worked.

As I understand it, the Common Ground Forum sees that high-quality, sustainable, ecological land has great benefits to our society, from supporting future generations to maintaining resilient rural communities. It brings together all those who wish to have positive engagement on how to best manage deer in Scotland. The forum's successes have shown just what can be achieved when dealing with difficult subject matter when all are prepared to listen and learn. Its strength has been found in fostering positive debate, understanding and collaboration.

Due to those successes, there is arguably a case that the implementation of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, in whatever form that takes, could benefit from engagement with the forum in the future. There is the potential to learn from those who work in the area for guidance when developing secondary policy, particularly in relation to a code of practice and a register of authorised persons. The group could also be used to engage with and support practitioners in what they need to do to in order to comply with any changes.

As for the group itself, I think that there is space to go further. While the group mainly brings together people from the upland deer management context, as I understand it, there is potential for its expansion to take in more recreational shooters and to hear more about the lowland and urban context of management and what challenges that brings.

I offer my whole-hearted congratulations to all those who have been in, continue to be in, and have facilitated the group. It is no easy task to talk about deer management in Scotland but, together, they are achieving, and politicians across the Parliament are listening and learning from them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Christine Grahame.

17:38

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I do not know about you, Deputy Presiding Officer, but I have certainly had a long afternoon.

I congratulate Elena Whitham on securing the debate. Some time ago, the cross-party group on animal welfare had an informative briefing on Scotland's deer population and management—and I should declare an interest as convener of the group.

There are more than 1 million wild deer in Scotland, with no natural predator. Although deer are free ranging and belong to no one, the right to take or shoot deer is associated with land

ownership, so whoever owns the land that the deer are on has the right to shoot them.

Red deer might travel long distances in search of food, however, often covering more than one land ownership area. Therefore, managing red deer sustainably in the uplands requires collaboration, as has been mentioned, and that is made possible by voluntary deer management groups. NatureScot works with the Association of Deer Management Groups, local deer management groups and others.

The deer in lowland and urban areas are predominantly roe deer, which are more solitary, secretive and territorial than red deer. Land ownership patterns are more fragmented in those areas, and managing roe deer there is very different from managing the red deer in the uplands. Although deer management across Scotland is a voluntary and collaborative activity, NatureScot has statutory duties to intervene in specific circumstances.

Fences are sometimes used to manage deer, say, for road safety or to protect woodlands in the short term while they recover. However, depending on the situation and the area, fences are expensive and do not always work. They can damage other animals, and they simply move a large deer population from one area to another.

The fact is that there are too many deer, and they need to be managed. I am not talking about some stereotypical rich foreigner swanning around a landed estate in his plus fours, having a poor beast practically lined up for him to shoot. I am talking about sensitive, selective culling for the health of the animals, because gone are the wolves that would have preyed on them.

Such an approach protects the landscape, too. The Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 sets out when, where, how and by whom deer can be shot, and it also defines the periods of the year when the killing of deer is or is not permitted. Those periods are known as open and closed seasons, respectively, and the dates vary according to the deer species. Following consultation, the Scottish Government removed the closed season for male deer of all species in Scotland, with effect from 21 October 2023. The 1996 act also requires that only certain specifications of firearms and ammunition can be used to kill deer, to ensure that the deer are shot as humanely as possible.

On the broader issue of deer culling, I should say that I take no pleasure in deer being culled, but the situation with the deer population means, unfortunately, that it is a necessary evil. There are 1 million wild deer in Scotland, up from around 500,000 in 1990, and that increase in the deer population has led in some areas to overgrazing, which can strip the environments that other

species need to thrive. Indeed, the 2023 “State of Nature Scotland” report found that, since 1994, when the monitoring of 407 species of plant and animal life began, the abundance of such species has declined by an average of 15 per cent. In the past decade alone, there has been a decline of 43 per cent. I am not saying that the decline is all attributable to the deer, but it is a fact.

Where culls are necessary, it is essential that they are carried out in a way that minimises suffering and takes animal welfare into account. For example, I would want culls to be undertaken by experienced shooters, who are more assured of a quick kill and know how to identify animals that might be diseased than an inexperienced shooter who would run the risk of maiming. Moreover, I want culls to be restricted to areas where there is evidence that the number of deer is a problem.

I understand that culling is a highly emotive issue, and I do support animal welfare, but appropriate—and appropriately monitored—culling is about animal welfare, too. I hope that that provides some context.

17:43

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Good evening, Deputy Presiding Officer and thank you for calling me to speak for Scottish Labour. I congratulate Ms Whitham on securing parliamentary time to debate deer management.

As we know, effective deer management is vital if we are to meet our goals for woodland management, carbon sequestration and habitat health. According to NatureScot, an increase in the national cull of 50,000 deer each year will be needed to meet the targets in the Scottish biodiversity strategy.

We know, too, that venison is a source of lean protein and a sustainable food source, with the potential to contribute to the nutrition of the nation. It is welcome that Jura is leading the way in that respect, with the initiative launched by Argyll and Bute Council to put wild venison on the school menu. Too often, that native wild protein source is not reaching our plates, and that needs to change. There are challenges at every stage of the venison food supply chain, and it all starts with deer management.

As we have heard, the Common Ground Forum brings together a network of individuals committed to a more collaborative approach to deer management. The forum is a welcome development, because although there have been good examples of co-ordination of deer management across boundaries in the past, that has not been enough and the deer population seems to be growing out of control. Constituents in



my North East Scotland region have told me that, on some estates, there is a determined unwillingness by an irresponsible few to cull sufficient numbers of deer, because of the income generated from recreational shooting. The same applies to other areas, too.

When those kinds of private pursuits impact on our public goods, they cannot be allowed to continue. However, under the current concentrated pattern of land ownership in Scotland, there is little that a community can do to challenge such irresponsible landowners. We need these vast estates to be broken up where they are found not to be working in the public interest. The Parliament has an opportunity to introduce such a test through the Scottish Government's Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, and I encourage all members to support that proposal.

Deer culling is only the first step in the process of managing deer numbers, because we must also consider what happens to the carcasses. I have heard mixed reviews of attempts to integrate culled deer back into the local ecosystem and shocking reports of deer carcasses being buried. Therefore, it is all the more commendable to hear of organisations such as Fair Feast, which provides a consistent supply of venison to rural food banks across Scotland; its venison is butchered and packaged on site to maintain the lowest possible carbon footprint, and its mission is

"To protect the environment, by sustainably managing deer, and providing for the community, through consistent food banks supply."

As a nation, we cannot afford to allow venison to go to waste while people are going hungry. Gone are the days when venison was a preserve of the privileged few—it is now for the people, as all our commons should be.

17:47

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I thank Elena Whitham for securing the debate. She has outlined well how the Common Ground Forum was set up and how it is working. The debate is also very timely, given that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, of which Ms Whitham and I are members, is scrutinising the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, part of which focuses on updating the deer management legislation.

Deer are a keystone species and help shape our ecosystems. Light grazing can keep in check competitive plant species, allowing plant diversity to thrive. In addition, microhabitats are created when deer disturb ground with their hooves and fertilise the soil with their dung. However, a high density of deer causes problems; indeed, the Wildlife Scotland Trust has said that these "gentle gardeners" can become "metaphorical bulldozers".

In my South Scotland region, as in other rural areas, we have a specific deer management group; in my case, it is the Galloway and Dumfriesshire deer group. I spoke to the chair of the group yesterday and will be meeting him and the vice-chair on Friday to discuss deer management issues, specifically lowland management needs and the differences with highland or upland needs.

I agree with the deer group chair that deer management is not just a rural issue. We have witnessed more deer in peri-urban and even urban areas, causing damage in residential areas and to gardens. Of course, there are issues on our local roads, too, with larger fallow deer colliding with vehicles, causing severe accidents and damage to those vehicles—or even writing them off.

The local deer group brings together a variety of stakeholders, with the aim of ensuring the safe and sustainable management of our different species of deer to help address overgrazing and to promote biodiversity and a healthy natural environment. People often cite conflict over how we best use and manage the finite resource of land, but when we think about the interests of conservationists, rewilders and the agricultural sector, the fact is that conflict is not always inevitable. We need to find a way of managing and resolving any conflicts that arise and bringing together everyone with an interest in this issue, and the work of local deer management groups and the national Common Ground Forum that Elena Whitham has praised in her motion and speech is crucial to that holistic approach.

One example of joined-up working is happening on Jura and Islay, in Jenni Minto's constituency, where locally sourced venison is now on the dinner menu at six schools. It is an excellent way of reducing food miles and providing healthy, protein-rich meals, as has already been mentioned. Of course, school meals are free to all students in primary 1 to 5, thanks to the Scottish Government.

This is exactly why the Scottish Government is funding projects such as the larder and chill facility at Barwhillanty near Castle Douglas. The costs to the Government are relatively small—in this case, around £20,000—but the potential benefits to the local community can be huge, including reducing the dependence on meat from further afield, reducing waste and keeping spending power in local communities. It is yet another string to the south's bow with regard to its reputation for world-leading food and drink, and I want such projects to be extended further across the south. I therefore urge estates and anyone else involved in deer management to get the ball rolling by getting in their applications, so that we can see the innovation deployed on Jura being rolled out to our

school students in places such as Dumfries and Galloway.

Capital funding for most pilot projects is aimed at developing the infrastructure for venison processing, storage and support, which is what we need for our local communities to turn deer management from a challenge into an opportunity. That support is also part of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill that I mentioned earlier and which, if passed, will modernise deer management by implementing many of the deer working group's recommendations on deer culling at a local and national level. Again, getting the various stakeholders around the table to work together on the issue will be key to striking a balance and ensuring that we promote biodiversity and the natural environment to its fullest extent.

I again thank Elena Whitham for lodging her motion and I commend the work being done in this area by the Common Ground Forum.

17:51

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** Before I begin, I apologise to Elena Whitham and other members for missing the beginning of her speech. It has been a long day—I was in the chair at 8 o'clock this morning, dealing with stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill. However, I would not have missed this debate for anything. I am absolutely delighted to speak in support of the motion and the recognition of the work of the Common Ground Forum through the nature of Scotland award for innovation.

The debate is an important and timely acknowledgement of a quiet but transformative piece of work that has begun to shift the tone and approach in Scotland's upland deer management sector. By bringing together deer managers, conservationists and rural landowners, the forum has created space for trust, dialogue and shared purpose in one of the most sensitive and contested areas of land use—deer management.

Deer management is not a marginal issue. Effective, ecological and sound deer management is central to our ambitions for nature restoration and climate action. As the Scottish Fiscal Commission has outlined, if we are to meet our climate targets, Scotland will need to spend around £11.5 billion in public investment up to 2050 on land use, land use change and forestry. That is significantly more per capita than in the rest of the United Kingdom, because we have peatland to restore, forests to plant and more land under active management. That means changing how we work on the land and doing so in a way that supports those who live and work there.

Just as we invest in roads and bridges to connect communities, we must invest in the soft

infrastructure of trust. We need forums such as the Common Ground Forum to bring people together to share knowledge, build understanding and co-operate on solutions to shared challenges.

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a meeting of the Common Ground Forum. About 80 stalkers, conservationists, estate workers and contractors came together to speak openly about the need to evolve practices. Many of them work alone, yet the forum creates space for them to exchange information, debunk misinformation and get up to speed with new techniques and technology. They came together under the common ground accord, which sets a standard for respectful behaviour throughout the upland deer management sector, and encourages participants to keep an open mind, listen to understand, engage honestly and work towards mutually beneficial solutions.

Although upland deer managers benefit from deer management groups, lowland areas, as we have already heard, often lack that structure. We must do more to support lowland stalkers through local forums, regional co-ordination and tailored support.

We must also recognise that managing deer for ecological recovery, if we are serious about restoring our degraded natural systems and meeting the target of protecting 30 per cent of Scotland's land for nature by 2030, will require more trained stalkers, not fewer. That means investing in skilled development and providing structured training routes into the sector.

I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that wild deer, which are currently overabundant on our hills, are treated as a viable and sustainable source of protein. Aligning deer management with the aims of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 offers the opportunity to put healthy, locally sourced venison on the menu in Scotland's schools, hospitals and other public kitchens. We have already heard this evening from two members about the incredible efforts on Jura and in the primary schools in Argyll and Bute.

I commend the Centre for Good Relations for the key role that it has played in facilitating the forum's work and emphasise my belief that that kind of collaborative approach should be core to how the Scottish Government funds rural development. I have had numerous conversations with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands about the need to fund soft infrastructure work. I trust that the debate today demonstrates to her and the minister the need to act on that.

The debate is about building a nature-positive future that allows rural people to continue to make a living using their skills and knowledge while

healing the land that we all depend on. Let us support the forum's approach and expand it to other sectors that work with Scotland's land and sea.

17:56

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** I congratulate my fellow Ayrshire member, Elena Whitham, on bringing this important issue of deer management to the chamber.

Although the imagery of the majestic stag holds a strong cultural significance in Scotland, it has long been a reality that deer numbers are a huge challenge. Woodland regeneration projects struggle without deer-proof fencing, while excessive grazing and the trampling of peatland disrupts the growth of peat-forming vegetation and damages soil, hindering the natural carbon storage process, releasing greenhouse gases and destroying habitats that support a distinctive range of species.

Given those challenges, I welcome the individuals and organisations, ranging from the Scottish Government and its agencies, national park authorities, private landowners and managers, gamekeepers' bodies, rewilding groups and agriculture, who have joined the Common Ground Forum. The initiative improves deer management and is welcome. The forum's recent innovation award is testament to its excellent work.

Gamekeepers are also vital, as is Forestry and Land Scotland, which last year culled 42,500 deer, or roughly one third of the deer that were shot across Scotland. However, the reality is that almost 1 million deer are still unsustainably causing ecological imbalance. We have already heard about Jura, which, incidentally, means "deer island" in Old Norse.

The elephant in the room is that adult deer in Scotland have no natural predators. Little Red Riding Hood and the three little pigs have a lot to answer for. Such tales consolidated our centuries-old fear of Europe's apex predator, the wolf. They were wiped out in Scotland in the 18th century and, in 1720 in Austria, Simon Wind was the last person executed in Europe for being a werewolf. In the preceding three centuries, hundreds of others met a similar fate.

Europe has matured since those hysterical times. In Italy, 3,300 wolves and hundreds of packs roam a country with three times their population density. Across Europe, only Cyprus, Iceland, Ireland, Malta and the UK have no wolves. In France, where wolves were eradicated in 1927, there are now around 800.

I am not advocating for wolf reintroduction—the minister would have a heart attack. However, the fact that wolves are widespread in Europe puts into perspective the Scottish Government's timidity and deep conservatism in obstinately refusing to contemplate reintroducing the Eurasian lynx. Although it is not a silver bullet for deer control—with apologies to the late Mr Wind—it should be part of a natural solution to deer sustainability. In the 1990s, as reintroduced lynx expanded into new areas in Switzerland, they encountered dense populations of roe deer with no prior experience of predators. Within five years, consistent and highly localised lynx predation significantly reduced those deer populations and the remaining deer became more widely dispersed.

Other countries that have reintroduced lynx have seen similar benefits. In Scotland, areas with high deer concentrations would see them reduce, with declining browsing pressure benefiting biodiversity and commercial forestry. I urge the minister to engage with the lynx to Scotland partnership, which organised the national lynx discussion between May and November last year. It found that there is sufficient quantity and quality of habitat in Scotland to support a viable lynx population to aid deer control. In Iberia, conservation has seen lynx numbers grow from a critically low 94 to around 1,200, which has been backed by farmers, who are delighted at the fall in rabbit numbers and the increase in tourists that the lynx has brought. Although Scottish ministers talk of enhancing biodiversity, their antiquated view regarding lynx reintroduction exposes the Scottish Government as a laggard in such matters, which is something that it must urgently address.

I warmly welcome the Common Ground Forum on deer which, in a short space of time, has tackled the decades of conflict that has plagued deer management. It is crucial that various interests work collaboratively to facilitate effective deer management across Scotland. Nevertheless, it is my firm belief that we can sustainably control the unnaturally high number of deer only by reintroducing to Scotland a native predator that would complement the culling that is already being undertaken. The Eurasian lynx poses no threat to humans and very little threat to livestock or pets—certainly less than dogs. Evidence abounds across Europe, if ministers could be bothered to look at it with an open mind. I urge the minister to be bold in that regard and to engage with the insightful findings of the national lynx discussion.

Once again, I thank Elena Whitham for bringing the issue of deer management to the chamber.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you. Having had his blood pressure suitably raised, I call Jim Fairlie.

18:00

**The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie):** I genuinely thank the members who have participated in today's debate. If I have time, I will try to get through some of the points that they have raised. I especially thank Elena Whitham for securing this very useful debate.

Before I get into the detail of the discussion, I want to take a moment to recognise the excellent work that is carried out every year by our land managers, gamekeepers and stalkers in managing deer, and to congratulate the forum on its award, proving, in my opinion, that even the trickiest of issues can be talked about in a way that leads to solutions. Sometimes, we forget that that is an option for us.

We are fortunate in Scotland to have such a wealth of experience and expertise in those who carry out deer management in a range of often challenging circumstances. Earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to go out stalking on the Glenfalloch estate with the people who manage the deer there, as well as with representatives of the Association of Deer Management Groups. It was an amazing experience and a great opportunity to see at first hand some of the excellent deer management that is going on across Scotland. It was also an opportunity to hear from people who are involved in finding common ground with regard to improving deer management relationships across Scotland.

Elena Whitham said earlier that she hoped that the forum would be obsolete in two or three years. I do hope not, because it will allow us to have continuous engagement on all the issues that we will face in the future.

Deer management is a vital part of land management, and it is carried out for a wide range of purposes. Understandably, there is a broad range of views on how it is best done. In the past, those differences have sometimes led to fractured relationships and a focus on opposing views rather than on the shared interest of those involved. I am incredibly pleased by the work that has been done across the sector to change that and to come together through the Common Ground Forum, with the support of the Centre for Good Relations—and I very much welcome the gentleman from the Centre for Good Relations who is here tonight.

In December 2024, the Common Ground Forum published a review of its progress. I recognise that there are two important pieces of work on that engagement. One of the Common Ground Forum's areas of focus has been improving the opportunities for young stalkers and women in stalking to be represented and to have their views heard. There is still work to be done there, but it is

a very important piece of work that should continue.

The other piece of work that has been really valuable has been on improving engagement between Government and the stalkers. Those voices are the most important but are sometimes the least heard, and I am grateful to the Common Ground Forum for its work on that issue.

I have also been particularly impressed by the forum's focus on issues of commonality—for example, on venison, which a number of members have talked about. There are shared opportunities that we can benefit from in deer management and in recognising that we have a very good resource in the wild deer population, regardless of why we are managing it. Venison is one of those excellent opportunities.

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** Will the minister join me in congratulating NHS Dumfries and Galloway, which has been working with Forestry and Land Scotland to get wild venison on the menu in its hospital in Dumfries, on being one of the first national health service boards to embrace that sustainable and climate-conscious addition to the diet?

**Jim Fairlie:** Absolutely—100 per cent. I endorse that approach, and the work that is going on in Argyll and Bute. People are starting to get involved in a number of different things, right across Scotland.

My colleague Ariane Burgess mentioned the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022—I am now going off script, so members will have to bear with me. I recently had a meeting on how local authorities and food providers can get involved with local deer managers to find out how to get venison into schools, hospitals and any other place where we can get the product consumed. That is exactly what we all want to see.

We have introduced reforms to deer legislation through the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, as has been mentioned, but that is just one part of the deer programme. Those changes are important, and that bill is intended to support our work on tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, but I know that legislation alone will not achieve our aims. We can achieve them only if we have a collective effort and skilled deer managers across the country. In that respect, I very much look forward to meeting the British Association for Shooting and Conservation next week to talk about lowland, as opposed to upland, deer management—I am going out on another stalking evening.

I get that there is a real issue here. We must recognise that, when we talk about deer management, we are talking about two different things: lowland deer management and upland

deer management. The deer management groups in the Highland areas are a much more organised and well-put-together set of people who know exactly what it is that they are trying to do. There can be conflict, but when it happens, that is where the deer management groups come into their own. However, it is not the same in the lowland parts of Scotland, and we need to find some way of putting in place in those areas a model similar to that established with deer managers in highland areas, in which they can find common ground. It is a perfect example of good practice.

As we look forward, I want us to move away from the idea that deer management is a necessary evil. That is certainly not my view. Instead, I want us to work together, both in Government and on the—

**Kenneth Gibson:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Jim Fairlie:** I will happily take an intervention.

**Kenneth Gibson:** I am not going to talk about wolves or lynx, but I wonder whether the minister supports the export of deer pizzle to places such as Taiwan, for example, where it is used as a replacement for tiger penis in soups as an aphrodisiac. *[Interruption.]* I am saying this in all seriousness, because it takes pressure off, for example, India's tiger populations.

**Jim Fairlie:** Every day is a school day. I did not realise that that was happening, and I thank Kenneth Gibson for giving me a nugget of knowledge that I now cannot get out of my head. I do welcome the fact that he has given it to us, though.

As I have said, I want us to work together, both in Government and on the—

**Christine Grahame:** Will the minister take another intervention?

**Jim Fairlie:** Yes.

**Christine Grahame:** The minister used the phrase “a necessary evil”, but I said in my speech that it was not a necessary evil, but a welfare issue. A lot of the conflict between those with animal welfare concerns and those who wish to do the culling has been resolved by seeing that it is also in the beasts' interest that they do not overpopulate.

**Jim Fairlie:** Christine Grahame makes a very good point, and it is exactly the kind of thing that will come out of the Common Ground Forum. The forum has certainly put us in a better place now than we were a few years ago, and I am very pleased with the work that it is doing. Indeed, everyone involved was recognised at last year's nature of Scotland awards.

I take a great deal of interest in the views of those who do this work every day, and I very much look forward to the opportunities that the Common Ground Forum presents to us as we move forward. I should also say that I look forward to not having lynx in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate.

*Meeting closed at 18:08.*

## Correction

Alasdair Allan has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

**The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan):**

*At col 63, para 5, line 3—*

*Original text—*

I listened carefully to Patrick Harvie's comments about local control and culture change. In the past 12 months, more than £30 million-worth of benefits have been offered to Scottish communities, supported by our voluntary good practice principles. We agree that, as a Government, we must do more.

*Corrected text—*

I listened carefully to Patrick Harvie's comments about local control and culture change. In the past 12 months, more than £29 million-worth of benefits have been offered to Scottish communities, supported by our voluntary good practice principles. We agree that, as a Government, we must do more.

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