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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 24 March 2026

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 10:00]

Sport and Activity as a Force for Good

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good morning. The first item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20497, in the name of Brian Whittle, on sport and activity as a force for good. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I advise members that the debate is oversubscribed, so there is no time in hand. In the open debate, members must stick to their agreed speaking slots of up to four minutes. The opening speaker and the minister must stick to up to seven minutes each. If members wish to accept interventions, those will have to be absorbed within the time constraints that have been set forth.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of sport and activity as a force for good that goes beyond just physical health; considers that they have a significant impact on mental health, as well as contributing to community and national cohesion and wellbeing; believes that sport breaks down barriers of colour, race, religion and creed by bringing individuals and communities together through a common shared interest and passion; recognises that, by promoting sport and activity, the Scottish Government can positively impact on confidence, resilience and aspiration which, in turn, can positively impact on education and benefit the economy, and notes the view that the Scottish Government should do everything that it can to make sport and activity available for all, in the South Scotland region and across the country, irrespective of personal circumstances.

10:00

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I have been warned.

My passion lies in the firm belief that education is the solution to health and welfare issues. By education, I mean not only academia but coaching in sport, the arts, drama, music and any activity that can engage, enthuse and engender a passion in our youngsters.

I will quote from my first speech in the Parliament, which I made 10 years ago:

"If we choose to open up choices to our children and allow them opportunities to find their passion … stoke their enthusiasm and engender self-belief, self-motivation, self awareness and a drive towards achievement, whatever they decide that achievement will be … they will seek to make better lifestyle choices",

and I believe that we can teach them to do so. I also said:

"The importance of self-awareness cannot be overstated. If we help them to achieve that, no matter what discipline they are involved in, it will have a profound effect across all … aspects of their lives … However, if we choose to ignore the issue"—

or if we decide that the task is too difficult to tackle, it is guaranteed that, in five years, not only will the issue remain but—

"the situation will continue to deteriorate, with the result that health inequality will increase and the attainment gap that we want to eliminate will widen."—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2016; c 25.]

When I said that, I was youngish, had 20:20 vision and had no grey hair. I was also 10kg lighter, optimistic and enthusiastic.

However, on health—whether physical or mental—and on education, we have made very little progress since then. In fact, many health indicators have got markedly worse. Obesity levels, type 2 diabetes, drug and alcohol deaths and the need for treatment for poor mental health, to name but a few of those indicators, have continued to deteriorate. We are the unhealthiest country in Europe and one of the unhealthiest in the world. Our healthy life expectancy is reducing—it has dipped below 60 years of age, with a huge differentiation between areas 1 and 5 on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation.

That worries me greatly, not just because I am well beyond that age milestone. The decline in children's physical literacy over the past few decades is directly linked to the decline in the health of the nation. The decline in investment in real-time sports and activities, from an already low level, the increasingly difficult access to sport and activity and a lack of understanding of the potential impact of sport on society have exacerbated our already poor health outcomes.

My daughters have always played sport. The eldest two competed internationally. The youngest is in sixth year and shows real promise. Her chances of becoming an Olympian are 0.0003 per cent. Nevertheless, if she stays in sport, the chances of her staying in a leadership position increase by 70 per cent, her risk of disease lowers by 40 per cent and her risk of developing mental health issues decreases by 40 per cent. Sport not only benefits our physical and mental health but gives us the tools and foundations that we need in life.

My two eldest grandsons—one plays for Ayr United Football Club and the other is on a Scottish Rugby Union pathway—are taking advantage of opportunities that are afforded to them that too many of our children do not have. In many cases, that is because there is no network to support

funding of the travel, the kit, the clubs, the availability to participate and all the associated costs. The children of my tribe are lucky, because their parents and grandparents are able to support their aspirations in that way.

"Nature or nurture?" is the perennial question. The truth is that the answer is, "A bit of both." One of my favourite quotes is from Henry Ford, who said:

"Whether you think you can, or you think you can't—you're right."

However, before you can believe that you can, you have to be aware of—and have access to—opportunity in the first place. We should all want to have access to sport and activity, no matter what the personal circumstances. I have had the pleasure of meeting many participants across sport who have been offered that opportunity.

I give a big shout-out to the Ayrshire Tigers powerchair football team, to whom I am eternally grateful for giving me the opportunity to put a parliamentary team against them—a team that included Alexander Stewart, who thought that he had found his sport because he could do it sitting down. He is still traumatised by his experience because, as he quickly learned, if you do not train for a sport, those who do will quickly demonstrate your frailties. If we want to witness a sport that has changed and enhanced the lives of those who take part, we need look no further than the powerchair football community.

The education environment is the key battleground in laying the foundations for an active and healthy long life. If we are to create an active community and reverse the declining health of the nation, we must develop a cohesive policy that connects from birth to old age. Much of the blueprint for later life, including for the cardiovascular system, bone density and the neuromuscular system, develops pre-school. There is an opportunity to use the 1,140 hours of free nursery care to embed active play and a better relationship with food while we are at it. I would like training modules in childcare to include the development of active play and a healthy diet. Incidentally, that would also allow for continuing professional development in the sector.

That would lay the foundation for primary school, where that already embedded activity and physical literacy could be further developed, still with play and fun at the forefront, through the school curriculum and the active schools network. That would ensure that all have access. As pupils develop through school activities, that should be reflected and connected through opportunities that are available in communities, and linked in with sports governing bodies. There must be participation pathways that make participation easy. By the time that secondary school is reached, more formal sport should be an option, and that should again be linked to community opportunities.

One issue that I am currently working on is how we deliver sport and activity in a way that includes those who are becoming serious about the sport as well as those who participate just for fun, camaraderie, health and inclusion. The competition structure is not what it used to be, and we need to recreate that opportunity. I believe that that can be done within the resource that we currently have. University sports and clubs await those who are keen to keep their competitive sport going, and many of Scotland's great achievements have come through that route.

I want to speak briefly about volunteers. We need to give more people the opportunity to volunteer, and I will offer an idea to increase the sector. How about, as part of an employment package, we develop a system whereby, as employees reach retirement, they get the opportunity to sit coaching qualifications in an activity of their choice? That would be paid for jointly by the employer and the Government, and both sport and the volunteer sector would benefit.

We have a fantastic summer of sport to look forward to, and those events will create national pride and emotion—all positive, of course. If we are to realise and optimise the opportunities that that legacy offers, we must consider how all our community can benefit and how we can ensure that all our people have access. That will require a consistent, joined-up and inclusive generational plan over a period of time. We must make it easier to take part.

It has been 10 years since I first spoke in the chamber on sport and activity. As I reflect on what has changed since I raised those issues, it is hard to say anything other than that, overall, Scotland is unhealthier, which is in part the result of sport becoming ever more difficult to access. Sport and activity are supposed to be for all. I urge the Parliament in the next session to take more seriously the role of sport and activity and their positive impact on health, community cohesion and national pride.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we commence the open debate, I note that a couple of speakers who had previously indicated that they might wish to speak have not pressed their request-to-speak button.

We move to the open debate, with back-bench members having speeches of up to four minutes, as I said.

10:08

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I thank Brian Whittle for giving me the opportunity to give my final speech in this august place on a subject that is very close to my heart. I was involved in amateur and juvenile football for many years, first as a very mediocre player and then as a more successful coach and manager, and I enjoyed almost every minute of it.

Two things never leave me about the importance of sport, and particularly team sports. One is the camaraderie that sport fosters, often among people from widely varying backgrounds, who become lifelong friends through the trials and tribulations of sport and, hopefully, that feeling of joy when you win a trophy or feel that you have played particularly well. I will come on to how one club in my constituency, through hard work and determination, along with the buy-in of the local community, helped to change the lives of hundreds of young kids, both male and female, through the power of sport.

The other thing that sport gives you is confidence. For example, it is through football that I got the confidence to speak in public. Before I got involved, I was—as I am sure members will not be surprised to hear—very opinionated, but I had a dread of speaking to even a small number of people in an official setting. That was because of imposter syndrome, I think. That was until my dearest friend, Sandy Fraser, who is no longer with us, told me that he wanted me to give a team talk at football. The only advice that he gave me, which I give to others even now, was to concentrate on one individual if I felt nervous and to speak as if they were the only person I was addressing. Since that day, people have not been able to shut me up.

Before I go on to the substance of my speech, I will take the opportunity to speak for a few moments about my time as a member of the Scottish Parliament. There is no doubt that being an MSP, particularly for my home constituency of Glasgow Cathcart, has been the proudest achievement of my life. To have won that seat three times, with an ever-increasing majority, leaves me with a sense of personal pride. However, I am even prouder of the fact that I, and my office, have helped hundreds upon hundreds of individuals and families and, with the assistance of some of the finest organisations in the country, have been able to reach out to those who are most disadvantaged.

I will briefly mention two charities. Home-Start Glasgow South has assisted countless families through the most difficult of times, and it continues to do so. The Daisy Project is a charity that works with women and families who have been victims, or survivors, of domestic abuse, invariably by men, and is an inspiration that is now looked on as a shining example of how best to support such families. I might be leaving the Parliament, but I will always be there for them.

In Castlemilk, we have a facility that had been left to rot, having been run down over a number of years by the previous operators. When Covid came along, the place was shut down, with the goalposts chained away and the gates locked, apparently never to be reopened. Then along came John Harkins and his team, who started a "Save our pitches" campaign that got the support of local clubs and people. Two years later, they got the keys to the pitches, built their own changing rooms in a shipping container and used that for seven months before they persuaded the authorities to give them the keys to an existing run-down pavilion and a licence to operate it. A year later, they completed a 25-year lease on the pavilion. Anyone who has been to see it will understand the changes that they have made to the pitches, the surrounding area and the whole of Castlemilk.

There are now more than 1,000 people training or playing on the pitches every week. The team created a brand-new Castlemilk community football club, with walking football for the over-50s. Around 24 local families per week benefit from the Scottish Government and Scottish Football Association-supported extra time programme, which allows parents to work for longer before collecting their kids. Additional holiday programmes provide breakfast and a free hot lunch, and the club employs local people and has local volunteers who help to maintain the facility, manage the car park and provide space for all ages to congregate to combat isolation.

Due to time factors today, I cannot go into everything else that the club does. I am sure that he will not like me saying so, but John and the others who run the Barlia pitches are true community heroes. They are an example that should, and could, be followed in every area of Glasgow—and other cities—that suffers from the same levels of deprivation as many in Castlemilk have had to face over the years and the decades. That example perfectly shows how sport can be a positive force for good for both individuals and communities.

I again thank Brian Whittle for lodging his excellent motion and for giving me one final opportunity to talk so positively about my beloved Cathcart and some of the real heroes within it. I hope that I did okay for them.

10:12

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Brian Whittle for securing the debate. I have been here for two years, and he and I have had

more conversations in the stairwells about sport, and the power of sport in people's lives, than I care to remember. He is a true champion of sport in Scotland, and I hope that he will return to continue to put pressure on the Parliament to deliver for our young people and for everyone across Scotland.

I find sport incredibly important. I remember becoming a councillor in 2017. Not long after that, councillors were at a meeting at the Glasgow School of Art premises at Forres, up in Moray, where we had to do a prioritisation exercise about what we thought was important. I was sitting in a room with a bunch of independent councillors and some of my colleagues, and the subjects that came up were big things such as education, social care and gritting the roads. Sport came up, and I remember everyone trying to put that right at the far end of the scale, but, as a young parent at the time, I tried to argue that that was not where we should put it. I said that if we saw sport for what it is, we would put at the top, because it saves money for the future. If we can get people embedded in sport at a young age, we can save money that might be spent on later health problems. I lost the argument at the time, but still think, to this day, that we should make much more of sport.

Sport is not protected in council budgets and is an easy thing to cut when we are trying to ensure that we have enough social care or are dealing with additional support needs in schools. Sport can often get lost. In 2019-20, I tried to make the argument that Moray Council should be part of a project to bring a running track to the community, because an athletics club was training on what was basically a dirt pitch and I did not think that that was good enough. I think that we should have facilities across Scotland to enable people wherever they are, whether it is in rural or urban areas, to do the best that they can.

When my wife and I were parents with a young family, she had the pleasure of getting involved in the swimming club in Buckie, which meant that she got to spend her weekends with our daughter, indoors, at a nice warm poolside, while I had the pleasure of taking on the football side of things. I know nothing about football—I played rugby as a child and had nothing to do with football. However, I did my level 1.1 introduction to coaching course with the Scottish Football Association. I followed that with the level 1.2 course, and, in May this year, I will do the level 1.3 course. That will involve me spending nine hours learning about football, which I am still not sure that I know anything about.

I have toured around the north and north-east of Scotland with a group of young people, and I have never been prouder of what they have achieved since primary 1. We have 15 or 16 boys who have worked hard to gel as a team. Nothing gave me more pleasure than making them do press-ups when they said naughty words on the pitch.

All that shows the power of sport. My son has done incredibly well as a result of his group succeeding in coming together as a team, and my daughter has flourished as a result of the benefits that swimming brings. I commend everyone who is involved in running those activities. I recently attended the Scottish Amateur Swimming Association north district event in Aberdeen. It was incredible to see the hundreds of people in that building, from parents on the poolside to coaches and judges, as well as the swimmers, all of whom were doing an amazing job.

My message is that sport is incredibly powerful. As well as delivering future health outcomes, sport can bring communities together and reduce the amount of money that we need to spend on services.

Finally, I say a huge thank you to all the volunteers across the country, without whom our sports clubs simply would not work. I am talking about the parents—the mums and dads—the aunties, the uncles and all those who enable our sports clubs to work every day. As Brian Whittle said, the Parliament needs to give much more consideration to sport, and I hope that that will be the case in the next parliamentary session.

10:16

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in Brian Whittle's members' business debate. When I saw the motion, I thought, "That's the one I'll make my final speech as an MSP in." I know, from serving on committees with Brian over the past 10 years since he entered Parliament, that sport is an issue that he has consistently highlighted. I always remember a conversation that I had with him about Allan Wells, whose wife came from Kelty. When Allan Wells won the gold medal, his wife's dad, Jock Wilkie, took the medal around schools to enthuse people about athletics and running. The energy that Brian Whittle has brought to the promotion of sport in the Parliament has been welcome.

I am a kind of glass-half-full type of person, and I believe that progress has been made over the 12 years for which I have been an MSP, although it is true that we need to do a lot more. One of the keys to that is getting people to work together. When it comes to sport in the area that I come from—Fife—I see loads of volunteers. Tim Eagle spoke about the role of volunteers. I see all the mums and dads and grandparents who are involved in sport at grass-roots level. The more we can support those people, the more chance we have of delivering sport across the country.

I live near a public park in Kelty. During the summer months, it is an absolute delight to see the number of children playing there. That is a result of the investment that Fife Council made in the park in 2012-13, including in an astroturf pitch that Kelty Hearts now play on. That is there for the public—it is a public park. Alongside that, there is a big new community centre. We can see the value of that.

Most of those activities are run by volunteers. We need to enhance that, which will involve local government, the Scottish Government and local communities working together. I am a passionate believer in devolution. If it was up to me, I would have far greater devolution to the Scottish Parliament. I also believe that there needs to be far greater devolution to local authorities.

We have had eight parliamentary debates on sport in this session since 2021—I checked that yesterday with the Scottish Parliament information centre; we have four cross-party groups in the Parliament that look at different aspects of sport; and we have a whole host of strategies. We have got that bit right, but we need to start implementing these things instead of just talking about them in places such as this.

Physical activity comes in many forms. My general practitioner used to tell me that the bus pass scheme for pensioners had done more for their health and wellbeing than his surgery could ever do, because it made those using the buses physically active. Indeed, I know, as someone who now regularly uses buses, that having to walk to get them makes me physically active.

I will finish on this story. Many years ago, when I was a councillor in Kelty, the local community came together to save a park, and it raised a whack of money—about £800,000 in total—for a play park. Way back then, there was a lady in Kelty called Mrs Gillespie, who was 100 years old, and we asked her to come and open the park, because we felt that it was symbolic to have the oldest person in Kelty open a park for the town's children. I remember Jim Leishman coming up—this was before he became a councillor; at the time, he was a famous sportsperson who lived in Kelty—and there was a photo of him sitting on a swing with Mrs Gillespie on his knee and all the children round about. Every time I go past that park and see all the children playing in it, I think of how much of a success it has been.

That shows that we do not need massive investments—much can be done with small investments. The lesson is that if we can work and pull together, we can achieve so much.

10:21

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): First, I thank Brian Whittle for securing this much-anticipated members' business debate and for championing sports throughout this parliamentary session. As members might know, I was a restaurateur in my former life, and it did not make me much of a morning person. However, sport has a way of changing people's habits—so here I am for this unique early chamber business. I could not miss this debate.

As a teenager growing up in Edinburgh, sport was the highlight of my day. I would come back from school, throw my bag into the house and run to our local council-run open space to play football. Sport brought us all together, regardless of our social or cultural backgrounds. Our differences were set aside, and we connected.

Sport supports children's mental wellbeing and improves discipline and performance in the classroom, and team sports help young people grow into better adults by teaching co-operation, respect and how to both win and lose with dignity. Research consistently shows that active children are far more likely to lead healthier lives as adults. I can certainly attest to that, and I have passed those values on to my own children.

Today, however, it is a different story from when I was a teenager. Many children and young people no longer have equal access to sports. The cost of booking pitches in Edinburgh is rising and many struggling families across the city have told me that they cannot afford to keep their children active.

One of my very first visits as an MSP in 2021 was to a summer basketball session at Tynecastle high school. Some of the young people told me that, without access to school facilities, they did not know how they would spend their summer and that they might start to get involved with things that they should not be getting involved with. That reflects a wider reality. We know the transformative power of sport: it not only builds friendships but keeps young people away from antisocial behaviour and reduces the risk of involvement with harmful substances.

Community initiatives are already using sport as a prevention tool to make neighbourhoods safer and more inclusive. A groundbreaking example is the Friday night lights project in Leith, which is delivered by the Leith community sport hub in partnership with Hibernian Community Foundation. It provides safe and engaging activities such as basketball, football, rugby and fencing as well as vital support to vulnerable young people.

Youth sport should also be a long-term priority, to ensure that Scotland finds its sporting talent and builds home-grown champions to compete in

international games. That message should be sent across Scotland with full force, with the world cup and the Commonwealth games in Glasgow coming up and the Tour de France grand départ in Edinburgh next year.

In recent years, vital facilities have been closed due to funding pressures, such as swimming pools in West Lothian, which are lifelines for many constituents. We must do more, and local authorities need greater support to maintain and expand facilities.

Sport also plays a vital role in community cohesion. Through groups such as Scot Bangla sporting club and Scot Nepal club in Edinburgh, sport helps to integrate newcomers and celebrate diversity. Community organisations are doing remarkable work, but they cannot do it alone—they need sustained nationwide support.

Quite simply, sport is one of the most effective and affordable solutions to many of the societal challenges that we face today. If we are serious about improving mental health, reducing pressure on the national health service, tackling youth crime and strengthening communities, sport must be at the heart of our approach. Sport is not a luxury; it is a necessity in building a healthier, more connected and resilient Scotland.

10:26

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank my colleague Brian Whittle for securing this excellent debate. I rise to speak about sport being a force for good with a mixture of pride, gratitude and a sense of coming full circle. This will be my last speech in the Parliament, and I can think of no better subject to close on than the power of sport, with regard to not just competition but community, compassion and change.

When we talk about sport as a force for good, we are not speaking in abstractions; we are speaking about places, people and projects that transform lives every single day. There is no better example of that than what is happening at Townhead park in Cumnock, in my constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

Cumnock Juniors Community Enterprise is, on the surface, a successful football club. It has a proud history, a trophy-winning junior team that inspires huge local pride and a vocal but good-natured rivalry with its next-door neighbour, Auchinleck Talbot Football Club.

However, to stop there would be to miss the point entirely, because what has been built around that club is something far more powerful than silverware; it is a model of what sport can and should be. At its heart is the simple but radical idea that everyone deserves access—not just the most talented or those who can afford it, but everyone.

That means creating opportunities for girls to take part and thrive in spaces that have not always welcomed them. It means opening the door for people who are in recovery, offering not just physical activity but purpose, belonging and hope. It means recognising that participation looks different at different stages of life, whether that is walking football, which is delivered in partnership with Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland and supports people to stay active and connected, or inclusive cycling opportunities for those with learning disabilities, which is developed alongside the Things Tae Dae club. Those are not add-ons; they are the point.

It does not stop there. Cumnock Juniors Community Enterprise understands that wellbeing is not just about what happens on the pitch; it is about the whole person, the whole family and the whole community. That is why it has developed goals for growth, which is an employability programme that meets people where they are at. The programme recognises that, for many, the first step towards work is not a CV workshop, but having a sense of confidence, routine and support that are built through sport and wellbeing activity. The programme connects participation with opportunity and aspiration with action.

Cumnock Juniors Community Enterprise also provides dignified food provision, because no one should need to choose between feeding their family and taking part in their community. That is also why it runs affordable and accessible holiday clubs, ensuring that children are not only fed during school breaks but have the chance to play, learn and simply be children.

That is what it means for sport to be a force for good. It is not just about health outcomes, although those matter a lot, and it is not just about the economic impact, although that matters, too; it is about dignity, inclusion and creating spaces in which people feel that they belong. If we are truly serious about tackling inequality, improving public health and strengthening our communities, we must recognise, support and invest in models like that.

The lessons from Cumnock are clear: when sport is rooted in community, led with compassion and open to all, it becomes one of the most powerful tools that we have for social change. I understand that only too well—and I wish that wee me had, too. As an undiagnosed ADHDer who participated in every sport going—especially the thrill-seeking ones such as diving, rugby, track and field, mountain biking, ringette and skateboarding—it helped to focus my really busy mind via activity and dopamine. Believe me,

Presiding Officer, I had knocked-out teeth, broken bones and the scars to prove it.

As I prepare to step away from this Parliament, I am incredibly proud of the communities that I have had the privilege to represent, and I am also deeply hopeful, because of what I have seen in places such as Townhead park. Sport can change lives; in Cumnock, it already is.

10:30

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank my friend and colleague Brian Whittle for bringing the debate to the chamber. The motion highlights something that most of us know instinctively, which is that sport and physical activity are about not only fitness, but also connection, confidence and community cohesion.

We all know about the health benefits of sport: stronger bodies, better mental health and reduced risk of serious illness. The United Kingdom chief medical officers even called physical activity the closest thing that we have to "a miracle cure", which is spectacular news for the NHS. It is therefore disappointing that this Government, year after year, has failed to spend to save on the NHS; it has failed to save money and to save lives.

Health aside, sport also builds leadership, resilience and teamwork. It widens opportunity and brings people closer together, regardless of background, colour or creed. It can even help politicians to talk to one another like human beings, which is a miracle in itself.

I have represented Scotland at rugby—yes, in an actual Scotland shirt. In fact, I am confident that my brief international career was the inspiration behind fellow Galloway lads and Scottish stars Stafford McDowall and Alex Craig reaching the heights that they have. Sadly, my own promising future was cut short due to a highly technical flaw: my severe and incurable lack of ability. For full disclosure, if members have not already guessed, my Scottish appearances were for the Scottish Parliament team.

The Scottish Parliament rugby team is an example of the positives of sport. Members from every party take to the pitch and, for 80 minutes, forget about divisions—albeit that is probably mainly because we are all too busy trying to remember which direction we are meant to run in. However, a few years ago, at the pre-match reception at the British embassy in Dublin, the British ambassador said that he believed that it was the first time that all the major parties of the island of Ireland had been in the same room at the same time. That was an example of rugby bringing people together—and it was quite something.

Our annual fixture with our Irish parliamentary counterparts has forged genuine friendships over the years. I have donned their tie and I am wearing it as I speak. I have watched novice politician Neil Richmond go from councillor to senator to TD to Minister of State, which clearly proves that playing regular matches against us Scots is the secret to career progression. If that really worked, in Holyrood, we would have a queue around the block to join the squad.

Humour aside, nothing demonstrates the strength of that relationship more than the compassion that the Irish team showed when our friend and colleague David Hill tragically passed away during one of those fixtures. Their kindness in that moment will never be forgotten. It showed the true power of sport not only to unite, but to support and heal.

I will turn to my constituency, where, thankfully, others are considerably more talented than I am. We continue to punch well above our weight. That includes fellow Twynholm lad, motor sport star David Coulthard. Right across the sporting spectrum, they all started somewhere: they started at a local club. David, for example, started at the Cults Kart Club just outside Stranraer.

I have spoken before in the chamber about the enormous impact of community sports organisations such as Queen of the South's Community Trust. Its work with young people, families and vulnerable groups is nothing short of outstanding. It is joined by Stranraer FC, St Cuthbert Wanderers and Threave Rovers, which are clubs that do more than simply field teams—they provide belonging, opportunity and purpose. In many communities, they are as essential as the village hall or the post office—just with better pies.

Curling, meanwhile, might be the sport that best captures the spirit of rural Scotland. Across Dumfries and Galloway, it brings together people of all ages—teenagers, pensioners, and everyone in between. Thanks to that community culture, we produce world-class curlers such as Grant Hardie, Hammy McMillan Jr, Bobby Lammie and Olympic champion Vicky Wright. There must be something in the water in Dumfries and Galloway—or, more likely, in the ice. We also have the brilliant Wigtownshire Ladies rugby team and the ever-dominant St Cuthbert's walking football squad.

Finally, it may be indulgent, but I would like to have my proud dad moment. Eleven years ago, after a reluctant visit—or should I say being dragged—to an ice hockey match at the Ice Bowl in Dumfries, my daughter Vicky got the ice hockey bug and, within weeks, donned skates and pads. After travelling thousands of miles and visiting dozens of countries, Vicky captained the Great Britain women's bandy team in the gold medal

match at the world championships in Sweden on Saturday. For anyone who is wondering, bandy is the fastest ball game and a wonderful sport that blends ice hockey, field hockey and sheer chaos. Her team did us proud, losing out on the gold medal only in the last few minutes.

The motion states clearly that sport should be available to everyone, everywhere, regardless of circumstance—whether in the south of Scotland or the rest of the country. When we invest in sport, we invest in healthier people, stronger communities and a more cohesive and confident Scotland.

10:35

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Finlay Carson's daughter and all the team, and I am sure that everyone would join me in doing so.

I thank Brian Whittle for bringing this debate to the chamber. Brian has been a brilliant champion of sport in this Parliament and, like other members, I appreciate all the work that he has done.

I pay tribute to my colleague Alex Rowley, who has given his last speech in Parliament. It is great to speak in the same debate. He has worked hard on many issues during his time here, raising matters from constituents and always offering to work across the chamber to ensure the best outcome for Scotland. I wish him well in his retirement. The Labour group will miss him and we will be poorer without his contributions.

During my time in Parliament, it has been a pleasure to meet numerous sporting organisations that do important work to promote the health, wellbeing and social benefits of sport. Recently, I had the pleasure of engaging with Netball Scotland, which does fantastic work to educate people on the reasons why sport, such as netball, matters. Netball is predominantly a sport for women. It has very passionate volunteers and seeks to bring together community and club level sport. The national team, known as the Scottish Thistles, represents Scotland across the world and is truly an inspiration to women and young girls across the country.

Last year, I nominated the Scottish Thistles captain, Emily Nicholl, to speak at time for reflection in Parliament. She highlighted netball's power

"to shape lives, build resilience and inspire ambition".—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2025; c 1.]

The Scottish Thistles are a great group of motivated, disciplined and educated women, and I wish them the best of luck as they compete in the Commonwealth games this summer.

Throughout the parliamentary session, as others have said, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee has done a great deal of work to understand barriers in sport, particularly in relation to participation, access and inequality. We know that access is not always equitable. Poverty and cost are significant barriers to access and participation. When considering sport and activity as a force for good, we need to be serious about addressing these barriers and recognise that, in some cases, those who would benefit the most from sport and activity are often those who are least likely to be able to access it. I hope that, in the next session of Parliament, further work will be carried out to promote potential solutions to break down those barriers.

Finally, I will reflect on the impacts of cuts to local services. The diving pool in the Citadel leisure centre in South Ayrshire is in my South Scotland region. It is the last remaining diving pool in the west of Scotland, with many people attending every week. However, the council's recent decision to cut the programme means that, if divers want to continue, they will need to travel long distances to the east coast. That goes back to the point that other members made. What ends up being cut, and what are the unseen consequences of that? Sport should be about all the different types of sport, and people should have access to them in their communities whenever possible. The diving club is just one example of the many cuts that local authorities are having to make due to long-term underfunding. Those cuts have an impact on overall health and wellbeing. If we want to recognise the benefits of grass-roots sport and exercise, which goes beyond just health and wellbeing, we must consider how such services can be better protected, as they are often the first thing to be cut.

10:39

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Brian Whittle for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Mr Whittle's motion rightly highlights that sport and physical activity are about far more than physical health. I commend him—as others have done—on his commitment to raising those issues in Parliament over the past 10 years. I have always had respectful and positive engagement with Mr Whittle, whether in the chamber or at committee.

Colleagues have also mentioned that the issues that we are highlighting relate to not only physical health, but mental wellbeing, confidence and strength in our communities. I will focus my remarks on an area where, although progress has been made, barriers still remain: the participation of women and girls in sport. As a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I had

the privilege of contributing to our inquiry on female participation in sport and physical activity. What we heard was clear. Although the benefits of sport are universal, access to those benefits is not. The evidence shows that a great gap in participation opens early, often around puberty, and continues into adulthood. That is not because girls and women value sport any less, but because the system too often does not work for them.

For teenage girls, the barriers can be immediate. Puberty brings physical change, along with increased self-consciousness, concerns about body image and practical challenges such as managing periods. Too often, those challenges are made worse by unsuitable facilities, a lack of privacy and clothing that does not meet teenage girls' needs. However, the barriers are not only physical, but also cultural: we heard consistent evidence of negative attitudes from boys, girls being sidelined in physical education and playgrounds being dominated by boys' activities. Those experiences matter, because they shape whether a young person feels that sport is for them, and that feeling can last a lifetime. Even when girls stay involved, they are often offered a narrower range of activities, which are still shaped by outdated assumptions about what girls will or should enjoy.

However, it is important to recognise that there has been progress. The Scottish Government's women's health plan is helping to normalise conversations about menstrual health, which is key to breaking down stigma. Programmes such as active schools are widening access and introducing girls to a broader range of sports. I have a wee shout-out here: Mr Carson mentioned the St Cuthbert Wanderers' walking football group in Kirkcudbright; I had the joy to participate and play there. There is also a walking football group in Stranraer, which invited me to join in on a game. Although I did not score any goals, Presiding Officer, I was credited with a couple of assists.

The commitment to increase investment in sport and physical activity to £100 million a year provides a strong foundation to build on. Elena Whitham mentioned community—I want to give another wee shout-out. I welcome the fact that the minister visited Let's Get Sporty in Dumfries last November. It is a social enterprise that has broadened its community involvement over 14 years to now include programmes such as let's get mentored, let's get training, let's get heard, let's get driving, let's get ready and let's get employed. There is a real community initiative going on there.

We cannot ignore the impact of cost. Fees rise when access to facilities is limited and, when equipment is expensive, participation becomes a privilege rather than something that everyone can enjoy. If we are serious about sport as a force for good, access must be genuinely universal; for sport to realise its full potential as a force for good, it must be a force for everyone. It means designing systems that work for women and girls, not expecting them to fit into systems that were never built with them in mind, and tackling cultural barriers as well as practical ones. If we get that right, we will not only improve participation but also improve health, strengthen our communities and unlock Scotland's full potential.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that, given the number of members who still wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion under rule 8.14.3 that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Brian Whittle*]

Motion agreed to.

10:43

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a match official and officiate matches for the Scottish Football Association.

I, too, congratulate Brian Whittle on securing the debate and on his excellent opening speech. Brian and I entered Parliament together almost a decade ago, in 2016. We very quickly formed the Scottish Conservatives run club with our former colleague John Lamont. From Tuesday to Thursday, we would go out running around Edinburgh almost daily. If Tim Eagle thought that it was difficult to get away from Brian Whittle's discussions about sport in the corridors or in his office, he should try to get away from an Olympic runner who also tried to get that message across as we pounded the streets around Edinburgh. That showed me at that point that Brian Whittle was passionate about sport, and he has continued to be passionate about it in everything that he has done in the chamber and in the committees that he has served on, bringing sport to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and his other committee roles.

Presiding Officer, this is not my final speech in the chamber. Members will be able to either enjoy or endure that later, depending on their own particular circumstances. However, when I saw that we were to have a debate about sport, I wanted to take part in it, because sport has been a big part of my life. I literally follow sport from the sidelines in my role as a match official but, more than that, as a parent of two boys in Moray, I give credit to the sporting organisations in Moray and across the Highlands that provide so many

opportunities for young people—boys and girls—throughout the country.

I particularly want to mention Moray rugby club and its rugby festival, which was held at the weekend. We had literally hundreds of boys and girls from primary 1—or a bit earlier; my youngest, James, is four and he is not yet in primary 1, but he takes part in the youngest group—right up to the seniors, from right across the north-east. Indeed, two boys came down from Caithness. They had been told that their team was unable to take everyone down so they were not going to be able to take part in the Moray rugby festival. However, they were so determined that they encouraged their parents to drive all the way down from Caithness to Elgin and all the way home again, because they are passionate about rugby and they wanted to be involved. Like all the hundreds of others who were at the festival on Sunday, they enjoyed it. They got their medals and they shook hands after the matches.

To me, that shows what sport can do at every level and at every age. It can encourage people to take part. That participation is so important and the rewards are so great. However, none of that would be possible without the coaches at Moray rugby club, who turn up every Sunday and coach the boys and girls in all the age groups with great success. They put themselves through protecting vulnerable groups courses and, when they could be having a weekend off or they have other duties, they turn up because they want to pass something on to young people.

I also see that in football when I am officiating. We go around clubs up and down the country and we see the youth organisations. Finlay Carson mentioned the opportunities with Queen of the South. At the Education, Children and Young People Committee last week, we heard Spartans Community Foundation and the Denis Law Legacy Trust speak about the work that they do, both here in the capital and up in the north-east, to help and enable young people through their love of sport.

In a year when we have the world cup coming up, with Scotland's first participation in it since 1998, and the Commonwealth games, we have a great opportunity as a country and as a Parliament to get more people involved in sport, and that is what we should all seek to do.

An issue that has come up time and again in the debate is funding. That will always be an issue and there are not unlimited pots of money, but we can make it easier for clubs and organisations to access funding. Having to look for funding on an annual basis means that a lot of the time that coaches and others could be spending on improving the opportunities for young people is spent on filling out forms to try to secure or re-secure funding. If we can get multiyear funding for a number of the clubs and organisations, that will go a great way towards improving the opportunities.

I am delighted to speak in this debate and I whole-heartedly support everything in Brian Whittle's motion.

10:48

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The first time that I spoke to Brian Whittle was when he first came into the Parliament. We were having one of those team photographs on the garden lobby stairs. I approached him and said, "You know, Mr Whittle, my father is currently turning in his grave because one of his sporting heroes is a Tory." However, I felt duty bound to speak in this debate because Brian Whittle has spoken in many of our debates on sport, and I thank him for bringing this debate to the chamber.

Sport can change lives in so many ways. When I was growing up in Paisley, sport was not always about elite pathways or podiums—it was about belonging. I have always known that I am not good enough to play centre-half for St Mirren, although I got a better call-up to represent our town here in the Parliament as Paisley's MSP. However, sport is where people find their pals and, as James Dornan said, where they find their confidence. For many people, it is where they find themselves. It builds resilience, because people lose more often than they win—let us be honest: as a St Mirren fan, I learned that lesson a long time ago.

Sport also builds character and teaches discipline. It gives young people a sense of purpose and direction, and that matters now more than ever. Sometimes, sport can save people. It creates healthy lifestyles. It is not always about elite sport; it is also about friends playing five-a-side once a week, thinking that they are Maradona or Messi. In communities across Paisley, local clubs and volunteers are doing extraordinary work every day. They do not always get the headlines, but they deserve our support.

I want to talk about Brian Whittle directly. As a wee boy, I did not know him as a politician; I knew him as an athlete. I watched him compete for Scotland with real pride—pride that I knew came from him. He was an outstanding Scottish Olympian, and he can still get from the chamber to the canteen more quickly than I can. I might not agree with him politically—he is a Tory, after all—but I recognise and respect his contribution to sport in this country.

That is the point of the debate. Sport cuts across divides, breaks down barriers of class, colour, religion and background, and it brings people together in a shared passion. In a world that often

feels divided, that really matters. If we are serious about improving health, strengthening our communities and building a fairer Scotland, investing in sport is not optional but essential, because sport does not only change lives; it can transform them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I sincerely thank members for their co-operation in more or less sticking to their agreed speaking slots. We have been able to hear from everybody. I have made a list with the clerk—I think that 14 sports have been covered thus far—and we are still to hear from the minister. No pressure, minister.

10:51

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh—thank you, Presiding Officer. I thank Mr Whittle for bringing this important motion to the chamber and all members for their contributions this morning. I have had the great privilege of serving as the minister for sport since May 2021, and I have witnessed at first hand the powerful positive influence that sport and physical activity have across Scotland. They improve physical and mental health, strengthen communities, boost resilience and confidence, enrich lives and open doors to new opportunities.

Sport is unquestionably a force for good, with the power to change lives. One of my earliest visits as sport minister was to Street Soccer Scotland's change centre in Dundee, which demonstrates the life-changing impact that sport can have. I later visited the street 45 programme in Edinburgh, which supports women who have experienced significant challenges in their lives. In both places, I met participants whose journeys were nothing short of inspirational and who spoke openly about how sport had supported them through homelessness, addiction, mental health challenges and social isolation. For many people, sport provides purpose, structure and belonging. When young people experience regular and enjoyable physical activity early in life, they are much more likely to stay active in adulthood. Physical literacy, confidence and the simple joy of movement are all built in childhood.

That is why our delivery of the commitment in this parliamentary session to make the active schools programme free to all pupils was crucial. The programme operates across every local authority and provides accessible opportunities before, during and after school. In my time as minister, I have had the privilege of visiting active school programmes and meeting recipients of Sport Scotland's school sports awards. I have been consistently impressed by the incredible teachers and coaches who create such opportunities, as well as by the young people who so clearly and confidently articulate how sport has enriched their lives. In 2023, I recall visiting St Cuthbert's Roman Catholic primary school to present it with a gold award. The local cricket club was working alongside the school's active schools programme, helping to engage pupils in a way that reflected the interests and heritage of the local south Asian community.

Children form ideas about what is achievable based on what they see around them. If young people see someone of their gender, ethnicity, body type or ability represented in sport, it can become a catalyst for aspiration, confidence and participation. Our belief in the importance of sport and physical activity for children and young people is demonstrated by the £20 million investment in this year's summer of sport programme. That will provide inclusive opportunities for children and young people to get active and stay active, and to improve their lives, with a particular focus on reducing barriers to participation and on addressing poverty-related inequality. As we look forward to our exciting summer of sport, we know that it has the power to unite people and inspire the nation.

If I could digress just for a second, I do not think that the Scottish Parliament rugby team inspired a nation, but, my goodness, there are not many places where I might be found on the same team as Brian Whittle, Jamie Halcro Johnston and Fin Carson. Sport has the power to bring together people with very—very—differing views, and we are all the better for having had those opportunities.

We have seen how Scotland has been uplifted by the men's national football team successfully qualifying for the football world cup, and we will all be behind them this summer. They are not the only ones. The Scottish women's cricket team has qualified for the very first time for the women's T20 world cup this summer. Our Scottish women's hockey team has qualified for the hockey world cup for the first time since 2002. I wish them all the very best. Their achievements will inspire young people across Scotland to get involved, leading to healthier and more active communities.

That sense of inspiration is also reflected through Scottish women and girls in sport week, which is always a highlight of my year. Meeting so many inspirational women and girls has reinforced the importance of creating safe, supportive and inclusive environments, where they feel confident to take part without fear of judgment.

Increasing rates of participation has been a priority for the Government, and access to facilities and community clubs is central to achieving it. Since 2007, sportscotland has invested more than £214 million in improving sports facilities

nationwide. In Mr Whittle's constituency, investment has supported improvements at Annan rugby club and Portpatrick Dunskey Golf Club, and it has enabled the creation of a new hub for the Stranraer Water Sports Association.

Those projects highlight our commitment to expanding access to high-quality facilities and encouraging active, healthy communities. From a preventative standpoint, we recognise the evidence that even modest increases in activity levels can help prevent illness, reduce pressure on health services and contribute to healthier, longer lives. That is why our physical activity for health framework takes a whole-systems approach to embedding movement in everyday life.

Equally important is the positive impact of physical activity on mental health. Across Scotland, people of all ages use sport to manage stress, build self-esteem and stay connected. Walking groups, community football, swimming, running clubs and dance classes all help people to maintain wellbeing and social connection.

Just last week I visited Hollandbush Golf Club for the launch of the Golf in Society programme, which is making a profound difference to mental health and wellbeing for people facing challenges later in life. By combining gentle physical activity with meaningful social interaction, the programme shows how inclusive, community-based sport can enhance quality of life for older people and their carers. Across all ages and backgrounds, sport remains a powerful force that strengthens communities and improves lives.

I finish by acknowledging the thousands of volunteers, coaches, parents, teachers and community leaders across Scotland who dedicate their time, energy and passion to supporting others. Without them, people would not benefit from all that sport provides.

I again thank Brian Whittle for lodging the motion and for providing me with this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to ensuring that everyone can experience the life-changing benefits of sport and physical activity. That commitment is demonstrated by the £40 million of increased investment that was announced in this year's budget. When we invest in sport, we invest in health, in wellbeing, in community and in Scotland's future.

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

Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Public Protection)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20603, in the name of Christine Grahame, on animal welfare sentencing and public protection. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I ask members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button, and I invite Christine Grahame to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the serious harm caused by animal cruelty, neglect and illegal breeding; notes concerns raised by animal welfare organisations regarding the consistency and proportionality of sentencing in animal welfare cases; understands that many cases involving the welfare of pets and farm animals are dealt with under summary procedure, limiting the penalties available under the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020; notes what it sees as the lack of specific sentencing guidelines covering these offences; further notes the view that clearer guidance and greater awareness of available powers would support more consistent sentencing that reflects the severity of the crimes; acknowledges calls for stronger monitoring and enforcement of disqualification orders, including consideration of a national animal offenders register to improve information sharing between agencies, and notes the importance of continued partnership working between the Scottish Government, justice partners, the Scottish Sentencing Council, Police Scotland and animal welfare organisations to support effective sentencing and protection for animals and the public in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale and across the country.

11:00

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Well, breaking news: Christine Grahame is at last retiring—some might say not before time—and I am proud that my last debate is on animal welfare. As a lass of 10, I made a phone call to the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, concerned that a lovely stray labrador running about our street was being tormented by children, and fearing that its happy, boisterous behaviour might just change. A family who lived a couple of doors down had taken it in—yes, they were feeding it, but then they just let it run loose. The SSPCA called me back—the dog was in good health, they told me, but they were missing the point, and, not more than a week later, it bit a child and was put down.

My first prize at school was for an essay on animal welfare, but being a vet was out of reach

for a girl from a council house scheme. However, I got to the right place at last, chairing the cross-party group on animal welfare for more than a decade, with two acts of Parliament—the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2025—under my belt. I am holding in my hand, as my first and last prop, the newly published "Certificate and Code of Practice for New Owners of a Puppy or Dog".

We have come quite a long way in recognising animals as sentient beings, but not far enough, in particular on the sentencing of those found guilty of cruelty. There are currently no specific sentencing guidelines for animal welfare offences relating to companion or farm animals. The Scottish Sentencing Council is developing guidelines for environmental and wildlife crime, but companion and farm animal welfare cases, which make up the vast majority of investigations, are not included. That can lead to variation in how similar cases are approached and sentenced across different courts, and there is a risk that similar offences may receive markedly different outcomes, and so undermine confidence in the justice system.

In practice, most animal welfare cases are brought under summary procedure in the sheriff court, even when the level of harm, the scale of offending or wider concerns might suggest that a more serious approach is justified through the use of solemn procedure in the High Court. On summary prosecution, the available penalties are very limited.

At a recent First Minister's question time, I raised the matter of the successful prosecution against the Hamiltons, who are part of the cruel puppy-farm trade. That case was concluded after a five-year investigation by the SSPCA that started when 33 puppies were found in dreadful conditions. It was taken as a summary prosecution, however, and all that happened was that the Hamiltons were given community service and were banned from having more than one dog for five years. Those are minor penalties, in my book.

We have come far. However, I note—while respecting the independence of the judiciary, of course—that there is work to be undertaken in the next session of Parliament on sentencing guidelines; on more cases, where it is appropriate, being taken under solemn procedure; and, in my view, on consolidating animal welfare legislation.

At this point, I thank all the animal welfare organisations and individuals who have kept me informed and who do such amazing work in representing and protecting the wellbeing of animals. I also put on the record my thanks to all those across the Parliament who have helped me over 27 years and who, as my ability has reduced, have been so very kind and thoughtful.

To my colleagues, I say au revoir, à bientôt, see you at conferences—at which I may even speak, goodness help you. I send my best wishes to my constituents in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale and, most importantly, all my thanks to my excellent staff in team Christine. They gave themselves that name, and that mattered.

One final word. I made my first speech in June 1999, and one Mary Scanlon, a Conservative, broke my peroration—I thought that I was doing rather well—with a point of order that challenged the relevance of my contribution to the motion. I was devastated, but I ploughed on. Later, at home, I took solace at the bottom of the garden with a large whisky—most unusual for me—and many tears, proclaiming that I did not want to be a politician. By the way, Mary Scanlon insisted on coming to hear my final speech, and she is in the public gallery now. So, I say to Scanlon, as I call her, that, 27 years on, I am a politician, and it has been an absolute privilege. [*Applause*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the avoidance of doubt, Ms Scanlon will not be able to make a contribution from the public gallery.

11:05

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Presiding Officer, I am here under false pretences. I understood that that was to be Christine Grahame's final speech, and yet I now gather that there are to be more final speeches than Frank Sinatra had farewell concerts.

I am very happy to contribute to today's debate, not just because Christine Grahame and I are the oldest members of our respective parties—I will not say that we both have one foot in the grave, but we are nearer to that than to having one foot at primary school, or to being like Ross Greer, whose best school days still lie ahead. It is a pleasure to contribute in the final debate to be led by Christine Grahame, which is on an issue that she is passionate about.

I have come to know Christine Grahame particularly well over the past five years, as we have served together on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. We have found, to our surprise, that, from time to time, perhaps because of our lifetime experience, we have the same view on issues that come before the SPCB, sometimes to the disquiet of the other members. I am no better at technology than Christine Grahame is, so, unfortunately, it is always down to Maggie Chapman to plug Christine Grahame in and to try to get her up to speed with the agenda, which she usually manages about halfway through the meeting.

Christine Grahame has brought to the chamber this fantastic personal concern for animal welfare, which is one of those issues that sits far higher up in the public's consciousness and on the public's agenda than is often the case with issues on the political agenda. All of us who are of a certain age probably remember Harold Macmillan lamenting the fact that, when the Russians first put a monkey into space, all the great powers of the world were devastated and concerned about what it meant that Russia was in space whereas all that the people who wrote to Harold Macmillan were concerned about was what happened to the monkey. Similarly, I remember Mrs Thatcher saying, when she was dealing with high unemployment, that people did not write to her about that but about lead weights in swans. As I said a moment ago, personal concern for animals has been much closer to the public's heart than many other issues.

The corporate body's proceedings during Covid were often interrupted by guest appearances from Mr Smokey, the much-loved cat in Christine Grahame's ownership—maybe "ownership" is too bold a word to use for a cat. I am less of a cat person than a dog person. I remember a very wise woman telling me that dogs are very transparent, playful and charming, just like men, whereas cats are more like women in that they are less of all those three things. Mr Smokey was a great passion for Christine. I saw a card the other day that said, "If cats could text, they wouldn't." However, I know that Christine Grahame has a great passion for animals of all kinds. I recall her, Margo MacDonald and Mary Scanlon forming a cross-party friendship in that regard in the Queensberry house lounge, over not a bottle of whisky but a bottle of wine—each. In my experience, such cross-party friendship has been Christine Grahame's example as a parliamentarian.

I have watched Christine Grahame speak in all sorts of debates where she has had to go and research the topic. I have watched her bring thoughtful contributions to the chamber. I have watched her challenge members of her own party just as much as she has challenged those in the Opposition parties. She has done all that indefatigably, and I doubt that she will be in any sort of retirement for very long. I expect that we will hear far more from her, and I look forward to doing so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was going to call Stuart McMillan, but I cannot see him for the time being, so I call Carol Mochan.

11:09

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Christine Grahame for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I want to speak in the debate for three reasons: first, because it is on a very important issue; secondly, because it is a members' business debate and I like to speak in those; and, thirdly, because I want to thank Christine Grahame for bringing the debate to the chamber and for spending time in members' debates in the five years for which I have been in Parliament.

Animal welfare is important to me personally, but not just to me. A study by the SPCA on public opinion on animal welfare found that 91 per cent of people across the United Kingdom recognise the value of animal welfare education. Welfare was ranked as the third most important issue for people when speaking about animals, and 34 per cent of people surveyed were worried about wildlife. The case for action is overwhelming. The figures send a clear message that the public care deeply about animal welfare and expect action. That action must include legislation. The study's report is a call to action on sentencing, monitoring and enforcement of disqualification orders.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Carol Mochan: Of course I will take an intervention.

Joe FitzPatrick: I apologise—I pressed the button inadvertently. However, this is an opportunity to put on record how sorry I will be to not be sitting next to, and sometimes plugging in, my amazing colleague Christine Grahame. I wish her all the very best for the future.

Carol Mochan: I see that Joe FitzPatrick has picked up Christine Grahame's excellent technology skills.

Many of the cases that I hear about are from constituents raising concerns that someone who has already been to court and had an order against them banning them from having a dog or pet still has an animal. I also hear about cruelty to wildlife, but often the concern is that the authorities might already be aware of the incident. The debate is important, because sentencing, legislation and the way in which the guidance is delivered must be updated. That is the point that Christine Grahame is trying to make, and that is certainly the case in my experience. The Parliament has done really good work on the issue, but we need to build on that. I look forward to the minister giving us some insight into that.

That links to the messages that I want to give about members' business debates. I want to raise the profile of members' business debates. Some in the Parliament suggest that they are not to be prioritised, because we have busy diaries. However, I put on record that I have certainly

learned much from members' business debates over my five years in Parliament. They have helped me with facts on many important issues and to understand the views of members from across the chamber, which definitely helps with the cross-party approach and the ability to work together. Members' business debates have also given me confidence in other debates, because we perhaps feel more comfortable about intervening during them.

On balance, members' business is a really important part of the parliamentary system. I thank Christine Grahame for bringing this debate to the chamber today. Sometimes, in this setting, such issues can grab the attention of ministers. We can use this process in the Parliament to get an issue further up the agenda and into different areas.

Thirdly, I thank Christine Grahame for taking part in many members' business debates in the chamber and for raising many important points about animal welfare and other issues. It has been a great pleasure to spend so many evenings with her, and I wish her well on her next adventure, which I am sure will include more fighting for the rights of our beloved animals and more debates between Labour and the Scottish National Party. Thank you, Christine Grahame.

11:14

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in today's important debate for many reasons. First, I want to acknowledge the legendary Christine Grahame and her passionate dedication to the cause of animal welfare. There are not many people we can call a legend, but I think that Christine qualifies. As this is my last speech in this place after 10 years, I want to thank Christine for being an incredible colleague who is full of wisdom and advice—even if you do not want it. She does not suffer fools gladly and, boy, don't they know it. As chief whip for our party, I have to be honest and say that she has at times been a challenge, but you really cannot stay mad at Christine for long.

Presiding Officer, Christine is just one of the incredible and inspirational women that I have worked with since being elected in 2016. The other two that I want to mention are the much-missed Christina McKelvie and Jeane Freeman. What a privilege to have known and worked with those freedom fighters. They fought for equality, fairness and, of course, independence. What a legacy they leave. I know that they will always be in our hearts.

There is much more that I could say about my time here as an elected member, which has been so memorable. It has been an absolute privilege to represent the fantastic constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden and to work with my terrific constituency team.

I turn now to Christine's important motion. I totally agree with her that animal cruelty sentencing does not reflect the serious nature of such offences. There should be specific sentencing guidelines covering these offences and better awareness of the available powers. This is 2026. Animal suffering should not be tolerated at any level. We are an animal-loving, compassionate nation, and I know that animals are sentient beings who are entirely dependent on the human kindness and care that we should always give them.

I have nothing but contempt for those who exploit animals for human entertainment or profit, be that puppy farming, greyhound racing—thankfully, since last week, that has been banned in Scotland—or any other form of exploitation. Christine has done a great job of highlighting all those issues and more in the cross-party group on animal welfare, which she has chaired for more than a decade. I am a member of the group—although, in truth, I have not been a very good attender.

To mark Christine's amazing dedication to the cause of animal welfare, I am delighted to have been asked to present her with a gift from several animal charities, including Humane World for Animals, OneKind and the Scottish SPCA, to name but a few, and it will be my honour to do so after the debate. Parliament needs more dedicated, passionate elected members such as Christine Grahame, although I doubt that we will ever see her like again.

11:17

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Christine Grahame for lodging the motion and securing the debate; it is a privilege to be able to speak in it. Yes, it is about animal welfare, but is also about marking the extraordinary contribution of Christine Grahame to this place. I know that I am not alone in saying that Parliament will feel very different without her.

The motion in front of us is one that I whole-heartedly support. I strongly agree with the statement that animal cruelty causes serious harm to animals and to society. How we treat those who are helpless in themselves, such as our animals, is a reflection of the kind of society that we are. We know that, as the motion points out, sentencing is inconsistent and often feels insufficient—particularly when cases are handled, as they are, under summary procedure, with limited penalties. We desperately need clearer sentencing guidelines, better use of the existing powers that we have, stronger monitoring of disqualification

orders, and serious consideration of a national animal offenders register, because we know that animal cruelty often does not stop there—it moves into other forms of cruelty, too. If we take animal welfare seriously, as the motion pleads with us to do, sentencing must reflect the severity of harm caused. The motion is about justice, it is about prevention and it is about public protection.

I want to speak, too, of Christine Grahame's legacy on animal welfare, as others have already done. Christine has been relentless in her advocacy for improving animal welfare. She has delivered changes in the law through the legislation on which she has led in Parliament. She has been a tireless campaigner and a convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare, as Rona Mackay and others have mentioned. The CPG has brought together so many different voices and has focused on so many different topics over the time that I have been a member of that group, and I thank Christine for her tireless charting of such a strong and coherent course as convener. It has been a great group to be part of and to learn from, and it has been great to take part in those discussions.

Christine does not just speak about animal welfare and change the law. Everything that she has done has raised standards, shifted attitudes and made Scotland a leader in that area. The debate and the motion are a continuation of that legacy.

Before I move on to some personal reflections of my five years with Christine, I pay tribute to Rona Mackay for her principled and measured contributions to so many debates in this place—some of which were quite heated. She has always brought calm and clarity in her contributions. I have learned a lot from her, and I am very grateful to have served in this place with her. I thank her very much.

I have personal reflections of Christine Grahame as not only a colleague but, I hope, a friend. Eleanor Scott, a former Green MSP, said that, when a lot of people retired at the end of the last session, people asked how Christine would get on, as a lot of her friends had retired. A mutual friend said to Eleanor, "Well, it's fine—Maggie's there." Of course—why would I not be friends with somebody who is as remarkable as Christine and who is so passionate about animal welfare? I share that passion.

Jackson Carlaw mentioned Christine's membership of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, which is where I got to know her and where she was always sharp, determined, principled, chaotic, warm, funny and utterly herself. My personal memories will include not only helping her with her information technology and the campaign that we both ran—and lost—for a Parliament cat, but primarily, in one of my finest moments in this place, getting a security pass for Christine's horse. When the low-emission zone was due to come in, Christine was not sure whether her car would be admissible to the parliamentary car park, and she talked about coming in on horseback, so we got her a pass for her horse. That is a perfect example of what Christine's wit and humour could elicit in us all.

Presiding Officer, I know that I have gone over my time. Christine Grahame means so much to this place, as a founding figure of the Parliament and a character in the best sense—independent, principled and never afraid to speak her mind. She has helped to shape this place in not only legislation but culture, and it is right that we reflect on that in today's debate. Christine, I thank you for everything that you have given to this Parliament and for everything that you have done for those who are unable to speak for themselves.

11:22

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am really chuffed to speak in support of today's motion, which recognises the serious harm that is caused by animal cruelty, neglect and illegal breeding. Across Scotland, including in the South Scotland region, which I represent, people care deeply about the welfare of pets, farm animals and wildlife, yet we continue to have cases in which cruelty goes unpunished or sentencing does not reflect the severity of the harm that is caused.

Animal welfare organisations consistently raise concerns about inconsistencies in sentencing, the limitations of cases being dealt with under summary procedure and the lack of specific sentencing guidelines under the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020. When penalties are capped or guidance is unclear, justice cannot always be delivered in a way that matches public expectations or the seriousness of a crime. Strengthening sentencing is not about being punitive for its own sake; it is about proportionality, consistency and, above all, better protection for animals and the public. Clearer guidance and greater awareness of existing powers would support more robust and consistent decision making across Scotland's courts.

That is why calls for improved monitoring of disqualification orders are so important. A national animal offenders register, which would allow agencies to share information more effectively, deserves consideration. If someone has demonstrated that they are a risk to animals, the system must be equipped to prevent reoffending. That is in the interests of animal welfare

organisations, police officers, local authorities and, ultimately, the public.

Although today's motion rightly focuses on the future direction of policy, I also want to highlight the contribution of someone whose commitment to animal welfare has shaped this Parliament for nearly three decades: my friend and colleague Christine Grahame. I feel as though I am at the coo's tail, though, because everybody has done an excellent job of describing her work.

Christine has served in Parliament since 1999, where she has been one of the most consistent, passionate and influential voices for animal welfare. By leading campaigns, championing reforms and scrutinising legislation with determination, she has made a tangible difference to animals across Scotland. Her work has never been about making short-term headlines; it has been about achieving long-term change founded on compassion and justice. During this parliamentary session, Christine introduced her member's bill, the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill, which strengthened protections for animals and built on years of advocacy on issues such as puppy farming, cat and dog welfare, wildlife protection and tougher penalties for cruelty. The issue of puppy trafficking is a shared concern. It was one of the first issues that I addressed when I was elected 10 years ago, because puppies continue to be trafficked through the port of Cairnryan.

Christine has always been generous in providing me with guidance, which has sometimes been very direct and always sound, and supporting me in navigating the complex aspects of parliamentary work. More than once, we have found ourselves speaking at short notice in response to the lodging of motions on challenging issues by Opposition members. In those moments, Christine's calm and measured approach, sharp thinking and wit have made those tasks much easier.

As we debate how to strengthen sentencing, improve consistency and better protect animals across Scotland, it is only right that we recognise the foundations that have been laid by Christine Grahame. Her contribution over 27 years has changed Scotland for the better and will continue to influence policy long after her time in the Parliament.

I fully support the calls in the motion for clearer sentencing guidance, improved consistency across the justice system and stronger enforcement to prevent repeat offending. When we work together—the Scottish Government, the justice agencies, Police Scotland and the many dedicated animal welfare organisations—we can build a system that offers the strongest possible protection for Scotland's animals. It is vital that we continue to do so, inspired by the work of Christine Grahame MSP.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jim Fairlie to wind up the debate.

11:27

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is an enormous pleasure to respond to what I had thought was going to be the debate in which Christine Grahame made her final speech. That is not the case, as Jackson Carlaw pointed out, and it should hardly be any surprise that the last word of the entire parliamentary session is likely to go to Christine Grahame tomorrow.

However, it is still an enormous pleasure to respond to—dare I say it?—my friend, Christine Grahame, who has had a long and hugely respected career in the Scottish Parliament, where she has been a formidable and tireless advocate for animal welfare in all its guises across all its sectors. In my earliest days in the Parliament in 2021, I spent quite a bit of time with Christine in the garden lobby, getting lessons on how to be a good parliamentarian; how to make impactful interventions—we heard earlier about Mary Scanlon, who is in the gallery today; how to be succinct in making my points—I am sorry that I never learned that; and what a privilege it was to be here and that we should all remember that the people of Scotland sent us here to represent them and to stand up for what they wanted from this Parliament.

Christine Grahame is a lady of immense character who does not suffer foolishness gladly, as Rona Mackay has rightly pointed out. At the same time, she would attempt to guide folk in the direction that she felt would be beneficial to them in achieving the best outcomes. If there was a point to be made, Christine would make it, even if it was not always received in the spirit in which it was intended—her points were always well meant and made with the best of intentions.

I knew Christine vicariously because she knew my dad, who was the depute leader of the Scottish National Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Her name was spoken regularly in our house, to the point where I recognised her and felt that I knew her long before I ever met her.

I got a greater understanding of why she was a familiar name in my house in my early youth when Christine told me a story during one of our earliest garden lobby blethers about the old SNP. She recited a story about a crucial debate that was being held by the party, in which my dad was debating with Jim Sillars on the direction that the

party should take in relation to the constitutional convention.

By all accounts, dad, in his own style, had made a very compelling speech. The conference hall was quiet while listening to the debate and, right at the end, my dad apparently attacked Jim Sillars in a way that Christine thought was unnecessary. She told him that she took the view that dad had let the silence and intense attention make him believe that he had lost the argument, which he had not. He had, Christine said, simply had conference's undivided attention, and the attack on Jim Sillars was not needed. It was not a criticism from Christine; it was her point of view. She was merely telling dad so that he would understand that the silence was a sign not that people were disagreeing but that they were listening intently. Apparently, my late mum was none too pleased at that sage advice, because she had misinterpreted Christine's intent, which was, in fact, to be helpful to my dad. Just as Mary Scanlon taught Christine a lesson, I took a lesson from Christine, which was always to be mindful of the intent, as much as the content, of the things that people say to us.

Why have I recited that story in the chamber today? I have done so merely to highlight that the force of nature that is Christine Grahame has never been afraid to challenge, to probe, to be inquisitive and to push hard for what she believed in. She has always offered advice and a helping hand, whether that was to the depute leader of the party in the 1980s or to the First Ministers who have sat in this seat. I am quite sure that Nicola Sturgeon will know very well the feeling of having Christine Grahame sitting in the chair directly behind this one over a number of years.

That determination and intent were never more evident than when Christine was advocating for better animal welfare in Scotland. She has been instrumental in driving that agenda for as long as this place has been reconvened. She is the convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare, and she has raised every kind of question, statement and debate that this place enables members to raise to do their work. She has been steadfast in her belief that we can and must always do more for the animals in our care and in the wild. She has undoubtedly been animals' voice and champion.

I thank the cross-party group and all its members, including the vice-conveners, Emma Harper and Maurice Golden, for their excellent work in this session. Collectively, they have been responsible for raising awareness and helping us to deliver significant improvements in animal welfare in this session.

Is there more to do? Absolutely. However, we have a pretty formidable track record, which is worth highlighting. We should be proud of what we have achieved so far: the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Scotland) Regulations 2021; the mandating of closed-circuit television in abattoirs; the ban on live exports of store and slaughter animals; and our support for members' bills, namely Emma Harper's Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2021, the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, Christine Grahame's Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2025 and Mark Ruskell's Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill. In addition, we are currently consulting the other United Kingdom nations on tail docking and lamb castration. As the motion says, sentencing guidelines are for the judiciary to decide, but this debate will allow members in the next session of Parliament to consider the content of the motion.

I would like to put in a word for Rona Mackay, because her speech in this debate has been her last contribution to the work of the Parliament. Rona has been a fantastic colleague. Her formidable powers of persuasion, even if they did not all work on Christine Grahame, are legendary. When Rona sets her mind, there is a settled face that she gets that she has perfected. Once we see that determination on her face, her will is not going to be bent, and we might just as well give up the argument.

Jackson Carlaw: I, too, pay tribute to Rona Mackay—I knew that this was her final speech, and I meant to comment on the fact—because she has been an indefatigable champion of the issue of chronic pain throughout her time as a member. In the absence of my former partners in the transvaginal mesh debate, Alex Neil and Neil Findlay, Rona was one of the ones who stepped forward, and she has been most vocal and supportive on the issues surrounding transvaginal mesh. Rona convenes the cross-party group on chronic pain, and that support and sustained commitment have meant so much to the many people who suffer from the chronic pain ailment, who have looked to her with great gratitude for all the work that she has done during this session of Parliament.

Jim Fairlie: I offer Rona my very best wishes for what comes next.

Before I finish, I want to mention the fact that there are so many powerful women in this Parliament. I pay particular attention to Nicola Sturgeon and Elena Whitham, who have been enormously influential and huge characters in our Scottish Parliament. They will both be missed tremendously.

I conclude by saying to the chamber—and to Christine Grahame, in particular—that we are, rightly, determined to continue to do more. However, if we do not go faster and deliver more, I fully expect to hear Christine Grahame in my ear saying, “This is simply not good enough,” and that we must do more to get our act together. To be honest, I would not have it any other way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, although not, I suspect, the contribution of Christine Grahame to public life in Scotland. For now, though, I suspend this meeting of Parliament until 2 o’clock.

11:35

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. Our first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Ellie Craig, who is the chair and a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

Ellie Craig (Scottish Youth Parliament): Good afternoon, everyone. I am the chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament and MSYP for Glasgow Cathcart. I am honoured to be part of the final time for reflection in this session of Parliament.

A few weeks ago, I was here in the chamber filming a podcast with the Presiding Officer as part of her legacy work. Next month, I will have served as a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for seven years, and, in around six months, my term as chair and time as an MSYP will come to an end.

Preparing for today’s speech got me reflecting on what I would like my legacy to be. I was first elected to the Scottish Youth Parliament when I was only 15. Back then, I had little confidence in myself. As a young carer for my mum, who seemed to be balancing a lot more responsibility than my peers, I often felt isolated and like no one understood what I was going through.

Just after the pandemic, in 2021, I lost my mum, Anne. I was only 17, just leaving high school and trying to figure out where I fit in the world. Without the support of youth work services, I do not quite know whether I would have survived. Now, in 2026, as chair of the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people, decision makers and those in power often ask me what I think of the problems regarding community and social cohesion. My response is always the same: there is a lack of support for young people when the world around us seems to be crumbling.

Members in this chamber voted unanimously to incorporate into legislation the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. As an MSYP, I am incredibly proud that, in Scotland, we have made it a legal right for young people to meet their peers, to join groups and organisations, to play and to learn.

However, that has not stopped the disinvestment in youth work services, which is having a detrimental impact on young people’s education, employment and mental health. That impact is not felt equally. For me, and for many other young people from seldom-heard groups, support from youth work services is essential. Those spaces allow young people to be young

people, to make friends, to build skills and to make change in our communities.

Behind those youth work services are youth workers. They are often unthanked, uncelebrated and underpaid. However, I can safely say that, without the support and encouragement of a number of different youth workers over the years, I would not be the person that I am today.

I stand here as a product of great youth work. The opportunities to use my voice, which so often went unheard, have allowed me to succeed. Every young person in Scotland deserves access to the support they need, not only to survive but to thrive—not because it is a nice thing to have, but because we made it their right.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Deaths of Babies (Co-sleeping)

1. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent findings by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service that 29 babies have died as a result of co-sleeping in Scotland in the past two years. (S6T-02970)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The loss of a baby is a tragic and traumatic event that has a profound impact and is something that no family should have to endure. I extend my condolences to every family who has experienced the loss of a baby or child.

Although sudden unexpected deaths in infancy are invariably complex and there could be many reasons for those deaths, any death is one too many. I am clear that families must be provided with up-to-date evidence-based information to enable them to make informed choices when taking care of their sleeping baby. In June 2023 and again in September 2024, we refreshed our safer sleep for babies resources to ensure that families have the most up-to-date information possible. I urge all parents with babies and small children to follow that guidance.

Carol Mochan: Recommended guidance is that the safest place for a baby to sleep is in their own separate cot. However, it is important that women are supported to make informed decisions about co-sleeping, particularly in the early stages of a newborn's life, when parents and carers may be tired and lack sleep and rest. Does the Government believe that current advice and support are sufficiently publicised in a way that is helping women to make informed choices about that?

Jenni Minto: Carol Mochan is right to point out the advice that is available. As a result of the correspondence that I have had with Ruth Charteris, I have asked my officials to write to all health boards to ensure that they point out that those resources are available to healthcare workers who are supporting families of newborn babies.

Carol Mochan: I thank the minister for that helpful answer. I understand that advice and guidance are regularly updated. Does the Scottish Government know of any further research that is being carried out on co-sleeping? How can we ensure that Scotland stays up to date with the latest research and guidance?

Jenni Minto: As I indicated, I have received correspondence from Ruth Charteris. Her letter specifically highlighted the importance of having a compassionate and caring conversation around co-sleeping.

The Scottish Government bases its advice on evidence. We have worked with the leading baby loss charity, the Lullaby Trust, which has shown that 90 per cent of parents bed share with their baby at some point. Therefore, it is important that we ensure that the guidance is kept up to date and is as supportive as it can be for families.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Budget)

2. **Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported comments by the Fire Brigades Union that years of real-terms budget reductions have left the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service "creaking", and that proposed workforce reductions would increase the risk to community safety, particularly following the recent fire in Glasgow. (S6T-02973)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I echo the First Minister's recognition of the service's response to the Union corner fire. We recognise the vital role that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service plays in keeping our community safe, and we remain committed to sustaining that capability.

The 2026-27 budget provides an additional £23.8 million to the SFRS, taking our total funding of it to £436 million, which demonstrates our continued support for the SFRS so that it can deliver the high-standard services that are required to keep Scotland safe.

We are aware of the concerns that the Fire Brigades Union has raised about long-term pressures that the service is facing, and our focus has always been on community safety and protecting front-line services. The SFRS's evidence-based service delivery review will align resources to modern risks and demands, ensuring that resources are directed where they are needed, and we will continue to discuss its further funding requirements.

Sharon Dowey: The devastating fire on Union Street in Glasgow once again demonstrated the extraordinary professionalism and bravery of Scotland's firefighters. However, we have heard deeply concerning warnings from the FBU that years of real-term budget cuts have left the fire service "creaking". There have been 1,250 firefighter posts cut since the creation of the national fire service. Ten high-lift appliances have been cut. The service has an ageing fleet, with only one new fire engine coming into service in the past two years. Fire stations have closed, 18 stations are without running water, and the list goes on.

It is noticeable that the fire service review has been kicked into the long grass until after the May elections. Given all those cuts, how can the public have confidence that community safety will not be compromised?

Siobhian Brown: It is right that the service review is about the SFRS identifying the optimal service to keep communities across Scotland safe in the future by addressing changes in risk. The emergencies that the SFRS responds to have changed significantly over the years; for example, dwelling fires have reduced by more than 20 per cent since 2013. Statistics also show a 33 per cent reduction in non-fatal fire casualties between 2009-10 and 2023-24 and a 32 per cent reduction in fatal fire casualties over the same period. The SFRS chief officer would not make any changes to operations that would put the public at an unacceptable level of risk.

Sharon Dowey: I note the minister's response, but it will be of little reassurance to firefighters on the ground who are being asked to do more with less. Firefighters have been clear that there are fewer firefighters, fewer appliances and longer response times, and none of those things logically results in safer communities. In response to an article that the minister wrote in her local press, the FBU said:

"The Minister's call for improved fire safety at a time when she is overseeing a service being systematically stripped of jobs and fire fighting capacity shows she is in complete denial about what is going on in the service she is responsible for."

Is the minister in complete denial about the effects of her Scottish National Party Government's cuts to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service?

Siobhian Brown: Absolutely not. I highlight to the member that the reduction in firefighter numbers since 2013 is not because of cuts. Forming a single national service allowed the SFRS to protect front-line services while reducing duplication. We will continue to work with the SFRS to assess the impact of possible pressures on the budget for 2026-27 to ensure that service levels are maintained.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The centralisation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service was not just about reducing duplication; it was about much more than that. In 2023, 166 firefighters were cut from the service and there was a temporary withdrawal of 10 fire appliances. It was not simply about duplication.

Last week, Colin Brown of the FBU wrote to the First Minister and said:

"It is impossible to accept the argument that fewer

firefighters, fewer stations, fewer pumping appliances … and longer response times will somehow make communities safer."

The Criminal Justice Committee has heard not just from the union but from SFRS management that they are concerned about the budget's impact. Is it right for the board to make a decision in June, when the new Parliament will only just have been elected? I think that that will result in the burying of bad news. Surely the minister shares my concerns about the issue. Is it not time to shift that decision, at least until the Parliament settles in and we can have a proper look at the impact of the budget on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service?

Siobhian Brown: As I said to the other member, the chief officer has said that the service will not make any changes to operations that put the public at any unacceptable level of risk. With the service delivery review, it is right that the SFRS takes its time to go through the more than 3,000 responses and to make decisions. The SFRS is the expert in the area, and we should allow it to take the decisions on how the service should best be configured.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Across Scotland, people will share the FBU's concern for the service, given the fire in Glasgow. They will have noted the skilled and dedicated work of the firefighters who attended that awful scene. We must have a well-resourced fire service that can respond to ever-changing urban and rural environments. However, there is uncertainty about the future of many fire stations, including the one at Balmossie, in my region. Workers and communities have waited too long to hear what will happen to their local station and staff. When will that uncertainty end? When will firefighters and the communities that they work to keep safe know what their future will be in terms of firefighting safety?

Siobhian Brown: We do not have a definite date for the service delivery review but, as I said to Pauline McNeill, the SFRS is taking its time to go through the consultation responses. It is not a short-term plan; it will be implemented over the next five years.

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): What analysis has been conducted of the potential change in response times for the north-east of the city of Edinburgh should the proposed closure of Marionville fire station proceed?

Siobhian Brown: That is an operational decision, and the analysis will come from the Scottish Fire and Rescue through its service delivery review. The SFRS continues to respond to every emergency incident with the appropriate level of resources. That was evident at the fire in Glasgow just a few weeks ago, at which there were more than 250 firefighters.

Home Care Services

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to protect people receiving and awaiting social care packages, in light of recent reports that industry leaders are warning that home care services are heading towards a "catastrophic breakdown". (S6T-02979)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): We are working to improve outcomes for people who need or receive social care. No one in Scotland should have to wait for crucial care and support. It is the responsibility of local authorities, national health service boards and integrated health and social care partnerships to have in place clear arrangements for the delivery, commissioning, management and monitoring of social care.

The current social care support system is under pressure as a result of Brexit, increased demand, restrictive United Kingdom Government migration policies, the increase in employer national insurance contributions and the cost of living. It needs to work better for everyone in Scotland, and we will continue to work with partners and people with lived experience to ensure that that happens.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: For the five years of this parliamentary session, we have known about the challenges that the minister has just rehearsed, and all the while that crisis in social care has fed through to a crisis in our NHS. It is no wonder that the report that was submitted to ministers by Lynn Laughland, who is the chair of HRM Homecare Services Ltd, revealed that 40,000 weekly hours of care were being missed or not met. That led her to say:

"These are not administrative backlogs. They are the measurable consequences of a system operating beyond sustainable capacity."

The sector has been on its knees for the better part of this parliamentary session, and this Government has been found wanting. In the dying days of this parliamentary session, what will the minister's Government do to help social care in this country?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the constructive engagement of Ms Laughland. With regard to what has been achieved in this Parliament, one key point that I will highlight is the increase in resource. This Government committed to an increase in social care resource of 25 per cent. That commitment not only has been met ahead of the end of the parliamentary session but has been exceeded by approximately £500 million. That has happened at a time when we have had

unparalleled pressure generated by the cost of living crisis. We all remember that we have had to contend with eye-watering inflation rates, which have impacted every individual, household and business, including those who operate in social care, and every facet of the public sector.

With regard to the specific measures that have been taken at the end of this parliamentary session, I draw members' attention to my announcement last week, which set out that the Government is committed to introducing sectoral bargaining for the financial year 2027-28. That, in and of itself, represents a significant step forward in improving terms, conditions, pay and overall resource in social care.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The current rates of social care pay are "woefully inadequate". Those are not my words but those of Donald Macaskill, who is the chief executive of Scottish Care. Let me quantify for members what that means. As a result of those 40,000 hours of unmet need in our communities, 2,000 Scots remain in hospital every night—they are well enough to go home but too frail to do so without a care package. That costs the NHS £1.3 million a day, whereas it would cost a quarter of that to sustain them in their own homes with a care package. All of that causes an interruption in flow, which causes operations to be cancelled and ambulances to be stacked outside accident and emergency units.

When will the Government finally recognise the words of Donald Macaskill, who says:

"I am still frustrated the Scottish Government doesn't take social care seriously"?

Tom Arthur: I put on record my sincere gratitude to Donald Macaskill and his team at Scottish Care for their continued engagement and valued insights. It has been a pleasure to engage with them regularly throughout my tenure as minister.

To respond on the issue of pay, that is why I made the point about sectoral bargaining, which is absolutely crucial. As Alex Cole-Hamilton will appreciate, there is differentiation in pay across social care depending on whether one is employed under agenda for change, the Scottish joint council for local government employees or the independent sector. That is exactly why sectoral bargaining has been brought forward after much careful work and deliberation with providers, Scottish Care, the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland, trade union colleagues and local government.

We have delivered the real living wage, which is £12.60 this year, for those who are involved in directly commissioned services in adult social care. In April, the wage will go up to £13.45. That represents significant investment, but we have an opportunity to build on that in the next parliamentary session through sectoral bargaining.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Some 1,036 Glaswegians are currently on a waiting list for social care assessment by the city council, which is the highest total in just under two years. While waiting list numbers are increasing, the sector is now facing a crisis and social care providers have been told to deliver a pay increase but without the extra funding to meet it. Lynn Laughland, the chief executive of HRM Homecare Services, said:

"Care providers are having to hand back work because they can't afford to run their services."

That is surely not acceptable. Will the minister accept that that is a direct result of the Scottish Government's decision, and will the Government aim to bridge the financial shortfall before we end up in a self-defeating situation whereby social care providers reduce staff levels and cut capacity?

Tom Arthur: I draw the member's attention to the additional resource that was agreed through the budget process in the Parliament, although I recognise that social care providers are under significant pressure. We know that that is a consequence of the UK Labour Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions. It is estimated that that is costing the social care sector in Scotland around £84 million this year.

A range of factors are impacting on the delivery of social care, and resourcing is a key component of that. That is why there has been a significant uplift in investment in social care over this parliamentary session, and it is why we have committed to sectoral bargaining, ensuring that the terms, conditions and remuneration for social care workers can be enhanced and improved going forward.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes topical questions.

Climate Change Plan

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Gillian Martin on "Scotland's Climate Change Plan: 2026-2040".

14:22

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I am pleased to be able to lay the final version of our climate change plan before Parliament today, after many months of constructive engagement with the public, Parliament and stakeholders. I begin by thanking everyone who has taken the time to speak to us and to respond to our consultation, which has strengthened the plan.

The plan is Scotland's pathway to net zero, and it outlines the action that we will take to meet our first three carbon budgets—targets that the Parliament agreed last year. It is more than a plan to meet our moral and statutory obligations, however. The climate change plan is our route map to realising economic and social gains for people across the whole of Scotland as part of a fair and just transition.

We simply cannot hang about. Scotland faces global competition. If we do not grab the opportunities for economic growth through the first-mover advantages that are outlined in the plan, others most certainly will.

The Scottish Government and I are absolutely up for this challenge. We have already seen what can happen when we take decisive action. When it comes to the renewables industry, the Office for National Statistics estimates that there are more than 35,000 jobs, directly, in Scotland's low-carbon and renewable energy sector. Scotland has had the largest percentage increase in turnover in this sector of any nation in the United Kingdom: it rose from £5.5 billion in 2015 to £13.3 billion in 2024. That has not happened by chance; it is the result of years of policy certainty and ambition from this Government.

The CCP highlights the potential of growth areas, ranging from renewables and heat networks to the circular economy, and it sets out our commitment to increase investment in areas that will simultaneously decarbonise Scotland and improve lives.

In rural Scotland, people are already benefiting from investment in peatland restoration and tree planting. That includes job creation, community resilience, enhanced biodiversity and improvements in the natural environment, alongside the contribution that many farmers, crofters and other land managers are making on climate action.

To further support those communities and our unique natural environment, we have today also published our first environment strategy, which is designed to create an integrated framework for environment and climate policies while harnessing the powerful synergies between the health of our environment, the wellbeing of Scotland's people and the success of our economy.

Today, we have also published our circular economy strategy, which underpins delivery of our climate goals by cutting the amount of waste that is produced in Scotland and managing our resources more sustainably to reduce emissions. Together with the climate change plan and the environment strategy, it will support us to become a net zero and nature-positive nation by transitioning towards a circular economy with sustainable levels of material use.

In finalising the climate change plan, we commissioned research from the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute on the wider socioeconomic impacts of the plan. The ECCI estimated almost £8 billion of co-benefits, particularly from the public health benefits of physical activity from active travel and reductions in conditions that are caused by harmful air pollution.

However, despite all the co-benefits and opportunities, the plan acknowledges the inconvenient truth of our age: the most dangerous and expensive choice is not to take any action at all. Do not just take my word for it. The Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Climate Change Committee have all presented evidence showing that the cost of inaction far outweighs the necessary cost of investing in net zero policies and action. That is a stark warning.

As the current situation in the middle east has shown, we must reduce our exposure to geopolitical shocks by shifting to more secure, domestically based renewable energy systems. Decisions by this Scottish National Party Government have increased the amount of electricity that is generated in Scotland from low-cost renewable sources and have put Scotland in a more energy-secure position. Despite that, it remains the case that the electricity price that people must pay is too often set by high-cost gas. It continues to be absolutely absurd that decisions taken at Westminster by successive Labour and Tory Governments have left Scottish consumers and communities exposed. For me, the answer is clear: Scotland's energy wealth should, right now, be protecting people here in Scotland.

We are clear that Scotland has obligations abroad to communities in the global south that are disproportionately affected by climate change. Today, I can confirm that we will provide £7.5 million of funding in the next financial year towards climate justice projects in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda, building on the successes of previous programmes to deliver locally led solutions that centre the needs of women, youth and people with disabilities. That funding demonstrates the Scottish Government's commitment to international development, and we are proud of the role that Scotland plays on the international stage.

The final climate change plan has been strengthened through our engagement with the public, the Parliament and stakeholders. I am grateful to the more than 500 individuals and organisations who responded to the public consultation and to the nearly 2,000 people who took part in more than 100 events in our public engagement programme across Scotland.

We will continue to engage with the public as we deliver on the plan. To support that, I am pleased to announce that, through our climate engagement fund, we will fund eight organisations in 2026-27 to engage a range of audiences across Scotland, from Argyll to Aberdeenshire, in innovative and inspiring ways. Alongside that, I am announcing £250,000 for the climate action schools programme to support children and young people to learn about and take action on climate change.

Yesterday, I visited Dronley Wood in Angus to see the excellent work that is happening on the ground through the Angus climate hub, which is part of our national network of climate hubs. The hubs will continue their work to support communities to tackle and adapt to the changing climate, with £6 million of funding for next year.

With Scotland's climate already changing due to accelerating climate adaptation, £1 million this year will support councils, community groups and businesses to strengthen their climate resilience through the Adaptation Scotland programme. The climate ready regions initiative will continue to identify regional priorities to reduce risks from flooding, coastal erosion, extreme heat and water scarcity.

Together, the funding demonstrates the importance that this Government places on empowering communities to take action on climate change.

I am grateful to colleagues from across the chamber for their engagement on the draft plan. We received scrutiny reports from four parliamentary committees and a further six offered evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. I was pleased to give evidence to the committee in February, following evidence sessions that were undertaken by my cabinet colleagues on their portfolios, and to take part in the NZETC-led debate on the plan, which took place earlier this month.

We have considered every recommendation from each committee and have made changes to crucial areas of the plan. We have responded to the call for more information about delivery by setting out how we will design implementation by working with partners to get the right mechanisms in place, alongside having a robust early warning and monitoring system. Our delivery approach will be agile, pivoting to corrective action if needed and taking advantage of new opportunities.

We have also responded to requests for more information about the methodologies used to evaluate policies and costs by providing a significantly expanded analytical annex. As I have already set out, we have also given much more detail about the benefits and co-benefits of the plan.

In closing, I make it clear that the Scottish Government cannot deliver the plan alone. It is Scotland's climate change plan, and we need people, communities and businesses to work with us on that shared national endeavour. We also need the Parliament to work with us to deliver the policies. There is no denying that we are witnessing a concerning rise in anti-climate rhetoric, but the plan proves the economic and social case for action, and those of us who believe in the need for climate action, in the science behind it and in the economic imperative that I have outlined must stand firm against those wilfully disruptive and egregious voices.

Just this week, we saw a new warning from the United Nations, which said that the past 11 years were the warmest on record. We should not need any more warnings because the science is clear. We must act, so it is essential that the Parliament works together to deliver the plan and to reach net zero, with all the benefits that that will bring. It is a national challenge that Scotland must meet, because the prize is not only a healthier climate but warmer homes, cleaner air and happier, more equitable and prosperous communities.

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

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Back in November, I criticised the draft climate change plan for being yet another Scottish National Party propaganda pamphlet that was

heavy on rhetoric and light on detail, and the full plan is more of the same. With just one day to go before the parliamentary session ends, we have been presented with more uncosted SNP proposals that will make hard-working Scots poorer, but we still have no energy strategy.

At a time when household bills are rising across the country, it makes no sense to slap on additional costs by forcing Scots to rip out their gas boilers and abandon their petrol cars while sending more taxpayer money abroad. Instead, we should be drilling in the North Sea so that we are less reliant on carbon-intensive imports from foreign countries, while supporting households to make the changes that work for them.

Will the cabinet secretary apologise for finding the time to jet all over the world while failing to produce an energy strategy? When will the cabinet secretary come forward with more detail about the cost of the policies included in the plan, so that she can finally be honest with Scots about how much it will cost them?

Gillian Martin: I mentioned some of the voices against climate action and we need no further demonstration of that type of voice than what we hear from Douglas Lumsden.

The climate change plan sets out a fair and ambitious pathway towards meeting our first three carbon budgets. It drives £42 billion in direct financial benefits and cost savings for households, businesses and Government, in more cost-effective transport systems, more efficient heating and wider support to decarbonise industry. The plan will also, as I have mentioned—and as has been said in an independent report—provide more than £8 billion in co-benefits, including through improvements in population health brought about by active travel, warmer homes and cleaner air. The plan creates and sustains thousands of jobs across a range of sectors and in all parts of the country, from jobs in our renewables industry—which Douglas Lumsden is not interested in supporting—to jobs restoring peatland and planting trees, which help farmers and crofters to diversify their incomes.

The plan works together with the environment strategy and the circular economy strategy. If I am lucky enough to be back in Parliament and lucky enough to be still doing this job, I will continue to deliver on the plan, which will include working globally with other sub-national and national Governments that understand that the fundamental challenge of our time is decarbonisation.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for advance notice of her statement, and I thank all the stakeholders who gave their views on how the draft climate change plan should be strengthened.

I agree with the cabinet secretary's reference to yesterday's warning that climate change is now accelerating and will negatively impact on people's lives. I note, for example, the 400,000 homes and buildings in Scotland that are now at risk of flooding.

It is crucial that the next Scottish Government has strong leadership and that it focuses on delivery. It must ensure that people get support to make their homes warm and energy efficient; support on solar, heat pumps and heat networks; affordable and accessible buses that they can rely on, with links to our railways; investment in our land to restore our peatlands; and a joined-up approach to food production and biodiversity. It must also ensure that councils and communities have the financial support to deliver community heat and power projects that will transform people's lives.

What is new in the final plan? Does the cabinet secretary agree that members in the next parliamentary session must change how we scrutinise implementation? Proper parliamentary scrutiny of the climate change plan has not been enabled today, and we have not heard from the cabinet secretary which recommendations have now been included in the plan. We need an urgent focus on implementation. Does the cabinet secretary agree that a key message from those who gave evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and other parliamentary committees was that it is all about delivery and that the draft plan did not go far enough?

Gillian Martin: We have taken on the recommendations of a number of committees, particularly on the monitoring and evaluation approach, in the final plan. We need to ensure that we are clear about where delivery is on track and where further action is needed, but also about areas that might be slipping. I set out in my statement some of the ways of doing that. It is covered in one of the annexes, which has been significantly improved in terms of the detail. In the climate change plan, we also set out greater detail on our methodology in order to provide greater transparency on the key assumptions and dependencies.

However, Sarah Boyack is absolutely right, and that is where constructive criticism comes in—constructive criticism that recognises all the things in the plan that we need to do. It is absolutely right that we are scrutinised on the delivery of that. That delivery will also be the job of the Parliament in the next session, and it will have to done on a cross-party basis. The nature of that debate must involve the type of constructive criticism that we have just

heard from Sarah Boyack, who asked whether we can do more and whether we can give more detail. We have given more detail in the final plan. We have announced a new levy on private jet usage, introduced a new £2 bus fare cap pilot in Shetland and the Western Isles, and we have also boosted our proposed pace of heat network connections.

The fundamental criticisms that came back about the draft plan were about how we measure deliverability. That will be a job for the Parliament in the next session, but it is also about delivering on the plans when they come to the Parliament. Cross-party support will be required in order to deliver on the actions. Unfortunately, that has been sadly lacking in recent years.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The cabinet secretary pointed out in her statement that the SNP Government has increased the amount of electricity that is generated in Scotland from low-cost renewable sources and has put Scotland in a more energy-secure position. However, in order to meet the targets in the climate change plan and ensure fair costs for households and businesses, the cost of electricity must come down.

What pressure is the Scottish Government putting on the UK Government to change the illogical electricity pricing regime that exists on these islands so that Scots can get a fair deal? Does the cabinet secretary share my view that the best way to ensure cheaper electricity is with the fresh start that independence would provide? [*Interruption*.]

Gillian Martin: There might be groans from those to the left of me, who do not want to grow our economy by investing in new technologies for our energy, but Kevin Stewart is absolutely right: that is a key example of how the constraints of devolution mean that we are, effectively, trying to deliver societal and economic transformation with one hand tied behind our back.

As we know, and as was reinforced during the scrutiny period of the climate change plan, the price of electricity is crucial to our climate ambitions, including electric vehicle roll-out, industrial decarbonisation and clean heating for houses. I am not the only one who says that; the Climate Change Committee says that electricity costs have to come down. That will also be critical for what the UK Government wants to do to reach net zero by 2050.

When it comes to the current situation in the middle east, decisions by the Scottish Government to increase the amount of electricity that is generated in Scotland from low-cost renewable sources has put us in a position whereby electricity bills should be a lot lower for people in Scotland, and are a clear example of why those powers should be in the hands of Scotland rather than in those of successive UK Governments, which continue to leave Scottish consumers and communities exposed. It would mean that more communities in Scotland would welcome developments in their area, because they would see the tangible benefits in their electricity bills. However, critically, until the cost of electricity comes down, we will struggle to deliver in a lot of those areas in a just way. Kevin Stewart is absolutely right about the way to get that energy security and decarbonisation.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Finally, we have the climate change plan, on the penultimate sitting day of the parliamentary session. In the 40 minutes that we have had to look at it—let me be clear that I have always called for that period to be much longer—I have found no clear synopsis of the changes from the draft plan to the final plan. I expected that to be in a few pages in annex 4.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee said that the targets for changing heavy goods vehicles to electric HGVs were unachievable. The committee called for drop-in fuels. Is that in the plan?

Gillian Martin: I do not understand. I have to be honest and say that I did not catch the end of Edward Mountain's question about drop-in fuels. I will need to consult him afterwards about what he meant.

There will be £6.6 billion in co-benefits from the changes in the transport sector, relating to improved health outcomes, increased exercise and reduced pollution, which I mentioned in my statement. I mentioned the changes from the draft plan in my statement and in my response to Sarah Boyack. We have boosted the monitoring and evaluation approach in the final plan and have set out greater detail on the methodology.

The committee of which Edward Mountain is convener asked for more information on the co-benefits in the plan, and we have given an awful lot more detail on what can be delivered. However, on his substantive question on fuels—it might have been about biofuels—I will have to pick that up with him later, because I did not quite hear what he was asking.

Edward Mountain: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. With respect, I find that answer to my question to be troubling, because it is clear that the NZET Committee called for drop-in fuels—not just biofuels but a combination of fuels to allow diesel vehicles to continue to work. I find it difficult to understand why the cabinet secretary does not understand that, given that it was a recommendation in our report. Is there a way in which I can get an answer to my question? At the moment, I have not had one.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mountain. That was not a point of order, but the cabinet secretary has heard your comments and has offered to be in touch with you on that issue.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Over the past few years, I have met and engaged with the East Lothian Climate Hub and seen its work across East Lothian. It has engaged with communities to embed the work that is needed to tackle the climate emergency. What commitment can the cabinet secretary give to the existing climate hubs about supporting them to continue the progress that they have already made?

Gillian Martin: Paul McLennan is a big supporter of and advocate for the work of his local climate hub.

Community climate action is a vital part of our communities' journey to net zero. We have a national network of climate hubs and funding to support them. Between April 2024 and December 2025, those hubs delivered more than 2,600 workshops across the whole of Scotland, reached 48,000 people and provided support to community groups, ensuring that climate risks and solutions are embedded in many local place plans. I was grateful to be able to discuss the draft climate change plan with all our climate action hubs online during the period of scrutiny of the plan. Given the hugely important role that the hubs play in delivering local solutions on the ground, they want to do more, and be supported to deliver more, for the individuals and groups in their area, and I am happy to support them.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I welcome Scotland's new climate change plan, which is of crucial importance for workers and communities in the North East Scotland region that I have been so privileged to represent for the past five years.

However, my constituents are still not seeing the just transition that they have repeatedly been promised. The misinformation that is circulating that more drilling is the answer does my constituents a grave disservice, as we know that the North Sea basin is in terminal decline and that gas prices are set internationally. That is exactly why we must heed the just transition commission's warning that, if the Scottish Government does not use every lever at its disposal to fight the climate crisis, we risk losing the social licence for climate action to dangerous climate change deniers. Will the cabinet secretary set out which, if any, of the recommendations of the just transition commission's report have made it into the climate change plan?

Gillian Martin: I was pleased that the just transition commission was complimentary about how we had embedded just transition throughout the draft plan. The commission is, rightly, often critical of some of the measures that we perhaps do not take fast enough. I was therefore really pleased to get its endorsement of the draft plan.

Mercedes Villalba makes a critical point, which is that we have to face reality. Two realities are happening. One is that we are far too reliant on the burning of fossil fuel. That is the case not only in this country but in countries across the whole world, and we are seeing the effects of that, including in the weather events that are impacting all our communities. The other reality, which is closer to home, is the fact that we passed peak oil and gas a couple of decades ago. We cannot rely on the North Sea to keep delivering oil and gas domestically for another 50 years. It is a declining basin, and so we need to have a fair and managed transition.

At the moment, I believe that the decline of the industry and the supply chain in North Sea oil and gas is happening too quickly and in a cliff-edge way. That has to be avoided, because we need to ensure that we have all the work associated with oil and gas, and renewables and decommissioning, for our wider supply chain. That is what I am trying to do as energy minister, and that is what my Government is trying to do. We will work with any partners who have that at their heart.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement. I very much agree with her comments about securing the economic value of decarbonisation and achieving net zero. The cabinet secretary will recognise that one of the key areas in which we need to see further decarbonisation is the transport sector, including in the bus sector. Alexander Dennis Ltd, a company based in my constituency, is a world leader in low-carbon and zero-emission buses. When do we expect to hear the outcome from round 3 of the Scottish zero emission bus challenge fund, which is seeing the further roll-out of zero-emission and low-carbon buses in Scotland, which are critical not only to Alexander Dennis but to achieving net zero by 2045?

Gillian Martin: I have the Cabinet Secretary for Transport sitting next to me, who has just told me that that will be announced very soon. As Michael Matheson knows, we are investing a further £45 million to support the adoption of zero-emission buses through the third phase of ScotZEB.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am grateful for advance sight of the documents.

A great many of the criticisms of the draft plan were not about methodology and measurements but policy and substance, given that the SNP has spent much of the past two years delaying,

ditching or downgrading climate action. In particular, will the cabinet secretary tell us how on earth she expects to see the scale of investment that Scotland needs in the clean heat sector, having just ripped out the heart of the heat in buildings programme, depriving the industry of the certainty that it needs?

Does she have any advice for a future cabinet secretary for climate, who is going to have to deliver a completely impossible scale of acceleration on heat decarbonisation in the 2030s, as a result of this slow action now?

Gillian Martin: Màiri McAllan has responsibility for domestic heat now, and she has outlined some of the actions that she will take forward, should she retain her position in the next Government and should we be lucky enough to be back in government. Patrick Harvie worked hard when he was a minister on a set of policies associated with decarbonising heat in buildings. I have to say that I did not find those policies to be particularly conducive to a just transition, in that many of them relied on the cost of electricity coming down. What I did not want to do, as the cabinet secretary with responsibility for climate action, was put forward policies that would mean that we increased fuel poverty. I have been lobbying the UK Government—two UK Governments—ever since I was Minister for Energy—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: —to reform the electricity market. Both Governments have dithered in that respect, and we are not getting clarity on that. I am getting further with the Labour Government than I ever got with the Conservatives, who barely even wanted to meet me on any of this. However, until the price of electricity comes down, we will not see a seismic shift to electricity-based heating. We have to invest in heat networks. Màiri McAllan has set out some of our plans associated with the new bill that will be introduced, should my party be back in government. Heat networks are a way to build in private investment, and a plan will be set out for how we will do that in the next session of Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen to protect time for the next item of business, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): As the co-convener of the cross-party group on Malawi, I welcome the announcement on funding for Malawi, but may I also advise the cabinet secretary that no one who I have spoken to in the energy sector believes that breaking up the UK is the answer to the maiden's prayer? Nesta has pointed to the significant underestimation of the pace that is needed on heat decarbonisation, while the Climate Change Committee has pointed to the gap between ambition and delivery. The cabinet secretary is right about the need for cross-party agreement on a way forward, but what confidence can people across Scotland have that this plan will not simply result in a further round of missed targets?

Gillian Martin: When I talk about cross-party action, I also talk about cross-party action on delivering on the reserved policies and actions that are needed, which will have a fundamental impact on some of the policies set out in the climate change plan. We need swifter action on the funding of Acorn, which has been mentioned, in relation to carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and we need electricity prices to come down. I am always willing to work with people across the Parliament who have ideas on how we can drive forward action in a way that is just, does not put people into fuel poverty and that means that we can capitalise on the investment in renewables in all our areas. I want to work with Liam McArthur and his colleagues in the next session of Parliament to do that. In particular, as he knows, we have many opportunities in Orkney to decarbonise and to roll out and commercialise much more of the innovation that is associated with climate action.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Ensuring that Scotland can effectively crowd in private investment is an essential part of delivering this plan, not least given the Scottish Government's limited fiscal levers. Can the cabinet secretary provide any examples of the Scottish Government's work to make that a reality? How will the Government ensure that we continue to do that, given that climate action cannot be delivered by the Government alone?

Gillian Martin: What Jackie Dunbar has just outlined is critical: public money will not deliver on all the actions of the climate change plan. It can be used as seed funding at the very beginning of some of the things that we want to happen, but crowding in inward investment will really boost jobs and the tax take for Scotland and will mean that we achieve a seismic change in the economy. Since the publication of the draft climate change plan, we have been able to see our ambition to deliver that change. Last November, we launched our new InvestScotland portal, which showcases to global capital investors investment-ready opportunities in Scotland, from heat networks to renewables.

In addition, there are already examples of the public and private sectors working together to deliver their emissions reduction ambitions, which will be built on as a result of the plan. For example, there was early public funding of EV charging, backed by our strong ambition and commitment, which attracted enough private investment to allow

us to meet our public charge point targets two years ahead of schedule. In offshore wind, £670 million of private investment has been leveraged from £150 million of Scottish public funding to date, creating and sustaining thousands of jobs. There are more sectors in which we can do that, and I am keen to do so.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): On the subject of public money, the entire premise of the climate plan is that the renewable investment that is outlined happens only because of subsidies from bill payers across the UK.

I want to speak about transport. The SNP Government has committed to reducing car kilometres by 4 per cent and has said that at least 90 per cent of all car sales must be of electric vehicles by 2030. Can the cabinet secretary tell me how much those proposals will cost the average driver and, importantly, how the Scottish Government will ensure that the drive to net zero will not disproportionately impact motorists?

Gillian Martin: What Sue Webber is not saying is that, actually, that is a UK-wide endeavour, and that a lot of the actions that are happening at UK level will prompt the change across Scotland. We are committed to doing what we can, particularly in relation to the EV charging network—which, as an EV driver, I know has improved dramatically in the past five years and which is set to improve even more. The Government schemes to enable people to buy used and new EV cars have meant that people have had access to those types of vehicle.

There will be an inevitable reduction in car kilometres as we build out our public transport networks and as people want to take active travel decisions. However, those who, like me, live in rural areas of Scotland will still need a car. That is why EVs will be critical to decarbonising road transport.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the climate change plan and its focus on a fair and just transition. Given the importance of rural economies, can the cabinet secretary outline how the plan will support regions such as Dumfries and Galloway through, for instance, the dairy sector, with technologies such as biogas, while also strengthening Scotland's long-term food security?

Gillian Martin: Emma Harper has a long-standing interest in biofuels, biogas, the circular economy and anaerobic digestion; I thank her for the spotlight that she has shone on them.

The plan ensures that the agriculture sector, including in Dumfries and Galloway, has the necessary support to deliver the emissions reduction required and the nature restoration opportunities that will improve overall farm sustainability. We want to produce more of our own food sustainably. I wanted to be clear that there is no contradiction in producing high-quality food in a way that delivers for climate and nature at the same time.

I recognise the potential role of bio-energy to reduce emissions in rural areas, contribute to the circular economy and improve the bottom line for farm businesses. In order to realise the potential in the sector, we need action from the UK Government and engagement with Westminster colleagues as they consider policy options for the next iteration of the green gas support scheme. The current scheme is due to end in two years' time.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Rural communities across Galloway and rural Scotland are facing a surge of unwanted onshore wind farm and renewable proposals, industrialising our rural landscape. The SNP Government continues to leave them without clarity, protection or a voice. They want to know when the Scottish Government will finally publish its energy strategy and just transition plan. Quite simply, the question is: when will it be published?

Gillian Martin: It will be critical that our energy strategy is set out when we have clarity around the strategic spatial energy plan review and the Supreme Court rulings, the outcome of which we are waiting for. Every Government is looking to that as they put out their strategies for the next five years—never mind the next 15 years, as this climate change plan has a route map to.

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

Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-21120, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 3. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button, and I call Daniel Johnson, the member in charge of the bill, to speak to and move the motion.

15:00

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I feel strongly that it is a basic human response that, when a child is in distress, hurt or injured, we want to help and protect them. That is one of the most fundamental human reactions. For a parent, that becomes amplified. When we see that our child is hurt, a knot forms in our stomach, we want to act immediately and we fundamentally feel guilty about not having prevented that harm.

Just imagine what it must be like when someone's child returns home from school with bruises, and it takes days, weeks or months to find out where those bruises came from. That is what is at the heart of the bill and what motivated me to introduce it to Parliament. Too many parents, whose children often have additional support needs and are often non-verbal, are simply unable to find out what happened. Sometimes, they eventually find out that it was the adults who were charged with looking after their children who caused those injuries through the use of inappropriate restraint.

We have to accept that the use of restraint and seclusion will at times be necessary, but, when it is, we have to have the highest possible standards—not only in how it is applied and how those children are treated, but in informing parents. That is what the bill will do and what Parliament will have the opportunity to decide on. It is a huge privilege to stand here as the member who introduced it.

Above all else, we need to recognise Beth Morrison and her tireless campaigning. Her journey started when her son came home in 2010 with bruises. That started a campaign that culminates, I hope, today—this evening—with Parliament passing the bill. After that incident in 2010, Beth lodged a petition and she lobbied. It was not just those processes, however. We all need to recognise Beth's absolutely winning personality: people cannot say no to her, whether through her perseverance in conversations with all of us in this Parliament, through her sending in all those submissions whenever a committee was looking at anything connected with the topic, and through her tireless work with the press. That is a huge amount of work. I fundamentally believe that this Parliament is about bringing power closer to people, and she stands as testament to the ability to do that. I hope that we will pass the bill this evening and, in so doing, bring about Calum's law, but we all need to recognise that, although this may be Calum's law, it is also definitely Beth's bill. [*Applause*.]

We also need to pay tribute to Kate Sanger, who has absolutely been Beth's partner and stalwart, standing alongside her. She has her own experiences with her daughter, Laura, and is an innovator, with the communication passport concept for children with additional support needs. We must pay tribute to such tireless campaigning, because that is something that we need more of. We should all be thinking about how we can support campaigners, making sure that their issues become real and become law, and that we see the change that we all want.

The bill that is in front of us does four critical things. It puts guidance on a statutory footing, ensuring that we have compliance with the standards that we expect. It contains requirements to inform parents so that, when such circumstances arise, parents are told as quickly as possible. It requires clear recording and reporting standards. Above all else, it requires training standards, so that when professionals in the classroom use such techniques, they do so in line with the highest possible standards.

I am pleased that the Government has today published its initial data on the use of the existing guidance, which tells us two clear things. First, it tells us that the overwhelming majority of local authorities and staff in the classroom say that the guidance has been helpful. Secondly, the data highlights the gaps. Only 30 of the 32 Scottish local authorities responded, while two did not. One local authority was unable to provide the data and almost half are not fully reporting data in a way that is compliant with the guidance. Therefore, although it is clear that the guidance is making a difference and bringing about improvements, the data shows us that we still need to go much further and that we need to pass the bill to ensure that we make progress.

In my closing speech, I will touch on some of the concerns that have been raised, particularly by trade unions, which I thank for their contributions. I also thank members around the chamber, including the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Government more broadly, because the engagement that has brought us to this point has been productive.

I look forward to hearing everyone's speeches. Most importantly, it is a great pleasure to move the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill be passed.

15:06

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I thank Daniel Johnson for his commitment in bringing forward the legislation on restraint and seclusion that is before us today. I applaud his approach to working with the Government and I encourage more such good behaviour in the coming parliamentary session.

The bill has brought together parties from across the chamber, united by a clear and shared objective: to improve the lives of our children and young people. As we conclude these stage 3 proceedings, it is right to recognise the significant amount of work that has brought the bill to its final parliamentary stage. Families, campaigners, the Children and Young People's Commissioner, our teachers and school staff, the teaching trade unions and the Education, Children and Young People Committee have all approached the issue with seriousness and compassion.

I again pay tribute to the determined efforts of Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger, whose tenacious campaigning has ensured that children's experiences remain firmly at the centre of this work. No children should have to experience what Calum Morrison and Kate's daughter Laura went through in school. Beth and Kate have turned those traumatic experiences into a positive campaign to improve the lives of all our children, and were it not for them I am certain that we would not be having a stage 3 debate on a bill on restraint today.

As colleagues know, the Scottish Government's position on the use of restraint and seclusion has been consistent throughout the passage of the bill. Restraint must only ever be used as a last resort to prevent injury. That principle, which underpinned the national guidance that was issued in 2024, remains central today.

The Scottish Government's original intention was to conclude the review of our 2024 guidance before determining whether legislation was required. I confirm that, as we have heard from Mr Johnson, we published the review of the national guidance this morning. I thank all those who responded to the review and who have helped to implement the national guidance in our schools. Although the data that has been collected does not yet provide a full picture, as we also heard, we can clearly see that there is a higher prevalence of restraint and seclusion in our primary and special schools.

Progress is being made on professional learning to help support implementation. However, one year on from the implementation of the national guidance, there is clearly more work to be done to improve parental notifications and recording and to further support professional learning.

The review is perhaps itself evidence of the need to legislate in this space—there is a clear alignment between the review's findings and the issues that Daniel Johnson seeks to address with his bill. That is why the Government will support the bill tonight. From the outset, the Government has seen the value in working constructively with Daniel Johnson to advance the bill, and that pragmatic, collaborative approach has been maintained throughout every stage.

The Parliament's scrutiny has also been rigorous and thoughtful throughout the bill's passage. The Education, Children and Young People Committee's stage 1 report and members' speeches in the stage 1 debate highlighted clear support for the bill's general principles. However, the committee also highlighted many areas in which further clarity and precision were deemed to be essential if the bill is to work in practice for the schools and families that are affected by restraint.

As members have heard, I have been pleased to work collaboratively with Mr Johnson to strengthen the bill at stages 2 and 3 and to lay the groundwork for clear and effective implementation.

The support that Daniel Johnson and I have received from the Education, Children and Young People Committee and from across the chamber has reassured me that we have listened to and addressed the concerns that were raised at stage 1. As a result of Parliament's close scrutiny, I believe that we have produced a stronger bill that is consistent with the initial intentions behind it.

The bill before Parliament today reflects that combined work of members, teachers, families and campaigners, and it represents a significant step forward in establishing a much clearer legal framework for the use of restraint and seclusion and for our rights-based approach to practice in our schools.

Should Parliament choose to pass the bill, the Government will focus on implementation. The creation of the new statutory guidance will be informed, of course, by the evidence that was gathered throughout the bill's parliamentary progress and the findings from the guidance review.

I congratulate Daniel Johnson on navigating the legislation so successfully through Parliament. On the day before the dissolution of what has at times

been a deeply divided Parliament, parties will instead come together to legislate in the best interests of Scotland's children and young people.

As cabinet secretary, I have been proud to support along its way a bill that, as we all know, was driven from inception by the campaigning voices and tenacious spirit of Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger. At the end of the day, the bill is about Scotland's bairns—for Calum, for Laura and for all of Scotland's children.

15:11

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Daniel Johnson, who underestimates his role in this matter. Those of us who have attempted to take through or have taken through a private member's bill in Parliament know the amount of work that that involves. I pay tribute to him and his office for their work on the bill, which is why we are at this point today. I also thank the non-Government bills unit—I see that the team is sitting at the back of the chamber today. They must be counting down the hours to our passes being deactivated, to be quite honest. They have done a power of work on many pieces of legislation that have, or have not, gone through in this session of Parliament.

It is without doubt that it is only thanks to organisations such as the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and individuals such as Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger that we will see this bill become law.

Beth began her campaign back in 2010. Work then began on a petition to the Scottish Parliament, which was lodged in 2015. I know that Beth and many of the campaigners have also acted as central contacts for many families who have faced similar traumatic situations. That is what has driven most of the work that they have undertaken in order to bring an end to restraint and seclusion. I am aware that Beth and other campaigners have undertaken huge amounts of investigation to try to understand the true scale of the problem and to demand action, which their Parliament is delivering today.

Many of us are wearing a little crown badge, which I am sure that people will be wondering about. All Beth's work earned her the nickname "Queen Bee", and the crown comes from that. I am very grateful for being sent one ahead of today's debate.

The cabinet secretary touched on guidance. What will be really important is how it is received and that it will be implemented in the true spirit of the bill. I have written to the cabinet secretary about the concerns of unions and those of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland about potential unintended consequences. I hope that, as soon as the guidance is published, it can be shared with all those who are involved. It is important that we and the teaching profession have confidence that common sense will always be looked at. However, it is clear that there are some concerns out there. Although this bill, which I welcome, will pass tonight, those concerns have not all been answered, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will make sure that a response to those concerns is forthcoming.

This is the final education debate of this session of Parliament, so I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those who have worked on the education portfolios during their time in this Parliament, particularly Pam Duncan-Glancy, who has announced that she is not seeking re-election, and my colleague Roz McCall, who has worked on the education bills alongside me. There has been a lot of education legislation over the past year.

We can look back and be proud of some of the opportunities that this Parliament took forward last week in relation to the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill and delivering the Promise.

I also want to thank and pay tribute to my colleague Douglas Ross, who will be making his final speech in the Parliament. He has done a triple now: he has served as a councillor, an MP and an MSP. He was also our party leader—I am not sure whether that was something that he also enjoyed. I know that he has always put his community in Moray first.

Many of us on the Conservative benches have been friends with Douglas and worked alongside him for many years. He might not thank me for saying this, but many people in the other parties probably do not see the true Douglas. He is an incredibly thoughtful and caring individual, who, I always find, remembers things about us and our families that we do not always remember ourselves. He is always checking in. That is one side of Douglas's character that other colleagues probably have not had the opportunity to see in the rough and tumble of politics. I do not think that today will see Douglas blowing the whistle on his political career. I look forward to seeing him return to serve his community in Moray in the future in the Westminster Parliament.

To conclude, Deputy Presiding Officer—you have been generous in allowing me additional time—I will say that the Scottish Conservatives will be supporting the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at decision time.

15:15

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): There is a distinct air of the end of term all around us. There

was a degree of chatter at the back of the chamber between the cabinet secretary and me and others, because people are becoming slightly demob happy, notwithstanding that an election is to come. During the debate, I have been reflecting on who I was at the start of the session as opposed to who I am now. At the start of the session, I used to write my speeches down carefully and closely. Today, I have not written anything down. That is because I know exactly what I want to say, because I know how passionate I feel about the issues and the individuals who have been involved in bringing the bill to its fruition.

I begin by paying a warm tribute to my friend Daniel Johnson for his work on the bill—for his tenacity, energy and dedication to it, and for what he has done to get to know all the different facets of it and to engage with them honestly and in good faith, which is what has brought us to this point today. I also join Miles Briggs in paying tribute to the other education spokespeople who I have had the pleasure of serving alongside in the latter stages of the Parliament, and to the cabinet secretary for her efforts on the bill and for the collegiate way in which she has sought to work on it. I know that in the coming weeks it will not seem as though we always have that collegiality, so it is important to put on the record today my thanks to her and to Miles Briggs, Willie Rennie, Maggie Chapman and others who have engaged on the bill.

There is a real sense of coming full circle at the end of a parliamentary session. For me, there is a personal element to that, given that my career at Enable Scotland ended on my election to Parliament, but that was also the point at which I began to do a lot of work with the people who have been involved with the bill.

I want to pay particular tribute to Beth Morrison in that regard. We have heard her described as “Queen Bee” and the driving force behind the legislation, and she is an incredible woman and a tenacious campaigner. Along with Kate Sanger and other parents who have experienced horrendous situations, she has fought every step of the way to ensure that we pass the bill. Behind that, there is a real kindness and warmth to Beth. It radiates out of her—I always thought that when I worked with her at Enable. I was always struck by the fact that Beth’s email address was “calumsmummy” at whatever the email provider was. I do not know whether that is still the case, but she used to laugh and say, “I had that email address because that’s how folk knew me. I was Calum’s mummy at the school gates, and I was Calum’s mummy when organising him seeing his friends and all those sorts of things. I stuck with that, actually, because that’s who I am.” Many people in the country now know Beth Morrison as Calum’s mummy, because that was behind her driving determination to pass the legislation.

I think that all of us who are parents would recognise that. When I became a dad in August, somebody said to me, “The way you feel right now about your wee boy is how you will always feel about them—they will always be your little boy or your little girl.” Daniel Johnson spoke to that experience powerfully today. It will always be our desire to protect and support them and to give them a future that perhaps will be better than what has gone before. That is what the bill is all about. It is about our children and ensuring that they can live safely at school and have all the support and protection that they need.

I was talking about the bill with some colleagues I used to work with at Enable, Kayleigh Thorpe and Jan Savage. I reflected that sometimes in life you plant trees for other people to sit under. They recognise much of their part in the journey, as I am sure many of the campaigners in the gallery do. There are days in this place when it does not feel like we are planting trees for other people to sit under, but today is not one of those days.

15:19

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Daniel Johnson for his work on the bill, and I pay tribute to him for that, but we should reflect on why it took a member’s bill to get us to this point. Why have successive Governments not acted on this most important issue for 27 years?

Parliament has acted for children before. After some delay, we incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into our laws. Prior to that, we agreed to John Finnie’s plans to end exemptions that allowed parents to physically punish their child. Our getting it right for every child—GIRFEC—strategy aims to keep children and young people safe and protected from abuse, neglect or harm at home, at school and in the community. The bill is a natural next step on the journey towards protecting children’s rights by ensuring that seclusion and restraint are used only as a last resort and when there are genuine health and safety reasons for doing so.

The UNCRC is clear that protection from punishment and detention is crucial. It enshrines the idea that children should be isolated only as a last resort and for the shortest time possible. However, restraint and seclusion are sometimes used as frequent responses to behaviour that is perceived to be challenging. Pupils find that traumatic, not just at the time but for years afterwards. The bill has been drafted well to respond to exactly those concerns.

The bill is right to support staff, too, by making clear in law what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate restraint. We should be outlining best practice and alternatives that prevent or minimise the use of restraint and seclusion. The current inconsistency and unclear expectations leave staff exposed.

The requirement to notify parents, carers and guardians of the use of restraint and seclusion is the key provision in the bill. Those people have a right to know that those methods have been used within 24 hours of that happening. They should not find out by finding bruises on their child or through children coming home from school in tears. Along with the requirement to keep records, that will bring much-needed transparency.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland's report "No Safe Place: Restraint and Seclusion in Scotland's Schools" found that only 18 of 32 councils recorded all incidents. We must know when, how often and where restraint and seclusion are happening, because only then can we drive down their inappropriate use. I share trade union concerns about workload, but the answer to that is to ensure that staff are given time and support, and I ask the cabinet secretary to give assurances on that point.

Within the scope of the bill, Daniel Johnson has done well to draft legislation that addresses those concerns. However, inappropriate use of restraint and seclusion stems from broader failures in our education system. There is a failure to understand and cater to the additional support needs of the children or young people involved; a failure to recognise that every child and young person has rights; and a failure to properly fund additional support needs in all our schools.

We have nowhere near enough support in our schools for children with additional support needs, and those children are disproportionately affected. As Kate Sanger told us at stage 1, a child's shout is often not aggression requiring restraint but distressed communication requiring love and understanding. Her communication passport, which helps staff to understand how and why a pupil behaves in the way that they do, should be in all schools. I ask the cabinet secretary to address that proposal in her closing speech.

As this session of Parliament draws to a close, there has been some good progress on children's rights. The bill is a testament to that, and the Scottish Greens are proud to support it. However, as we move into a new session, we recognise that we still have much further to go to ensure that the rights of all children are respected, defended and promoted.

15:24

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have met Beth Morrison on several occasions. I recall one particular occasion in the middle of winter in my office in Cupar. I said something that she disagreed with, and I was left in no doubt about the truth of the situation and how I needed to amend my views.

Therefore, although I congratulate Daniel Johnson on introducing the bill, I know that, in reality, he did not really have any choice. Once Beth Morrison had made her mind up that a bill was required, it was going to happen and Daniel Johnson would just be a victim along the way.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Certainly.

Daniel Johnson: Just to update Willie Rennie's characterisation, it should be noted in the *Official Report* that I was a very willing victim. [*Laughter*.]

Willie Rennie: That is what all hostages say, so we should express our concern about Daniel Johnson's future.

Beth Morrison's campaign has been going on for 11 years, and anyone who is involved in politics knows that that is a long time. It is a tremendous commitment that has, I am told, involved her speaking to 3,000 families and bringing together people from across the country who have had similar experiences to hers. In a recent communication to us, she said:

> "The children aren't naughty, they're scared".

That offers a different perspective on how we should view restraint and seclusion.

The campaign has involved two different phases. The first phase was to develop guidance that involved the adoption of best practice, understanding what the young people experience and considering what the response from the educational establishment should be.

The second phase was to bring that into law. The fact that there was a need to do so says something about how we view guidance. Often, guidance is produced, it sits on a shelf and it is ignored, along with all the other guidance that has been produced. If we feel the need, on every occasion, to put something into law, we need to consider carefully how we bring together guidance, because it is often viewed by professionals—not only in the education world but across every part of our public sector—as having a somewhat diminished status.

We need to think very carefully about that, because if we go down the route that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

highlighted in her evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which would involve putting other areas on a statutory footing, that would introduce significant complication into our law. Elevating a very complex set of issues by putting them on the statute book is not a simple matter. We need to consider all that. I fully understand that, when particular cases are brought forward, they should be elevated to a higher status than that of others, because they are incredibly important. However, we need to look holistically at how we drive forward guidance and legislation to ensure that they are complete and are considered in the round.

I do not have a lot of time left, but I recognise the anxiety of many unions across the board, which came together throughout the process to express concerns about workload and definitions. We need to consider their concerns, which we have reflected in the stage 3 amendments.

This issue is part of a wider debate. This session of Parliament has been dominated by debates about behaviour, violence, ASN and absence, and restraint and seclusion are part of that mix. We need to consider everything in the round to ensure that our classrooms are a safe place to be, as well as a good place to have a great education.

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

15:28

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Daniel Johnson for his work to introduce the bill. As the MSP for East Lothian, I am proud to support the bill on behalf of the children and young people of the county.

As Daniel Johnson said, the passing of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill—which is often called Calum's law—is a landmark moment. The bill puts clear, enforceable protections in place so that restraint and seclusion are used only as a genuine last resort and never as a first response. I commend Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger for their work in getting us to this position.

We all know the current reality for too many children, especially those with additional support needs. More than a third of pupils have been subjected to practices that are inconsistent, poorly recorded and sometimes downright harmful. The 2018 investigation by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland laid bare the gaps: there were no national standards, there was patchy monitoring and parents were left in the dark. The voluntary guidance had not been good enough.

That ends today. The bill changes that by placing the Scottish Government's guidance on a statutory footing. It requires every school—public or independent—to train staff properly in de-escalation techniques and positive behaviour support. It demands that parents are informed immediately when restraint or seclusion is used, and it insists on proper recording and reporting, so that we can spot patterns, learn lessons and drive down the use of such measures for good.

The bill is not about tying teachers' hands; it is about empowering them. It is about giving every educator the tools and the confidence to support children without resorting to physical intervention or isolation. It is about creating the trauma-informed, rights-respecting schools that Scotland's young people deserve. As legislation, it sits squarely within the Scottish Government's values. I thank the cabinet secretary, Jenny Gilruth, for her collaborative work with Daniel Johnson and the Education, Children and Young People Committee in considering the bill.

The Government incorporated the UNCRC into Scots law. As a Parliament, we made the Promise to Scotland's care-experienced children just last week. As a Parliament, we believe that every child, regardless of their needs, should thrive in an inclusive education system. The bill delivers on those commitments. It turns warm words into legal duties. It puts children's rights at the heart of our schools.

Once again, I thank and pay tribute to Daniel Johnson for introducing the bill and for the thoughtful way in which he has worked across the Parliament. I also thank fellow members of the Education, Children and Young People Committee for their rigorous scrutiny. Above all, I thank the families, the campaigners and the children themselves, who have shared what have often been painful experiences. Their courage has made the bill possible. They are an inspiration to all of us in this place.

Today, Scotland has a chance to say loud and clear that we do not restrain our children unless there is no other way, and that we do not isolate them from their peers without proper safeguards. Instead, we choose dignity, support and inclusion. I urge every colleague to join me in voting to pass the bill. Let us send a message that, in Scotland, our children's rights are not optional—they are the law. The bill is for every child who has ever felt powerless in a school corridor, for every parent who has waited anxiously for a phone call that never came, and for the future of an inclusive, compassionate Scotland.

15:31

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I rise to make my final speech in the chamber. I chose to speak in this debate, on this subject, for a number of reasons. First, the member in charge proved to be a very conscientious and determined member in getting the bill through. I was reminded that he is the only member to take forward a member's bill in this Parliament to have come to a Conservative group meeting to discuss the bill. I was leader at the time, and I remember watching him walk out the door and thinking that he got a far easier ride from my colleagues at that group meeting than I often did in the same room. That proved that Daniel Johnson was determined to get as much support for the bill as possible at every point.

Another reason for speaking in this debate is the campaigners, who have already been mentioned. Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger have my utmost respect and admiration for what they have done to get the bill to this stage and for the work that they have done for more than a decade to reach this point. I know that Peter, Calum, Beth and Kate are in the public gallery today to watch the bill reach this point and get passed into law. They should be extremely proud of the work that they have done. [*Applause*.]

I will make two final points as to why I thought that this was the right topic to finish on. First, I will mention the non-Government bills unit. I took a bill through the Parliament to stage 1. It was unsuccessful, but I saw up close the skill, dedication and commitment of that unit—something that I had not witnessed before, as I had not been involved. I believe that that team needs to be nurtured and celebrated in the next session of the Parliament, because it is a great asset to those of us who are lucky enough to take a bill through various stages.

The Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill came to the Education, Children and Young People Committee—a committee that I have been very proud to convene over the past 18 months. I have enjoyed my time as convener; I am not sure that my fellow members enjoyed it quite as much as I did. I know that I stretched the limits of the convener's role at times, but I always did it in the best interests of trying to get to the root of some of the issues.

Willie Rennie quoted an email that we got from Beth Morrison this week. When we are thinking about the bill, which will undoubtedly pass at stage 3 today, I am sure unanimously, we might consider what she said in her email:

"Calum can't advocate for himself due to his complex disability, but he can express this truth: the children aren't naughty, they are scared."

Children should not be scared in Scotland, and they should certainly not be scared in an educational setting. If passing the bill prevents just one more child from being scared at school, we will have done our job today.

In the time that I have available, I will make a couple of offers of thanks. The first is to the staff who have been with me through my time in Parliament—some of whom have been with me the entire time since I was first elected in 2016 and others who have come more recently. The work that I have done as an individual member, as a party spokesperson, as a party leader and as a convener has been assisted by their tremendous efforts.

I also want to say thanks to my wife, Krystle, and our two boys, Alistair and James, who will see a bit more of me in the coming weeks and months and who have been a great support to me, as has my wider family.

A final speech by me in a consensual debate would not be quite the same if I did not add in just a hint of controversy. I do not think that I have hidden—certainly not well—that I have grown increasingly frustrated with the mechanisms of the Parliament, because I do not think that we are doing enough. Today is an exception—I think that we will pass an important bill—but, other days, I come in here and I am frustrated. I am frustrated that we have politicians who cannot speak for four minutes without having the lectern up and reading from a script, daring not to deviate by taking an intervention. When people look at that from the outside, they do not see politicians who are upping their game; they see people who are reading a script that could have been delivered by anyone. From the back benches, we hear softball questions that are supposed to be spontaneous in response to an answer from a minister, and then the answer to that scripted question is also scripted. We can and should do far better than that. In the seventh session of the Parliament, more people will be looking to see an improvement, and I hope that we see that. We have an opportunity in the Parliament that is not offered to many. If we up our game, that will improve how this institution is viewed from the outside.

To have the chance to serve is a huge privilege. For me, that began 19 years ago, when I was first elected as a councillor. I have since been an MSP and an MP, and I now conclude my time in the Scottish Parliament. To those who gave me that opportunity, I say thank you. To the people of Moray and the Highlands and Islands, who, 19 years ago, put their trust in a young farm labourer to represent them, which has been a huge honour and privilege for me, I simply say thank you.

15:37

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I ask members to note my entry in the members' register of interests.

As we come to the conclusion of today's debate, I rise to offer the full support of Scottish Labour for the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill. At its heart, the bill is about dignity, rights, protection and transparency for some of our most vulnerable children. The purpose of the bill is to minimise the use of restraint and seclusion and to ensure that such practices are used only as a last resort and only when there is an immediate risk of harm. The bill will place a statutory duty on ministers to issue national guidance, to set consistent national training standards and to require the recording and reporting of all such incidents to parents and guardians, ending the unacceptable inconsistency that has persisted across Scotland for too long.

The case for the bill was driven by families, campaigners and organisations that refused to let experiences remain unseen. Reports from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, "No Safe Place: Restraint and Seclusion in Scotland's Schools", and Enable Scotland, "In safe hands?", have made clear the scale of the challenge and the lack of proper systems for reporting and accountability. The findings are reflected in the fact that Scotland has fallen behind other United Kingdom nations, particularly Northern Ireland, in providing a clear statutory obligation to protect children in schools.

The bill is a culmination of more than a decade of uncompromising advocacy by individuals such as Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger, who fought not for personal recognition but to ensure that no other family would experience what they had to go through. Their tireless campaigning alongside the children's commissioner, Enable Scotland, the National Autistic Society and others has ensured that children's voices and their rights are now central to this legislative approach.

The Parliament should be in no doubt that the practices that we are legislating for are serious intrusive interventions that must be governed by robust rights-based and trauma-informed standards. That is what the bill will do. It will establish a clear legal duty, requiring all instances to be recorded and communicated to parents and ensuring that staff have access to high-quality training that is aligned with national best practice.

I will touch on a couple of contributions before I close. The first was from Douglas Ross, who has just sat down. It is always a pleasure to follow Douglas Ross. I note his incredibly useful confirmation that one of my party's members attended a Conservative group meeting and will file that away.

As a wise parliamentarian, Douglas Ross acknowledged those who support us here. In this case, it was the non-Government bills unit, but there are many people around us who allow us to do our jobs. I will dwell on the comments he made as convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, because it is a tribute to him that he saw, in that committee, the ability to fulfil a role that is crucial for committees in a unicameral Parliament. Those who return in the next session could do a lot worse than to look at some of the reactions and strategies that the convener chose to use to hold the Government to account and consider the legislation that came before the committee.

Finally, I pay tribute to Daniel Johnson, whose determined and principled leadership has brought his member's bill to its final stage. It seems that he is getting quite good at member's bills, so let us see what the election brings, in the hope that he will be working on a Government bill next time.

15:41

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): First, I congratulate Daniel Johnson, the non-Government bills unit and everyone involved in getting this important bill to this stage. I am deeply impressed by all the members who have managed to navigate the maze of the legislative process. We have had some excellent bills to discuss and scrutinise in the past few months of this session, and this one is certainly right up there in terms of importance.

We have had an essential debate about a sobering issue. Throughout the bill process, and for many years before that—we have heard mention of 11 years—we have listened to powerful stories from families, campaigners and professionals about what too many children and young people have been facing in our schools. That restraint and seclusion have been used inconsistently and without parents being told is worrying, and that is exactly what the bill hopes to address.

When parents find out what has happened to their child only because of bruises, distress and changes in behaviour, that is not just a failure to communicate; it is a failure of trust. Children are being harmed, which puts extra pressure on families, who should be treated as partners in their child's education, not as an afterthought. During our discussion of the bill, members on all sides have agreed that relying on the current process does not give children and families the consistency or protection that they need. Scotland now needs a national legal framework to ensure that restraint

and seclusion are used only as a last resort and only when there is an immediate risk of harm.

Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger have been mentioned by absolutely everyone who has contributed to the debate, which shows just how much work they have done to contact every single one of us, to lobby us and to highlight how important the legislation is. I greatly appreciate all the work that Daniel Johnson has done with them on the bill, and I highlight that the cabinet secretary has spoken about the collaborative work that has been done to get us to this point. I echo those sentiments: there has been seriousness and compassion as the bill has gone through the process.

In the little bit of time before I conclude, I will highlight the work of Douglas Ross and apologise that I am doing so by reading from speaking notes on my lectern—I will try to ad lib a little. As a friend and colleague, Douglas Ross is a force to be reckoned with. He is a strong voice for the people of the region that he represents and, as Miles Briggs said in his contribution, he has a side that many people do not see when he is in in the political arena. I know that Douglas feels deeply and passionately about the need for change for young people in Scotland and it does not at all surprise me that he wanted to speak about this bill.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Does the member agree not only that Mr Ross is an outstanding and fearless parliamentarian—as we must all agree, whatever our views—but that he has, as I know, been prepared to work across parties in order to try to achieve things for Scotland? Is that not an example for us for the next session of Parliament?

Roz McCall: I thank Fergus Ewing for that intervention. I cannot disagree with a single word that he said. In the work that I have tried to take forward with the minister Natalie Don-Innes, we have tried very hard to work on a cross-party basis, and that is definitely something that we should be looking to do.

To be clear, I note that no child should face restraint or seclusion unless there is truly no other option. For those reasons, putting the law into practice will be crucial.

The Scottish Conservatives are happy to support the bill. Scotland's children deserve consistency, openness and safety in every classroom, and the bill is an important step towards making that happen.

15:45

Jenny Gilruth: I start by making it absolutely clear that all of Scotland's children deserve and have the right to feel safe in our schools. They should not be restrained or secluded. The only occasions on which that should be considered are when there is an immediate risk of injury to the child or others, as we heard from Paul McLennan and others, and the cross-party support for Daniel Johnson's bill shows that the Parliament shares that view.

I thank members for their really constructive and thoughtful approach to today's debate and indeed to the bill process as a whole. I will respond to some of the comments that members have made in the debate.

First, I have some bad news for Miles Briggs: this is not the final education debate in the current session of Parliament. In fact, his colleague Pam Gosal will be leading a members' debate tomorrow afternoon on mobile phones in schools, and he can be assured that I will attend that debate.

I absolutely love that Beth Morrison—the "Queen Bee"—has ensured that we are all wearing our crown badges today. After the stage 1 debate, Beth presented me with a tiara, but I did not think that it would be appropriate to wear a tiara in the chamber, so I have not come wearing it today.

Miles Briggs spoke to the importance of the statutory guidance, on which I firmly agree. The consultation will sit alongside that statutory guidance.

I turn to the concerns of stakeholders, and particularly the teaching trade unions, with whom I have spent a lot of time in the past three years. First, I am sympathetic to some of the concerns from the teaching trade unions. We rehearsed some of this in the stage 1 evidence session at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, but I have engaged directly with all the teaching trade unions, including as recently as last Thursday, and the Government has ensured—working with Mr Johnson, of course, whose bill it is—that the teaching trade unions will be consultees in relation to the statutory guidance. That is hugely important.

Secondly, a number of Scottish Government amendments last week spoke to some of those concerns, and an amendment by John Mason made it clearer that the proposed changes will not apply to nursery settings. Mr Mason's amendment on the definitions speaks to the issue being revisited in the future, which addresses a concern that the teaching trade unions highlighted about the broadness of the category.

Thirdly, amendments were agreed to at stage 3 to support things that will be non-reportable in order to minimise the workload burden on teachers. That also addresses a concern that the teaching trade unions highlighted and to which I was sympathetic.

We heard from Willie Rennie about the churn of guidance that the Government produces. I remind members that much of the raft of guidance that the Government has produced in the education space, particularly in the past three years, has been at the behest of the Opposition parties. However, we need to consider the matter. I discussed with my officials only yesterday that, when we are creating a range of guidance, such as on attendance, behaviour and mobile phone use, we also need to step back and ask what needs to go, and to be mindful of the workload that they create for our schools. Publishing reams of non-statutory guidance arguably does not create the behaviour change that we need. That substantiates the need for Daniel Johnson's bill, because we need that behaviour change. The review guidance update that officials published this morning covers the rationale for Mr Johnson's bill.

Paul O'Kane was quite right to reflect on the collegiate spirit that has characterised engagement on the bill throughout its passage. In that spirit, I pay tribute to Douglas Ross. He said this weekend that he did not think that it was his job as convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee to give the Government an easy time. I say to Mr Ross that absolutely no one in the Scottish Government thinks that he has given ministers an easy time so, on that, he has absolutely succeeded.

I also commend the diligent work of members across parties—in particular, Miles Briggs, Roz McCall, Martin Whitfield, Paul O'Kane, Ross Greer and Willie Rennie—for their work with the Government on a range of educational issues.

If you will indulge me, Presiding Officer, I will also pay tribute to Natalie Don-Innes, who will be stepping down. I was not able to contribute to the debate that she led last week, in which lots of accolades were paid to her. As her cabinet secretary, I thank her for her diligence as a minister and congratulate her on the successful passage last week of a vital piece of Government legislation that was also supported across parties.

I am glad that the bill that we have worked on together will—as I hope—pass this evening. It sends a strong signal. It signals to teachers and staff that we will support them to de-escalate challenging situations in schools. It signals to parents that their children matter and that, when something happens at school that involves their child, they should be told about that timeously. More importantly, it signals to all our children that they should not be restrained or secluded at school.

I am pleased that one of the final bills that the Parliament will pass in this session relates to children and to giving effect to their rights. As Calum put it, the children

"aren't naughty; they're just scared."

I agree with that. That is why the Scottish Government will vote in support of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Daniel Johnson, the member in charge, to wind up the debate.

15:51

Daniel Johnson: The challenge in summing up a stage 3 debate for my own member's bill is to prevent that from becoming akin to a gushing Oscar acceptance speech. I will therefore try to marshal my thank yous and to make some points. I begin not just by thanking members for their contributions this afternoon but by thanking the Parliament more broadly. The passage of the bill has been a genuinely cross-party effort, and the bill is better as a result of not just that engagement but the overall parliamentary process: the definitions are tighter; there is flexibility in the way that it is framed; and the scope is right, because nursery classes have been removed from it. Above all else, as members from across parties have pointed out, it will make our children safer, provide clarity for practice and treat the issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

On that cross-party effort, Miles Briggs's contribution in particular has been very helpful. He has taken a real interest in the topic, as has Willie Rennie, whom I also thank for his on-going dialogue.

Indeed, I thank the entire Education, Children and Young People Committee. Its work was diligent, detailed and critical to providing the scrutiny that allowed the bill to be improved.

I pay tribute to Douglas Ross. He has been a diligent parliamentarian throughout, and I agree with him on what the Parliament needs to aspire to being when it comes to how it works and how contributions are made. That is very important.

I pay tribute to the non-Government bills unit. When we think about what the Parliament should be, the member's bill process is critical. Roz Thomson and her team do an outstanding job.

I pay tribute to the children's commissioner and third sector organisations—in particular, Enable—for the work that they have done in shining a light on the issue and providing the impetus.

I also thank the trade unions. They have not always been welcoming of the proposal, and I understand why. It is a difficult topic. However, I have no doubt that the bill has been improved by their engagement and has tighter definitions. I am

also mindful of the bureaucracy and workload about which they have raised concerns, and of the on-going resourcing and support that teachers and classroom assistants require.

Let us be in no doubt that this is not the final word on the topic. Indeed, following 7 May, it needs to be at the top of the to-do list for whoever will form the next Government, because there is work to be done to implement the bill's intent.

We need the guidance to remain a living document that is updated so that it reflects best practice. Above all else, it must be a practical document that everyone in the classroom can use.

We need continuing professional development for all practitioners in the classroom. Most practitioners will not need training, but those that do, definitely need it. Therefore, we need a focus on the training and on ensuring that it is available to all practitioners who require it.

We also need to look very carefully at the fact that while there has been a huge expansion in the number of children identified as having additional support needs, the level of resource—particularly the number of specialist, trained, additional support needs teachers—has declined.

However, I also want to thank the Government, because this has been a really rewarding process. The communication has been constructive, on-going and focused. In particular, I thank Jenny Gilruth. I remember the two of us as very newly elected members back in 2016, sitting around the table at the away day in Stirling for the Education and Skills Committee. I do not think that either of us would necessarily have imagined that that on-going relationship might have resulted in a bill such as this.

Ultimately, politics is about interpersonal relationships, dialogue, identifying where there is common cause and doing something about it. I hope that this bill stands as testament to that. This is my second member's bill. I do not know whether two for two is a record. If this bill passes, as I hope it will, I will be proud of it.

However, above all else, I repeat my thanks to Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger: you are absolutely outstanding campaigners and you are delivering change. I know that I should speak through the chair, but please forgive me, Deputy Presiding Officer. All of us in the Parliament owe you a debt of gratitude.

The cabinet secretary stole my closing line. As we pass Calum's law, let us end with Calum's words:

"The children aren't naughty, they're just scared."

Let us put that to an end.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : That concludes the debate on Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 3. It is time to move on to the next item of business. There will be a brief pause to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-21103, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3.

Before we move to the debate, I call Shona Robison to signify Crown consent to the bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): For the purposes of rule 9.11 of standing orders, I advise the Parliament that His Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, has consented to place his prerogative and interests, in so far as they are affected by the bill, at the disposal of the Parliament for the purposes of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:58

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I am delighted to begin the final stage of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill with this debate at stage 3. Although this has been an expedited process, Parliament has applied the same level of rigour and scrutiny as it does to any other major piece of legislation.

Before turning to the substance of what the technical bill will provide, I will offer some thanks. I recognise the constructive approach that has been taken across the chamber in ensuring that the bill is robust and ready for implementation. I thank members who have given their attention to the detail in scrutinising the bill and, in particular, the members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee, all of whom have provided their insight, advice and time to ensure that the bill is able to deliver the improvements that are needed.

I also extend thanks to all the key stakeholders who gave evidence to the committees and who worked with the Scottish Government to help to shape the contents of the bill, the regulations and the updated guidance that will follow.

I acknowledge all those who have previously contributed to the development of Scotland's visitor levy, including my colleague Tom Arthur, who took through the original bill. Their work has helped to build the foundation that this bill strengthens.

I thank everyone who will help to deliver this legislation in practice, from local authorities that choose to implement a scheme; to accommodation providers who will make returns; to the wider tourism industry with other key roles, such as providing third-party sales of accommodation; and VisitScotland, which will develop the guidance. They will all help to change how we support and invest in our tourism sector in Scotland, to ensure that visitors have a positive experience as they share our culture, landscape and hospitality. Finally, I thank the officials who worked at pace on the bill to ensure that it was delivered in time and very successfully.

On that note, I would like to highlight some of what the strengthened framework in the bill will deliver. A key improvement in the bill is the introduction of an additional basis of charge. Local authorities will now be able to set a levy as a fixed amount or amounts. That new option is in addition to the existing percentage-rate model, giving councils the flexibility to choose the approach that best reflects their local visitor economy, particularly where accommodation prices are more consistent and a fixed amount of the levy might be simpler and more effective.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I congratulate the minister at least for introducing the bill, but would it not have been better, rather than having two options, if there was simply one option—a flat rate? Does the additional option not really amount to a bit of a capitulation to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities, and will it not result in lingering confusion about which charge will be applied?

Ivan McKee: Respectfully, I do not agree with Fergus Ewing's comments. It was important that all stakeholders, the business community and local authorities were involved in the process and that there was flexibility to design a bill that meets local circumstances. The bill is very strong on the consultation that local authorities will have to carry out, and I am absolutely sure that local businesses and business representative organisations in any local authority that is considering introducing a visitor levy will engage effectively and thoroughly with the relevant local authority to get a levy that suits local businesses.

The bill also clarifies how the levy will apply when accommodation is sold through booking platforms or tour operators. In those cases, the levy will be calculated on the price at first sale, which gives accommodation providers certainty about the amount due and avoids any confusion when bookings involve third parties. As I mentioned at the start of the debate, this is a

technical bill, and one key measure ensures that a levy return for a given period will set out the levy payable for overnight stays that take place within the period in question instead of the date at which the overnight stay was booked.

However, the bill does much more, and I want to highlight a few amendments that have resulted from the rigorous process that the bill went through, the co-development that took place with key stakeholders and, as I mentioned, the input from members across the chamber. At stage 2, we added provisions so that, once regulations are in place, accommodation providers will be able to amend submitted returns to correct errors. I was also pleased at stage 2 to accept an amendment lodged by Tim Eagle, which will require ministers, in carrying out the three-year review of the operation of the act, to assess the impact of visitor levy schemes on businesses, communities and tourism in rural areas.

Last week, during our first stage 3 proceedings, amendments were agreed that mean that the bill will now give local authorities the option to allow accommodation providers to deduct and retain a proportion of the levy to help to meet reasonable administration costs. During those stage 3 proceedings, Stephen Kerr sought an amendment that would require local authority annual reports to include an assessment of the impact of the scheme on visitor numbers, length of visitor stay and the viability of tourism businesses. Although I resisted that amendment for various reasons, I gave the member an assurance that I would ask my officials to work with VisitScotland colleagues to consider how that detail could be brought out in the revised guidance. I am happy to give that assurance again today.

Throughout the process, our aim has been to provide a framework that is proportionate, clear and accessible. We want local authorities to be confident that their schemes reflect local economic assessments and that the language and guidance used will support high levels of understanding, compliance and trust. Therefore, I have also instructed my officials to begin working with VisitScotland to ensure that the statutory guidance is updated and revised to take account of the changes delivered by the bill and for that to be available to support the implementation across Scotland later this year.

I mentioned the importance that the Scottish Government places on engagement with key stakeholders who will deliver visitor levy schemes in practice, and I want to share with the chamber a contribution from Argyll and Bute Council, which responded to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's call for views.

The council's evidence emphasised the need for decisions to be taken at the right level of government, and at the right time, to support best practice and avoid taking

"a 'one size fits all' approach"

that would not reflect the diverse needs of communities in both urban and rural areas.

The council said that the visitor levy

"ensures that funds raised locally can be reinvested directly in maintaining and improving visitor infrastructure"

and that

"decisions must be informed by clear and robust economic and destination management data".

In ensuring that those decisions are right for our local economies, an important step in the process is local consultation to ensure that key stakeholders continue to engage effectively through co-design to meet the local needs that are being assessed.

The bill strengthens Scotland's visitor levy framework so that, where local authorities choose to introduce a scheme, it is fair and workable and reflects local priorities; supports sustainable tourism; empowers local decision making; and ensures that the benefits of tourism are shared across communities. I commend the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill to Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

16:05

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives very much welcome the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, which corrects errors and misjudgments arising from the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 that the Parliament passed back in 2024. I thank the minister for his constructive engagement with me and other colleagues on the content of the bill and for all the work that he and civil servants did to get it through so quickly. That just shows what can be done. If the minister is back as a minister after the election, who knows what other matters might be dealt with very quickly if the political will to do so is there?

Although Scottish Conservatives welcome the changes in the bill, there are other changes that we believe could have been made to improve the legislation in this area, which we discussed when we were looking at amendments last week. I am sure that we will want to return to those in the future.

Let us put all that in a bit of context, because the visitor levy continues to be controversial. We have

made the point on numerous occasions in the chamber that Scotland is already seen as a high-cost tourist destination. We have VAT on hospitality at 20 per cent, which is the second-highest rate in Europe. If we add a visitor levy on top of that, at anything between 5 per cent and 10 per cent, we push up costs even more. Many Scottish families already find it cheaper to fly overseas for a holiday rather than take a break here, and overseas visitors will be balancing the cost of visiting Scotland in comparison with that of visiting other European destinations. We need to be careful that we do not price ourselves out of the market.

I know that people will argue that in Edinburgh, during the festival, the place is buzzing and it can easily sustain a visitor levy, because demand outstrips supply. However, Edinburgh is not all of Scotland, and many parts of Scotland would love to have even a fraction of the visitors that Edinburgh has.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The key issue, though, is that it is up to every local authority to decide whether or not they want to use the legislation, and they have to go through thorough legislation to do so. Is that not critical?

Murdo Fraser: Sarah Boyack is absolutely right about the practicalities of the legislation. However, the problem—as she will know—is that councils across the country are being squeezed for cash and are trying to find money anywhere they can to make up for the cuts that the Scottish National Party is delivering to them. It is no wonder that they are looking at visitor levies.

For example, last year, in my region, Perth and Kinross Council, with an SNP minority administration, ran a public consultation on the visitor levy. There was overwhelming public opposition to such a levy from across various sectors and classes of respondents, but the SNP minority administration is still thinking of going ahead with a levy—it has not ditched those plans.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To go back to the member's previous point, other regions in Scotland need to recognise that, in rural communities and local authority areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, officers are promoting the idea of a visitor levy because they want the cash. They are not carrying out unbiased surveys—those surveys are directed at councillors to get them to agree to introduce a visitor levy.

Murdo Fraser: I agree with that point from my friend Mr Carson—he is absolutely right. As he will have done, I have seen surveys that start by asking people, "How would you like to see this money spent in your community?" It is interesting, however, that, in so many consultations, even against that backdrop, people are coming back with a negative response. Even with that biased wording pointing in one direction, people realise that there are downsides to a visitor levy.

The bill that is before us makes a number of significant changes. It allows councils flexibility to introduce a flat fee—or tiered flat fee—visitor levy, rather than a percentage. When the original legislation was before us in 2024, we submitted amendments on having a flat fee, but the SNP and the Greens voted against them and Labour abstained. I am pleased that, following substantial pressure here in the Parliament and from the industry, the Government has finally accepted its error and the legislation will give councils greater flexibility. It is just a pity that the Government did not do that in the first place.

That change has been welcomed by industry representatives. For example, Marc Crothall of the Scottish Tourism Alliance has said that a flat fee

"would be much more transparent and easier to display to the guest".

Fiona Campbell of the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers has said:

"it is regrettable that … challenges were not addressed earlier and that the legislation was not … fit for purpose from the outset."

The second problem identified, which the bill seeks to correct, is that booking platforms were not able to properly charge the visitor levy for guests staying more than five nights, so businesses had to process manual refunds for those staying for such periods. In October last year, David Weston of the Scottish Bed and Breakfast Association said:

"We're in a ridiculous and unacceptable situation … where hotels and B&Bs are forced to either break the law on the visitor levy or break the laws on price marking and price quoting, because they're literally in the position where systems can't do it."

In May 2025, 78 representatives of the tourism and hospitality industry co-signed a letter to the Scottish Government demanding that such problems be sorted out.

We have the bill before us, which is welcome, but there are significant problems with the visitor levy, which we highlighted in our amendments at stages 2 and 3. Councils still have the power to charge it to people travelling within Scotland to stay overnight for medical appointments. As we heard from my colleague Tim Eagle during last week's discussion on amendments at stage 3, City of Edinburgh Council has granted no exemption for travel from other parts of the country. Indeed, there is no incentive for it to do so, because the charges impact not on Edinburgh residents but on residents from other parts of Scotland, such as the Highlands and Islands. There is nothing that people from the Highlands and Islands or their

councils can do about that. We should have had a more generous and extensive national exemption scheme to deal with such unfairness, and we should have considered whether low-cost affordable accommodation, such as in camping and caravan sites, should have been exempted.

The legislation that is likely to be passed today will not be the last word on the visitor levy. I hope that we will see further revisions in the future. In the meantime, I hope that councils will not see the levy as a means of making up for SNP cuts and will consider carefully the negative impact that such levies have on local economies. Every week, hospitality businesses are going to the wall due to rising costs, exacerbated by the current rates revaluation. The visitor levy should not sound the death knell of the Scottish hospitality and tourism sector. Scottish Conservatives will support the bill, but a lot more needs to be done to support our tourism sector.

16:13

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Given that, as the minister says, this is a short technical bill, I will keep my remarks relatively brief, in the hope that any brevity on my part will allow more flexibility to members who might be making their final speech in the Parliament.

I thank the organisations and individuals whose evidence has been vital in shaping our understanding of this amended legislation. We will support the bill at stage 3, because we recognise that the legislation seeks to ensure that visitor levies are workable, transparent and responsive to the realities that Scotland's tourism sector faces.

Today, we are considering whether the changes that the bill makes to the original legislation will improve its operation in practice. We are satisfied that the changes that are set out in the amended legislation will give greater flexibility to councils. The introduction of a flat-rate option reflects that simplicity and predictability are essential for businesses if the levy is to work effectively for them. That recognises the diversity of Scotland's visitor economy. What works in Edinburgh might not work in the Highlands, for example. We have had a consistent position on the question of exemptions. We feel that decisions should sit with local authorities. A national approach risks undermining the very flexibility that the legislation is intended to provide.

Murdo Fraser: Does Mr Griffin understand the point that I made a moment ago and that Mr Eagle made last week, which is that City of Edinburgh Council has no incentive to grant medical exemptions, because that would not impact its residents? People who travel to Edinburgh to use medical facilities come here from other parts of the country. Does he recognise that there is an inherent unfairness in people from the Highlands and Islands, for example, needing to pay a visitor levy in Edinburgh for something that does not impact Edinburgh residents?

Mark Griffin: I appreciate that that has an impact on those who travel. However, I have faith that councils will take humane decisions. What we are doing today is devolving power. We are not taking a national approach; we are giving the job to councillors and entrusting them to run schemes that are in keeping with the needs of their authorities. It is about time that the Parliament did that more rather than less.

Throughout the passage of the bill, we have been guided by the principle that councils should be trusted to design schemes that meet their local needs. We should not consider councils to be just administrators of central Government policy; they are elected with their own mandates to design schemes that fit their communities. The improvements in this amending legislation will bring about such increased flexibility, which I support.

I also note that the improvements that the bill will introduce were discussed at stage 2 of the original legislation's passage. Although it is right that the Government has now acted, we should reflect on how we arrived at the point of needing amending legislation so soon after the original act was agreed to.

It is important that we remain clear about the purpose of the bill, which is to make the visitor levy work better in practice. The levy must not be considered to be a substitute for proper, sustainable funding for local government. For the reasons that I have given, Scottish Labour members will support the bill this evening, but we will do so with the clear expectation that its implementation will be handled with the clarity, engagement and competence that businesses, visitors and communities across Scotland deserve.

16:17

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): This amendment bill is, at its heart, a technical piece of legislation that will make what we put in place through the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 more workable on the ground. In particular, it will give councils greater flexibility by adding the option of a flat rate alongside the percentage model that is already available.

That matters, because Scotland is not one place. The pressures that are faced in central Edinburgh are not the same as those in Skye or in our smaller towns and rural communities. Local

authorities need tools to respond to those differences, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

It is also worth recognising that these changes have come about through positive engagement. The Scottish Government has worked with industry to understand where the original legislation could be improved and how it could operate more effectively in practice. That kind of collaboration and co-design is welcome, because it has strengthened the approach to Scotland's visitor levies. It was also good to hear positive feedback from stakeholders during stage 1 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's evidence.

However, it is important to reflect on how we arrived at this point. There were opportunities for a more constructive approach during the passage of the original legislation. Instead, there was outright resistance from some quarters to the principle of a visitor levy altogether. The passage of the original legislation was a missed opportunity, because the pressures that led to the policy have not gone away—if anything, they have intensified. If we had started from a co-design approach in the first instance, perhaps we could have identified, during the process of passing the 2024 act, issues such as the third-party booking issue.

Across Scotland, many of our most cherished places are experiencing the strain of success. From the streets of Edinburgh to the communities in Skye and beyond, increased visitor numbers are putting pressure on local infrastructure. Roads are deteriorating under heavier use, particularly with the rise in car travel and camper vans. Public spaces, facilities and services are being stretched.

At the same time, we should be clear that Scotland remains an incredibly attractive place to visit, which is something to celebrate. Tourism brings jobs, supports local economies and connects people to our landscapes, culture and communities. However, it also brings costs, which are currently borne disproportionately by local communities and local authorities. That is where the visitor levy plays a vital role.

Until now, those offering accommodation—from hotels to short-term lets—have benefited from Scotland's appeal without there being a direct mechanism to contribute to the upkeep of the very places that attract visitors in the first place. The levy begins to address that imbalance. It is not about deterring visitors; it is about sustaining the places that they come to experience. It allows authorities to reinvest in infrastructure, services and the quality of the visitor experience. By giving councils flexibility in how the levy is structured—whether as a percentage or a flat rate—the bill strengthens their ability to do that in a way that reflects local circumstances.

Ultimately, the bill is about fairness and sustainability. It is about fairness because it is reasonable to ask those who benefit from tourism to contribute to maintaining what makes Scotland special. It is about sustainability because, if we do not invest in our infrastructure and environments now, we risk undermining the very assets on which tourism depends.

The bill is a sensible step forward. It reflects learning and engagement, and it helps to ensure that the visitor levy can work as intended to support communities, protect places and sustain Scotland's tourism offer for the long term. I look forward to seeing other tourist-type levies in the next session of Parliament, including the cruise ship levy and, potentially, a point-of-entry levy.

On behalf of the Scottish Greens, I am pleased to support the bill.

16:21

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I commend Tim Eagle, who is having a gossip with Fergus Ewing at the back of the chamber, for resisting the temptation to add lots of bells and whistles to the bill. He was restrained. That was important because, when the minister came to us, he asked for an expedited process. He asked for our good will, because we knew that the parliamentary timetable was incredibly tight and that adding another bill into that mix could endanger other pieces of legislation.

I commend all the members who took part—the committee members and the various spokespeople—for keeping it tight. Of course, there was a debate about some elements, including the medical exemptions, which I agree with and which I will return to later. We managed to get through the bill at speed, which is what the industry wanted.

The industry has behaved incredibly professionally. Marc Crothall from the Scottish Tourism Alliance, as well as Fiona Campbell from the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, are professional advocates for their sector, and their sector should be proud of what they do for it. They have managed to elevate the sector to an industry that is respected for its economic contribution, as well as for its contribution to good employment.

The sector has been transformed in recent decades. It is now something that we can all be incredibly proud of, with great visitor attractions and high-standard accommodation and restaurants. The sector is a good one, which is due in part to the contribution and advocacy of Marc Crothall and Fiona Campbell.

This is a good bill. It is not just a technical bill—it is more than that. It will improve a piece of

legislation that had a flaw: none of us in the chamber had identified the need to give local authorities the flexibility that they required to ensure that the levy, when applied, is easy to implement. We have now given local authorities that flexibility.

However, just because local authorities have flexibility and power does not mean that they have to use it. It is not a compulsory power; they can choose to implement it or not. I urge them to consider carefully the wider economic circumstances that we now face. We are all having to consider that. Of course we would like more money for public services, but we all must consider the damage that can be done to important sectors by constantly ramping up tax—the message that it sends about our belief in the sector and wider sectors in the economy. I urge caution on local authorities in using the power. The economy is struggling, as we have all seen, and any additional cost—particularly in comparison with other parts of the world—can act as a disincentive. Act with caution.

Secondly, if the powers are going to be used, make sure that the money that is accrued from the levy goes into tourism. I have heard scary stories about what some local authorities are planning to use that money for, and it does not sound like tourism to me. We need to ensure that the money is ring fenced for the direct benefit of the tourism sector, because we need to keep the confidence of that sector for the longer term if we are going to grow our relationship with it.

My final point is about the exemption for hospital and medical visits, which has been raised in particular by my colleagues from the Highlands and Islands, where there are long distances that require overnight stays. People making such visits should be given exemptions. Every council that implements the levy should—because they will have the power to do so—give exemptions. I hope that the minister makes it clearer to local authorities that, although they have flexibility and they have the choice, they should provide the medical visit exemption. He should encourage them to do so.

We will support the bill, because it is a good bill that improves the original one and because, although it will give local authorities the power to charge a levy, that does not mean that they have to use it.

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

16:25

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): This will be my last speech in Parliament, Deputy Presiding Officer, so I hope that you will indulge me with an extra few words today.

Tourism is a key industry across Scotland. It is amazing to be able to welcome visitors and share our country and all that it has to offer, but high footfall has an impact on infrastructure. We need to ensure that tourism is sustainable. The visitor levy is an excellent opportunity to generate income that will only improve the experience for visitors and local people. The bill offers flexibility to ensure that the levy scheme works for local authorities. I am keen to see how it will be used in my Stirling constituency, which hosts Stirling castle, Loch Lomond and so much more. I ask members to please support the bill at stage 3 today.

My love affair with Stirling began immediately when my family moved to Doune in 2016—the welcoming people, the beautiful scenery and the atmosphere of the Trossachs. It was just stunning.

If someone had told my younger self, growing up in a poor housing estate in Ayr, that one day I would be an MSP during a worldwide pandemic, I would not have believed them. One teacher told me that I would amount to nothing, after asking me where I lived. However, my great-gran, Jane Brazier, who had been through wars, death and hardship, told me that I would make something of myself. I thank you, gran.

I have been blessed in my life to be surrounded by wonderful, supportive people—my mum, dad, Sanny, family and friends who are in the gallery today. I thank my husband, Ahsan, and my children, Emily, Benn, Marcus and Steven. I thank my political mentor, David Shearer, for his unwavering advice and good humour. I thank my party and its members for the opportunity to be here. I also do not forget the great teachers that I had who helped shape my love of life and politics: Mr Mulligan, Mr Johnson and Mr Mochan—Carol's dad. Mainholm academy no longer exists, but it produced resilient pupils—thank you for believing in me.

After a 25-year housing career, I threw myself into the 2014 independence referendum. I felt alive having conversations about Scottish independence and, to be honest, I still do. That experience led me to be here today. I came into politics to help people, to listen to and see them, and to give them a voice. I strongly believe in equality for all. I know what it feels like to come from poverty, to be homeless and to feel that no one cares for you. I have loved that part of my role, and I would like to thank everyone who has come to me over the years. I hope that I did your cause justice. It has been a privilege to serve you.

I also thank my amazing staff team—Scott, Betty, Joanna, John, Mason and Olivia—and colleagues across the chamber. I say to future

MSPs: please defend our right to a Scottish Parliament. We recently celebrated our 25th anniversary, and I very much hope that we will continue to celebrate our Parliament, our right to democracy and, eventually, our independence in the years to come. Thank you.

16:30

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I congratulate the minister on having the gumption to do something that does not happen a great deal by introducing the bill with an expedited procedure. I think that it was me who, in speaking to a business motion—from memory, it was on 18 December—suggested that that procedure should be used. That was not because of any brilliance or foresight on my part; it was because Fiona Campbell had, through her research, worked out that an expedited bill appeared to be the appropriate vehicle. I congratulate the minister, because he took that up and he listened. He did the right thing by listening and, by implication, accepting that a mistake had been made. I guess that it could be said that it was made by us all, although I voted against the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill. However, the minister is due congratulations.

I will embarrass the minister now with all this praise in front of his colleagues, but he is known to be pro-business, and that is a good thing. Sadly, he is an oasis of common sense amidst a desert of disdain and disinterest. I am afraid to say that that was evident in the passage of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill, but not only then; it was also evident during the passage of the short-term lets legislation and in the business rates fiasco, when it was proven beyond any doubt that the methodology that the Scottish assessors employed for calculating the rateable value of self-catering properties was nuts. That approach was rejected by England, and it was completely nuts. Incidentally, that matter remains unresolved, because the assessors have ignored the criticism. They are completely beyond accountability, as so many quangos are. Anyway, I praise the minister.

This will be my last speech—in this session of Parliament. If I may say so, I very much look forward to having the opportunity to continue to serve in the next session, which will make it seven sessions in a row. I say that seriously, because this session of Parliament has, by any standards, been one in which the tourism sector has not been dealt a fair hand of cards—and that is putting it very mildly. I was the tourism minister on two occasions, from 2011 to 2016 and then from 2020 to 2021. The latter time, I offered to do it—I told the then First Minister that I would—because, frankly, I thought that it would be an easy ride to the election. It is great fun working with people in tourism, because they are so optimistic. However, Covid happened two weeks later and I spent the rest of the time sitting in conference calls from 9 until 6. I never turned down any request for a meeting.

At that time, businesses were on their uppers. Businesses that were worth £10 million could not be sold for £100,000. People were absolutely at the end of their tethers. Some people died—I could name them, but that would not be appropriate. The overhanging debt from that is still being worked out and dealt with. Brexit took their staff away, Covid took their reserves away, and this session of Parliament has sapped their spirit and confidence. That is really dreadful. The minister is not responsible for that, but I am afraid that he is part of a Government that has dealt with tourism in that way.

I hope that there can be a fresh start and a fresh approach in which we value what is, after all, one of the most important industries—if not the most important industry—not just for the Highlands, but for many other parts of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:34

Ariane Burgess: Before I get to my points about the bill, I will say a few words about some of my colleagues who are speaking in the chamber for the final time. I came to know Evelyn Tweed as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, specifically by observing her determination to ensure fairness in the approach that the Scottish Housing Regulator takes to all forms of social housing, especially community-led housing. I learned a lot from her approach and the tenacity that she showed in that work.

I will also express gratitude to Sarah Boyack, who has been a consistent and constructive voice for climate action on the Labour benches. Again, I have learned from her approach and hope to bring what I have learned into session 7.

The debate on the bill has been constructive and important. Although this is an amending bill, it speaks to a much bigger question of how we properly resource local government in Scotland. The changes before us today—particularly the addition of a flat rate option—are sensible. They give councils more flexibility to design a visitor levy that works in their area, and they reflect engagement with the industry to make the policy more practical and deliverable.

However, we should see the bill in its wider context. For far too long, local authorities in Scotland have been asked to do more with less, and they have had limited powers to raise revenue locally. That has had real consequences for

services, infrastructure and the resilience of our communities. The Scottish Greens have been clear that that needs to change. Through successive budgets and negotiations, we have pushed to expand the fiscal powers that are available to councils. That has included council tax reforms—new bands will be introduced in 2026-27 to make the system fairer and more progressive. We have also supported measures that represent a shift in approach, such as the visitor levy, and we recognise that local areas should be able to generate revenue in ways that reflect local pressures and opportunities. That is exactly what the bill supports.

The reality is that tourism brings both benefits and costs. Although it supports jobs and local economies, it also places demands on roads, waste services, public spaces and local infrastructure. Giving councils the ability to respond to those demands and to reinvest in their communities is not only reasonable but necessary. It is about moving away from a system in which local government is overly dependent on central funding and towards a more balanced, empowered and resilient model. The bill alone does not solve that challenge, but it is part of a broader direction of travel that signals that we trust local authorities and are willing to give them the tools that they need. Importantly, that has been done in a way that reflects what has been learned. The original legislation set the framework; this bill improves it and makes it more flexible, responsive and more likely to succeed in practice.

The bill is not only a technical amendment; it is another step towards a fairer and more sustainable system of local government finance—one in which communities are better supported, local decisions can be made locally, and the success of places, including their success as visitor destinations, helps them to sustain themselves into the future. Once again, I am pleased to support the bill on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

16:38

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I hope that it is okay that I borrow a minute from my colleague.

In the run-up to the 2016 election, I worked on a member's bill to introduce a transient visitor levy. I knew that it would make a difference in Edinburgh by helping to address the challenges and opportunities created by year-round tourism, which puts pressure on culture, housing and local services. However, democracy kicked in and I did not get elected, so I was delighted to support the 2024 TVL, because it was urgently needed. However, as Mark Griffin commented, only two years later we are back here supporting another TVL bill to address issues that were not fixed in that bill.

Details matter, and I believe that we urgently need a new Scottish Government that is ready to fix the systemic issues that our country faces. In our national health service, we have overcrowded accident and emergency facilities, inadequate mental health support for children, which will impact their lives, and appalling waiting times for adults. One constituent I have been supporting has been told that it will be a decade before he gets the help that he urgently needs.

It has been a privilege to serve the constituents of Edinburgh Central and then the Lothians. That has included local campaigning on issues such as the Dalry baths and a new eye pavilion, as well as the current campaign to save Marionville fire station. I have been endlessly raising Edinburgh's housing emergency, and I have been highlighting the systemic underfunding of NHS Lothian.

Referring to what Ariane Burgess said, I have also been campaigning on the need to urgently address our climate and nature emergencies and to create decent jobs and empower local communities at the same time. For me, being in here is about delivering change that will benefit my constituents. That is why I stood to get elected in 1999, for the first session of the Parliament. It was personal. My dad chaired the all-party campaign for a Scottish assembly for a decade in his spare time, and my granny was a Labour activist after the second world war. You can imagine the debates in our family—they never stopped.

If someone had told me that I would get elected in 1999, that I would be involved in the coalition negotiations and that I would then become a member of Donald Dewar's Cabinet, I really would not have believed it. That taught me that constructive hard work and using the powers of our Parliament could deliver real change. For me, it was about investing in our railways—Airdrie to Bathgate, Larkhall to Milngavie and Stirling to Alloa, and supporting work on the Borders railway—as well as new CalMac ferries, improving island airports and tackling potholes. I had a £30 million fund. That would probably not sort out Edinburgh these days, and that was for the whole country. I introduced twenty's plenty zones, investment in walking and cycling infrastructure and our first national planning framework. I set a target—which was quite radical at the time—of 20 per cent of electricity consumed coming from renewables.

I delivered legislation to establish our first national parks: Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms. As a former town planner in Central Regional Council, I was hugely proud of that. My first debate in here was on Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, responding to Jackie Baillie's members' business debate. It is an

issue that we have both been passionate about for decades.

It is harder to deliver change in opposition, but it is a matter of giving a voice to effective campaigning by constituents, such as on the eye pavilion. It can deliver, even if it takes years to get the result that we need.

I was very proud to amend housing legislation to support constituents who were attempting to make tenement repairs. It is now more straightforward for them to do that. In the next session, the Parliament will have to work out how to address community heat networks and the installing of solar panels, which are urgently needed on our tenements.

In 2009, I successfully amended the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill to include a requirement for all new homes to have whatever renewables were appropriate installed in order to make them more energy efficient. I thank the then finance minister for that—and members can work out afterwards who that is.

We are now at a point where we need to accelerate action to address our climate and nature emergencies. We urgently need to get our constituents and businesses the support that they require now. Great British Energy and the United Kingdom's warm homes plan show the way forward, but the 400,000 homes and buildings in Scotland that are currently at risk from flooding do not need warm words; they urgently need action. People are calling out for transformative change—well-paid, decent jobs in every constituency across the country and community, council and co-operatively owned heat networks and power schemes.

It has been an honour to serve in this Parliament and to work with MSPs across the chamber. I have had a great team of staff throughout the years, and I thank them for all their hard work. I also thank all the activists and community members I have worked with and campaigned with. It has been a real privilege.

16:43

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): First, I pay tribute to Sarah Boyack, who has just spoken. Her speech contained a long list of the very many initiatives with which she has been associated and that she has pushed as a member of the Parliament. On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I wish to pay tribute to her service to our country, as a minister and as a member. I had not had the privilege of watching Sarah Boyack in action close up until I became a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. She has an impressive approach to policy, with her grasp of detail and her interest—indeed, her curiosity—in how things can come together to work for the betterment of the people of Scotland. I pay tribute to her.

Likewise, I am grateful to Evelyn Tweed for her service to the people of Stirling, which is her constituency. She and I have a shared passion for the people of the Stirling area. I am grateful for her service as a councillor on Stirling Council before she became a member of the Parliament. I know that she has always striven to do the very best that she can. She was right to pay tribute to her office, because she and her team have been a powerful source of good information during difficult times for the people of Stirling, particularly when we had dreadful weather last year—I think that it was last year; I cannot remember, as everything just meshes into one after a while. Anyway, her office did a fantastic job of communicating the latest information to the people of Stirling, so I pay tribute to her for her public service.

It has been an interesting debate. When it comes to such affairs, it is usual for there to be some liberal rewriting of history. That was not a dig at Willie Rennie, although I noticed that his obsession with bells and whistles has not been cured since his previous stage 3 speech, when he made repeated reference to them.

I join Willie Rennie in paying tribute to the way in which the bill process has been run. The only problem was when the stage 2 committee proceedings were postponed. For some bizarre reason, there had been a miscalculation of how many days or hours we had to wait until we could have a committee meeting. It was all a bit much: on the evening before, we were told that we would not hold the meeting and everything had to be rearranged at very short notice. However, that was the only hiccup in the whole process, and we have all practised maximum self-restraint in not lodging loads and loads of amendments.

Willie Rennie said that he has heard some scary stories about how the revenues from the levy might be used and how that seems to have very little to do with the sector that will have to collect the revenues. I agree with him, which is why, sadly, I disagree with Mark Griffin—I usually quite like to agree with him—over his resistance to putting in the bill some encouragement for exemptions for people attending hospital or other medical appointments who have to stay overnight in an area because it is absolutely necessary. I am disappointed that he could not see the sense in that. I am glad that other speakers, including Willie Rennie, saw that that would have been a good idea. I hope that the minister, in concluding the debate, will do exactly what has been suggested to him and will give strong encouragement to all our local authorities to create an exemption for

those who are visiting an area because they have to be there to fulfil a medical appointment.

I am sorry to inject a note of controversy in what has otherwise been a most agreeable debate, but Ariane Burgess was not quite right when she said that some of us had made a mistake in opposing the very existence of a visitor levy. It is in the DNA of the Scottish Conservatives that we will never jump up and down with enthusiasm for new taxes of any description. It is clearly on the label of our party and in what we stand for that we are against that sort of thing; in the spirit of "Father Ted", we would say, "Down with this sort of thing." We want to reduce taxes and to have simpler taxes, fewer taxes and more effective taxes, so I do not agree with Ariane Burgess that we were wrong to take that approach.

The Conservatives and other members, including Fergus Ewing, who is sat at the back of the chamber, made the case that the bill that became the 2024 act was flawed. Fergus Ewing was right to encourage ministers to listen. Some of the best examples of good law making that we can possibly see are where the minister who is leading the process is open to listening to what members and, more widely, stakeholders are saying.

I thank the minister, Ivan McKee, who has brought some remedy to what was a flawed piece of legislation. He has brought post-legislative scrutiny to a new level of competence by introducing the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill in the way that we all encouraged him to. I congratulate him on that, and I appreciate the fact that Fergus Ewing is right when he says that the minister has a pro-business leaning.

I can see that I am out of time, so will conclude by saying that, although I do not resile from any of the amendments that I lodged, I was grateful that Mr McKee accepted one of them. The ultimate test of the visitor levy will be how it works in practice and I hope that we will be open to further review in future, because I am sure that there will be many opportunities for a positive critique.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Ivan McKee, to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:50

Ivan McKee: I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions. It is important to identify the points of consensus, because we have secured considerable cross-party agreement on the bill and ought to be proud of that. I am also grateful to the members who have resisted what Willie Rennie called "the temptation to add … bells and whistles" to the bill, given the timeframe. That resistance has helped us to complete our scrutiny today, with a full day to spare in advance of the conclusion of this session of Parliament. When I have spoken to stakeholders about the bill in recent weeks, they have repeatedly highlighted how pleased they are to see politicians from across the chamber working together. Such consensus reflects Parliament at its best, with all parties coming together to deliver legislative improvements for local government and, importantly, for our vital tourism sector.

We have spent a considerable amount of time working to identify the right approach to supporting investment in our tourism sector, and it is important to recognise that comparatively small investments in visitor services can be transformational for communities and for visitor experiences, as we have seen with recent investments from the rural tourism infrastructure fund. In Orkney, there was £750,000 for visitor infrastructure in Dounby to help to deliver a visitor hub that serves the needs of both tourists and the local community, reducing pressure on key natural and cultural heritage sites and improving the visitor experience. In the Highlands, £250,000 was awarded to the Glencoe greenway, delivering a new traffic-free active travel route and creating a new path as well as upgrading an existing one.

In Stirling, £230,000 was awarded to the Trossachs scenic viewpoint, delivering the final stage of a visitor management project that includes a high-quality landmark viewpoint at the busy Trossachs pier visitor hub. That is something that I am sure that Evelyn Tweed would recognise. I congratulate her on her session in Parliament. It has been a pleasure working with her, and I know that she is hugely committed to the Stirling area and is keen to see tourism there go from strength to strength because the area has tremendous attractions to offer. I wish her every success in whatever she decides to pursue in future.

It is those types of investment that the visitor levy revenue is intended to support, and having a visitor levy scheme in place will help to ensure that local authorities can fund future projects that will boost visitor services without diverting resources from local communities.

We heard a final speech today from Sarah Boyack. Members may not know that I first met Sarah way back in the 1980s when we were both involved in student politics. It was long ago—a different world and a different time—so it was great to see her in Parliament when she was re-elected. The list of her achievements across a wide range of policy areas is long and impressive, and likewise I wish her every success in the future.

I thank Fergus Ewing for his compliments, but I must very strongly tell him that the SNP Government is firmly pro-business. That is true of the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for

Finance and Local Government, the Deputy First Minister, all Cabinet ministers and all members of the party, who absolutely recognise the critical role that business plays in building a strong economy for Scotland, which is the key to a successful future.

I very much agree with Willie Rennie's comments about the leadership of the tourism industry, which is critical not only because of the revenue and economic activity that the industry generates but because of the opportunities that it presents to communities across the whole country—few sectors can match that geographical reach. It also presents a hugely important front window for Scotland internationally. I have no doubt that it is a key element in our continued success in attracting inward investment across all sectors, given our leadership role in that metric. The tourism sector has a huge role to play in presenting Scotland internationally in the most favourable light.

I recognise the comments from Willie Rennie and many other members across the chamber on medical exemptions. There has been a balance, with many members recognising that it is for local authorities to decide how to apply exemptions and that we should seek to devolve that responsibility as much as possible. However, with that responsibility comes an obligation to recognise many of the issues that members have raised. I give an undertaking that officials will work with VisitScotland to include references to medical exemptions in the guidance that will be produced for councils to support implementation of the bill.

Willie Rennie: I urge the minister to be just a little bit clearer and more direct to local authorities. We need to have medical exemptions across the board. I know that it is up to local authorities, but can he just give them a little bit more so that they fully understand the importance of that?

Ivan McKee: As I have said on the record, with the responsibility that we have delegated to councils comes an obligation on them to take the matter very seriously and recognise the points that have been made in the chamber this afternoon. Local authorities should seriously consider how they will approach exemptions from the visitor levy for those who, through no fault of their own, have to travel to other parts of the country for medical treatment.

The bill responds directly to what local authorities and industry have asked for. It provides the clarity, consistency and confidence that they need on how visitor levy schemes will operate. I thank members again for their contributions and commend the motion to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-21104, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 3. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

16:57

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): From the crofters uprisings in the late 1880s to the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886 and the 10 major acts of Parliament on crofting that have been delivered since then, with the last one being the Crofting (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2013, we can see the evolution and the embedding of Scotland as a unique crofting nation. Our crofting communities are the very heart and soul of what, arguably, makes Scotland the best small country in the world. The bill that we will vote on today is the latest instalment, but certainly not the last, in Scotland's crofting story.

I thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its work, its diligence, its scrutiny and its evidence gathering, which have helped to shape and reshape the bill so that it will do what we collectively set out to achieve—that is, a simplification of the accumulation of bills that I mentioned, which have, in all honesty, left us with remedial work to do in order to make the crofting legislation fit for purpose in modern Scotland. I believe that the bill will take us to that place.

I place on the record my profound and sincere appreciation for the incredible amount of work and engagement that my officials and policy development teams have put in. It has been a gargantuan effort, with engagement across the crofting communities, the Crofting Commission, the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. Because of the time that has been spent, the diligence and the extensive engagement, we come to today's stage 3 debate knowing that no opportunity has been lost to maximise the potential to get to a point where our aims and objectives for the bill are met. I thank everyone who has had a role in helping us to get to where we are.

My final and, I believe, most important thanks go to the crofters and the stakeholders. I have had the great pleasure of meeting many of them. I enjoyed their craic and their hospitality but, most important, I took away the sense of community, of family ties and of the anchor to the land that makes crofting the very heart and soul of our crofting counties. That understanding of what it means to be a crofter is at the epicentre of many of the provisions in the bill and has helped us to shape it so that it can deliver the improvements that I believe that it will.

As I explained in the chamber at stage 1, this crofting reform should be viewed not in isolation but alongside the work of the Crofting Commission. It is important to understand the interplay between the legislation and the commission's policy plan. The bill provides the necessary framework and the plan provides the detail of how the commission will administer and regulate. I meet the Crofting Commission regularly—in fact, I met its chair and chief executive officer today, and I know that they care deeply about the communities that they serve.

The bill provides the commission with the tools to support crofters by tackling breaches of duty and making stronger decisions on crofting applications that will support active crofting. It will also strengthen the role of grazings committees in managing common land and give crofters, and their communities, a greater say in how the land that they work is used.

We know how complex crofting law is, but the bill takes out some of that complexity. I will take a moment to outline some of the real-world improvements that the bill will deliver. It will give crofters more options in how they use their land. It will allow approximately 700 people to apply to become crofters. It will streamline the enforcement of duties and the family assignation processes. It will prevent crofters who are in breach of their duties from profiteering and removing land from crofting tenure. It will prevent the separation of a grazing share from the inby croft, unless that is specifically approved by the commission. It will give more power to the commission to approve crofter-led environmental uses of common grazings. Crofters will be able to apply to the commission for boundary and registration changes. The bill will create a power to regulate the transfer of owner-occupier crofter status.

All of that represents significant change. The bill will make crofting regulation less onerous for active crofters and the commission, and flexible enough to allow them to grasp new opportunities and cope with future challenges. However, it goes further. It also commits any future Government to scoping and launching a review of crofting law within three years of royal assent at the latest. I have put it on record that, if my party is in Government, it will take place sooner than that.

Crofters and stakeholders have been clear about the need for a broader review of crofting legislation and subsequent future reform. The bill will help to lay the foundations of a stronger and healthier future for crofting, in which we will aim for increased residency levels and more people

actively using their crofts and common grazings. The provisions of the bill will support our joint endeavour to breathe new life into crofting communities and to enable rural repopulation.

On part 2 of the bill, I recognise the contributions of both the former and the current chairs of the Scottish Land Court, who have each played an important part in the consideration and development of that reform. Part 2 creates a single judicial body for resolving disputes that relate to crofting, agricultural land or valuation. It brings together the Land Court's specialist remit and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland's wider land, title and valuation functions.

The court will continue to work in the long-standing traditions that matter deeply to the community that it serves. Rightly, the statutory requirement for a Gaelic-speaking member and local sittings, and the specialist character of the court, will remain. The reform is proportionate and practical, and will provide the flexibility that is required to respond to future demands.

In concluding my opening remarks, I reflect on the deep connection and sense of belonging that characterise our crofting communities. The pull and draw of the land, its stewardship through generations and that deep sense of community and culture are things that we must cherish and support. That is why I assure members of the Government's commitment to our crofting communities and to a unique way of life, which is built on the hard-won rights of those who refused to be forced from their own land. In this age of instability, their courage and persistence are a lesson to us all. Today, through the bill, we honour that proud legacy as we seek to build on it to secure crofting's place in Scotland's future.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill be passed.

17:03

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I have a small farm, albeit that it is not a croft.

Crofting is one of the defining features of life in the Highlands and Islands. I am certainly not the first to say it, but crofting is not simply a system of land tenure; it is a way of sustaining communities, supporting rural families and protecting landscapes. It is a core part of Highland culture. For generations, crofters have helped to shape the character of some of the most fragile and beautiful parts of our country, and their contribution to our rural economy and food production remains enormously important. That is why legislation that affects crofting matters deeply to the communities that rely on it—to my constituents in the Highlands and Islands.

As I said at stage 1, there are elements of the bill that I welcome. It provides a number of useful technical clarifications and procedural improvements to existing crofting legislation. In particular, it attempts to streamline processes, improve transparency and modernise some administrative tasks. There was also constructive engagement between the Scottish Government and stakeholders prior to the bill's publication, which is worth recognising.

However, although the bill contains worthwhile measures, it is important that we are honest about what it is and what it is not. This is not the comprehensive reform of crofting law that many people expected it to be. Members may remember that this Parliament undertook a review of crofting in 2017. At that point, there was an expectation across crofting communities that a full and meaningful modernisation of the framework would follow; yet, here we are, almost a decade later, considering legislation that makes only partial and technical changes.

That reality was recognised by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in its stage 1 report, which highlighted the continued importance of crofting and the cultural, economic and social benefits that it brings to rural Scotland. However, the committee also recognised that the deeper structural questions around crofting law remain unresolved. Many crofters tell me that the legal framework surrounding crofting remains complex, fragmented and, at times, difficult to navigate. The bill does not fundamentally address those challenges, and leaves wider questions about the future of crofting largely unanswered.

Crofting has always been about active land management. The primary purpose of a crofting business, for me, remains agricultural activity. Through that activity, crofters contribute not only to food production but also to biodiversity, habitat enhancement, carbon sequestration and the maintenance of the landscapes that define the Highlands and Islands. There are legitimate concerns, which were raised during scrutiny of the bill, about the land being used solely for environmental purposes without active management. Environmental benefits are important, but they must not come at the cost of abandonment or absenteeism. Crofting land should not simply become a passive landscape under the banner of rewilding or habitat creation. I do not feel that we have yet asked communities what that would mean for them.

Active occupation and active land management are at the heart of what crofting means. That brings

us to a broader question that the Parliament will eventually have to confront: what does crofting mean in 21st-century Scotland? I have said this before, but it is worth repeating: crofting is not just about land use; it is about the people, the families and those remote rural areas. It is about sustaining Gaelic culture and local traditions, and supporting fragile communities that might otherwise face depopulation.

In many parts of the Highlands and Islands, crofting provides the foundation for community life. Schools, local services and small businesses often depend on the stability that it provides. If we are serious about tackling rural depopulation in the Highlands and Islands, crofting must remain a part of the solution. Therefore, although I absolutely support this bill and what it brings, I see it as only a first step. The next Government must commit to the fuller review of crofting law for which crofters have been waiting for many years, and I am pleased that the minister just confirmed that. We cannot again provide only an update, because crofting deserves more than that piecemeal reform. It deserves a clear, modern and coherent framework that protects its traditions while ensuring that it can thrive in the decades ahead.

Before I finish, I am acutely aware that we have three people doing their final speeches today. Although my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston will also talk about that later on, I express my personal thanks to Rhoda Grant. Rhoda, it has been a pleasure to serve with you on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. You are a determined and principled voice for the Highlands and Islands, and we will deeply miss you.

I do not want to say this on the public record, but Richard Leonard was a slight crush of mine during his early days as leader of the Scottish Labour Party—in a good way! I did not agree with what you said, Richard, but every time that you stood up to speak, the determination that you brought in your passion for workers' rights was quite something to behold. I do not necessarily agree with you, but, to this day, I am captivated by what you say whenever you stand up, Richard Leonard.

Members: Oh!

Tim Eagle: You see why I did not want to say that on the public record.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am rather relieved that you did not say that through the chair, Mr Eagle.

Tim Eagle: My apologies, Presiding Officer.

Finally, I thank my colleague Edward Mountain, who has been an incredible campaigner for rural Scotland. This Parliament will miss Edward Mountain greatly. He has worked across benches and within the Scottish Conservative Party, and he has done strong work with the Scottish stoma forum and on everything that he believes in.

17:09

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank Tim Eagle for his kind remarks. There will be a lot of thank yous in this contribution, because I also want to thank all those who helped us with our work on the bill, including Parliament staff on the committee and in the legislation team, as well as those who gave evidence to the committee and the bill team and the minister, for their very constructive discussions throughout the process.

Special thanks must go to Donna Smith and Susi Stuehlinger from the Scottish Crofting Federation—Donna is in the gallery again today. Their evidence and assistance were incredibly important to the bill, and they must rightly feel a great deal of ownership of it.

We hope that the bill, as far as it goes, will put some protections in place but also make the administration of crofting little easier, and we will support it tonight. As Tim Eagle said, it was not the bill that was promised. We all expected an overarching bill that put crofting on a firm footing for the future. That is unfinished business, but it cannot be done at the end of a parliamentary session. This bill was supposed to be dealt with early in the term and yet it will be the last one that we pass.

Drafting an overarching crofting bill will not be easy. Crofting has evolved throughout the crofting counties in very different ways, so the way that crofting works in the Western Isles is very different from the way that it works in Shetland, and it is different again in the Moray Firth and the west coast.

A new bill must strip crofting back to what it was set up to do. Crofting was devised as a result of the land raider protests to give people secure access to land. People from the Highlands and Islands were prosecuted and jailed simply for asking for land on which to work to feed their families. The early crofters were politically astute. They set up their own political party, affiliated to the Highland Land League, and had five MPs elected in 1885. The Crofters Party was a predecessor to the Labour Party. In 1886, a year after the election in which it had five MPs elected, the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act was passed, and we have to learn from the speed at which those MPs worked. The act established the Crofters Commission and led to reduced rents. Those were the first land reformers. Sadly, it is a struggle that continues today.

This will be my last speech in the Parliament, and it feels apt that it is about crofting, because the cross-party group on crofting was one of the first

cross-party groups that I was involved in setting up, and it feels as though things have come full circle. It would be wrong of me, in my last speech, not to pay tribute to some people. To start with, I pay tribute to Maureen Macmillan and Peter Peacock, who were elected on the Highlands and Islands regional list with me in the first session of Parliament, and David Stewart, who joined us thereafter. I shared staff with all three of them. There are too many staff to mention here, but I want to thank them all for their work and support. A special thanks goes to my current team—Andrene, Laura, Stuart, Michael and Emily—who have been a fabulous support to me and my constituents. As MSPs, we should remember that we could achieve only a fraction of what we do were it not for those who work with us, so I thank them for their support. I also want to thank our Scottish Labour staff pool and the parliamentary staff who support us so well.

Over the past few weeks, I have been seeing people and thinking to myself how much I am going to miss them. It will be strange not being here, but I am going to enjoy watching the new Parliament come together. I am also looking forward to spending a lot more time with my long-suffering family. Special thanks go to my husband Mark and the rest of the family for their support over the years.

In conclusion, may I say: be kind to each other. Debate and disagree, of course, but be respectful when doing that. We are all here to make our country a better place. I want to see the Highlands and Islands thrive. I want people to understand our unique way of life—which is often different throughout the region—and I want people to respect our culture and heritage, not trample on it. Most of all, I want our people to have equality of service and infrastructure and equality of opportunity that our young people can access by staying rather than leaving. I urge the next Parliament to achieve that.

17:14

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Crofting is a vital part of Scotland's cultural and social heritage, as well as its future. It is a social and economic glue that holds rural and island communities together, offering us a template for low-impact land management that, if adopted more widely across Scotland, could help us to meet the major challenges presented by the climate and biodiversity crises, support fair access to land and food and provide an antidote to rural depopulation.

Although I am pleased that stakeholders are largely happy with the bill's contents, it must be said—as other members have done already—that the bill is something of a missed opportunity. It has been in the pipeline for a decade, and yet what we have before us today is fairly technical, and not the ambitious reform that crofters have been crying out for.

Key elements that are missing include tighter regulation of the market in tenancies to make crofting more accessible; a scheme to create more crofts on public land; and moves towards a Scotland-wide expansion of where crofting can take place. We must ensure that the next Government uses the review of crofting legislation that Tim Eagle and I secured to deliver the much-needed solutions to those issues in order to secure crofting's future.

I express my thanks to the stakeholders who have worked with me on the bill. The Scottish Crofting Federation and Community Land Scotland have provided excellent support on part 1. Ramblers Scotland and the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland have also been very helpful in proposing amendments, and it has been good to collaborate on making meaningful changes to part 2. I also thank the minister and his officials for their constructive approach in meetings about the bill.

Turning to the specifics of part 1, despite the overall lack of ambition in the bill, some welcome progress has been made on giving crofters the right to put land to environmental use and ensure a fairer balance of rights between the crofting community, the public interest and landlords and estates.

I trust that those changes will allow crofters to do their bit for Scotland's nature and climate and enable landscape-scale change so that we meet our biodiversity and emissions reduction goals, with biodiversity in particular being key to ensuring that our nation remains resilient in the face of global ecosystems collapse.

My concern is that it is unclear who is entitled to the financial benefit of that vital work. Although I understand that the bill is not the place to resolve carbon offsetting issues, I urge the next Government to commit to investigating that issue through primary legislation to allow crofters and other land users to work with full confidence.

That is not an endorsement of the carbon offsetting system—instead, it is an acknowledgement that the system exists and needs regulating in the interests of fairness, community wealth building and democratising Scotland's land.

Part 2 of the bill is a sensible idea in principle and will give crofters, as well as other stakeholders, a clear destination for their legal cases.

It is especially pleasing to note that the new Scottish Land Court will have jurisdiction over access rights. That will allow for better, fairer access to justice in this area—something that can only improve outcomes for everyone, not just for those with the deepest pockets.

My stage 3 amendment, which will see land access guidance updated for the first time in two decades, and the minister's amendment to review the operation of the Scottish Land Court—something that I pushed for at stage 2—will ensure that the new jurisdiction works as effectively as possible in the years to come.

To wrap up, the Scottish Greens support the bill, but we want to see further reform in the next session of Parliament to ensure a viable future for crofting for generations to come.

17:18

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased to speak for the Scottish Liberal Democrats on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 3. I, too, thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee convener, members and clerks, the bill team, those who gave evidence and the many organisations that sent briefings on the amendment stages of the bill.

As I stated in the chamber at stage 1, and as other members have highlighted today, reform of the legal landscape around crofting has been slow to emerge. The bill is a welcome step, but it is not lost on those in the crofting counties that the Scottish Government has left it right to the end of the parliamentary session.

Similarly, the Scottish Government has published the long-awaited rural support plan today, and it is disappointing that the Parliament has no time to scrutinise it. Such delays could create the perception that the Scottish Government does not recognise the importance of agriculture and crofting to Scotland.

At stage 2, I put forward the Law Society of Scotland's suggestion to provide certainty around the involvement of family members or hired labour in a crofter's fulfilment of their duties. The wording that specified that such assistance is permissible was removed by the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993, and my amendment, which was accepted by the committee, reinstated that wording.

I am grateful to the minister for working with me to ensure that that wording is replicated in the section on owner-occupier crofters, thereby providing consistency.

It is long past time to have a serious review of crofting legislation, to stop making minor adjustments around the edges and to consolidate it. During stage 3, my party and I supported the Scottish Government's amendment that requires a review of crofting law to begin within three years of royal assent. That review must be prioritised in the next parliamentary session and should not be left to the last minute. Crofters have already waited too long. I am concerned about the timescale and do not want to see another parliamentary session slipping by without adequate time being given to the much-needed review and action.

The review must engage crofters from across the crofting counties. They are the ones who must tell the Scottish Government what crofting should look like and what is needed in the coming decades, not the other way round. The Scottish Government will need to understand not only how crofters approach crofting today but how it is changing and how they envisage the regulatory framework working for them in the future. The review will need to capture the differences in crofting practice across the crofting communities, so that they can be recognised in its recommendations.

During the bill's scrutiny, there were discussions about the complexities of common grazings. The specific review of the operation of common grazings, which must take place within five years, should be taken together with the overall review.

The tradition of crofting is the backbone of agriculture in Shetland. It is very important to all rural and island areas, where working the croft land provides economic and environmental benefits, enriches our cultural heritage and community and helps to counter depopulation. It is time for politicians from across Scotland to recognise and value crofting and its contribution to the rural island areas of the crofting counties. The Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the bill today, but it must be a stepping stone to wider crofting reform.

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

17:22

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am pleased that my final speech in this session of Parliament is about such an important subject to my constituents as crofting. I, too, pay tribute to the contributions that have been made on the issue over the years by many members, not least by Rhoda Grant and Edward Mountain.

This bill has been in the works for a long time. Following the Shucksmith report in 2008, the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 was passed. In 2014, the so-called crofting law sump concluded that a significant overhaul of crofting legislation was still required. As the minister has outlined, 140 years of successive crofting acts have created a

complex legal situation that is not currently serving crofting particularly efficiently, so the bill is a welcome move to simplify some of that picture. Like other members, I very much hope to see further and more comprehensive legislation soon.

Meanwhile, as other members have mentioned, it is important not to lose sight of the reasons for and origin of crofting law. Throughout the 19th century, the people of the Highlands and Islands faced systematic persecution and eviction at the hands of some landlords who increasingly viewed humans as unprofitable. After the Napier commission examined those issues in the early 1880s, as has been mentioned, five members of the Crofters Party were elected as MPs. That pressure led to the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886 finally being passed. For the first time, crofters had legal security of tenure and the right to fix a fair rent.

It is rare that any sector wants tighter regulation. However, the history that I have just recounted means that crofters are very aware that this traditional, culturally vital way of life requires legislation to sustain and protect it. The bill is a step forward in what must be a longer process of crofting law reform.

The bill streamlines administrative processes, frees up the Crofting Commission to focus on its enforcement duties and combines the functions of the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. That tackles at least some of the areas on which there was the greatest consensus among stakeholders. The next piece of legislation will need to be more comprehensive. However, I believe that the crofting community supports the general principles and the final form of the bill that is before us today.

I was pleased to secure several amendments at stage 2, including to give ministers the power to regulate the transfer of owner-occupier crofts, to prevent a right-to-buy where a crofter is in breach of their duties, to explicitly include enforcement duties in the Crofting Commission's responsibilities and to introduce a more practical and proportionate civil rather than criminal penalty where there is a failure to uphold certain duties.

Other members also improved the bill with their amendments, and I thank them for supporting those and other amendments last week that related to grazings shares and the involvement of the Crofting Commission, where necessary, on grazings committee applications for environmental or forestry use of common grazings.

Depending on the voting intentions of my constituents, I look forward to working with the next Government on the additional legislation that will be required. In the meantime, the bill is an important step forward on the road to crofting legislation reform and I urge members to give it their support.

17:26

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As this will be my last speech in the Parliament, I hope that the minister will excuse me if I touch only briefly on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. It is nothing like what we were promised in 2016. I agree with the minister that crofting needs a simpler future to secure our heritage, our rural population and our national language. Like him, I hope that the bill is just an appetiser and a step towards a future bill. I am sure that he and many other members of the Parliament will be pleased that I will not be here to lodge one or two amendments—if I were here, he could guarantee that I would do so.

I will take some time to offer some comments on my experiences, having had the privilege of being a member of the Highlands and Islands MSP group for the past 10 years. I have found the formulaic nature of the Parliament to be quite difficult and stifling. Everything that we do follows procedures and timings. For me, four-minute speeches kill debate and prove only that the person who is giving the speech can read. Pre-supplied questions to the Government demonstrate the power of good briefings as well as good reading skills.

The never-ending creep of partisan party control is also deeply unhelpful. We should all resent parties choosing who gets supplementary questions and who gets to speak in debates. I wish that the Presiding Officer could make those decisions and call on the person who has the knowledge and the experience.

I strongly believe that we need less party dominance and more individuality. We need to put party politics to one side, because we must remember that we all came here for one reason, which is to make Scotland a better place. Therefore, we have no differences except in the way that we deliver a better Scotland. I wish that we could work more across the Parliament to make that happen.

I have found convening committees in the Parliament for nearly 10 years to be interesting. I absolutely respect the committee system, but it is truly broken. All but a few of the committees have Government majorities that can be whipped to get legislation through. That is not suitable, and it is the root cause of framework and bad legislation. I wish that we could find a way to make committees work more as a revising chamber than they do at the moment.

The other thing that has frustrated me and, I think, many people across Scotland is the constant

deflections that we hear. There are cries of, “If only we had the tools and the levers of power that we need.” I gently remind politicians in this Parliament that it is about what is possible, and much is possible in this Parliament. Scotland wants and expects us to make things happen. By all means campaign for more powers—I accept that—but, when it comes to delivery, we should remember the old French proverb that it is bad workmen who blame their tools.

I would like to give three pieces of advice to those who will come here in the next session of Parliament. The first is to be kind. Members should remember that, when they come to work in this building, their job is important and they are less so. They should spare a thought for the 1,700 people who make this place work. Do not ignore them. It is they who make it possible for members to do what they do on a daily basis.

Secondly, make friends across the chamber. I have tried to do that, and it has delivered for me.

Thirdly, focus on one issue. My issue found me. Indeed, campaigning for better health outcomes across the Highlands will not leave me when I leave here.

Presiding Officer, I would like to thank you for your indulgence and that of members. I wish everyone leaving here success. I give my team and my family my heartfelt gratitude for their support. For those who are elected in May, I wish them luck. Making Scotland and all of our lives better is really important. Remember that we who are leaving will be watching.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

17:30

Ariane Burgess: I pay tribute to some of the members who have spoken today and who are stepping down. I hope that I do not pick up the tears that my colleague Edward Mountain has brought into the chamber—that depth of feeling. Although we may come from very different perspectives, he has always been willing to reach across the aisles between us to work constructively as a fellow member and convener. We have found common ground on a number of issues, including salmon farming and climate change, and I appreciate the work that we have done together in those areas.

Beatrice Wishart has been a strong advocate for Shetland. We share a passion for infrastructure—that of fixed links. Rhoda Grant has been an incredible champion for crofting—I have seen that come to the fore through the passage of this legislation—and a force for the Highlands and Islands. She has also called for the right to food. I share Tim Eagle’s enthusiasm for Richard Leonard’s speeches in the chamber, and I appreciate the tag-team approach that we took to making improvements to seasonal worker accommodation. I am looking forward to taking that forward in the next session.

My thanks must also go to the team that put together the bill and to the Parliament’s legislation team, which was very supportive in our work to lodge amendments.

On what is at hand today, I will close the debate for the Greens by saying that we support the bill. It ties up loose ends that are creating problems for today’s crofters. However, as I said earlier, it is not ambitious enough to ensure crofting’s long-term future. I look forward to working with the Government to create something that will allow crofting to flourish and expand.

There are a multitude of challenges ahead that crofters will need support with so that they can adapt and thrive. For example, the 2045 net zero target is edging ever closer, and we also have the good food nation commitments to consider. The job of the Scottish Government in both instances is to prepare the ground for crofters and enable them to make the most of the opportunities that these present. We are moving in the right direction, but more haste is needed, given the severity of the challenges that are on the horizon.

Elements of the legislation will help crofters to begin the process of adaptation, but there was room in the bill to speed things up. At stage 2, we proposed giving crofters the benefits from environmental use of the land, an environmental use advice service and public financing. Had those amendments been accepted, crofters would have had the means and the confidence to pick up the pace on climate and nature.

At the same time, those amendments would have fostered thriving crofting communities, with a more equal distribution of wealth, greater financial security and a clearer route forward when it comes to putting the land to environmental use. Those ideas should not disappear with the bill. They need further consideration by the next Government in its review of crofting legislation.

The review should also aspire to create a system that is easier to access. The new entrants will be the life-blood of crofting’s future, and we need to pave the way for new faces by levelling out the market in croft tenancies and simplifying the legislation so that it is clearer and more coherent for those who are not yet part of the crofting community.

There was an opportunity to create rapid positive change in part 2 of the bill. We pushed the Government to consider giving the Scottish Land

Court further environmental jurisdiction, with a view to using it as a foundation for an environmental court. For too long, Scotland has been in breach of its Aarhus convention obligations, with little meaningful movement by successive Governments to rectify the situation. If Scotland is to become an independent nation that is trusted and respected on the international stage, we need to meet all the requirements of the treaties that we have signed up to. To the Government's credit, its amendment to review the court's operation will mean that that issue is looked at.

The Scottish Greens stand ready to work with the next Government to deliver more ambitious reform for crofters. I sincerely hope that work on that can start early in the next session.

17:35

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): This is my last speech to Parliament as a member, after 10 years. As a back bencher and a front bencher, as a party leader and a committee convener, I have always tried to speak out not only for the labour and trade union movement who sent me here, but for all of those oppressed, denied justice, exploited, voiceless—and so, for those seasonal migrant workers, toiling on our farms; for the miners, still demanding justice; and for our crofters, whose historic land rights and security of tenure this Parliament must not merely defend but must advance, and so let flourish.

It feels right to make my final speech in a debate led for Labour by Rhoda Grant, whose unswerving, loyal support to me in Parliament I have valued above all others', and in a debate which, at its very essence, is about power, is about wealth, is about control and its ugly, unequal distribution. It is a debate, as well, on this distinctively Scottish landholding system, and so a debate which reminds us of the very reason why so many of us fought so hard, for so long, for this Parliament to be created.

Although, I am bound to say that this Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill is another example of a Government bereft of ambition. When we needed radical reform, we find timidity and mediocrity. Eight years in the making, the Government has come up with a largely technical bill, which we will vote for, but it is the same formula that the Government has been habitually serving up—on the broader question of land reform, on a national care service, on community wealth building. When we need real change, we are presented with a tepid continuity, with the result that too much power still rests in too few hands, from the commanding heights of our economy to the ownership of our land, where the old aristocracy and the new billionaire class—too often, absentees both—remain in charge. And yet we still hear calls, even during this stage 3 debate, in this, the third decade of the 21st century, in this Parliament, for the entitled voice of the laird and the privileged status of the landlord to be afforded their due place, as if they were a silent—they were an underrepresented—class in our society. If only they were.

I have always believed that we make our own history, and we have seen glimpses of what is possible, from the abolition of feudalism in the first parliamentary session, to public ownership of the railways in this—reminders that we can be ambitious, that we can have vision, that we can give people hope, that we can redistribute power and wealth. So I do not despair. My head is not bowed. I remain optimistic that we can return to radical reform, including of crofting, in the next session of Parliament.

Before I finish, before I leave for the very last time, I want to thank the outstanding people who have worked with me over the last 10 years: Billy McCauley, Thomas Mulvey, Craig Miller, Lesley Brennan, Lauren Harper, Linda Shevlin, Rich Simcox, and the one person who has been there from the very first to the very last, Mike Holmes. I thank my family, without whose love and support I would never have been here, never been able to lead the Scottish Labour Party, never been able to fight the good fight. Let me thank especially my wife Karen, who has been with me day and night, through the ups and downs of a life in front-line politics. I do not know where I would be without her.

So let me finish where it all began: two years after the very first crofters holdings act was passed, in direct response to the land raids, the forced Highland clearances, the battles against eviction—resistance often led by the women of the crofts—it was the crofters, led by their MP, Dr G B Clark, and the miners, led by Keir Hardie, who came together with the Scottish Home Rule Association in 1888 to found the Scottish Labour Party. It was a turning point in history. So let my closing words in this Parliament be the closing words of James Keir Hardie in "From Serfdom to Socialism". They speak across the centuries. They echo down the ages. Let this be my parting hymn:

> "Socialism with its promise of freedom, its larger hope for humanity, its triumph of peace over war, its binding of the races of the earth into one all-embracing brotherhood, must"—

must, must—

"prevail."

17:41

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Now for something different. I

draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests, as a partner in a farming business, a member of Scottish Land & Estates and NFU Scotland, and a crofting landlord.

I turn to part 1 of the bill. It bears repeating that, although the legislative framework for crofting was first laid out in the 19th century, the practice retains an important role in crofting counties up to the modern day—one that is as much about society and culture as it is about land tenure, as others have said. The bill is, of course, far from the first piece of reforming legislation for the crofting sector, and it will not be the last. At stage 1, I observed that, although the bill paves the way for further changes down the line, that should not be an excuse for a bill that cannot stand on its own merits or make a positive and meaningful difference in its own right.

The process of reform is essential to ensure the survival of crofting, but the crofting of tomorrow will doubtless be quite different. The process of evolution has been a major contributing factor in crofting's continued relevance. As a result of the consultation on the bill and the lengthy process of discussions that predate it, we now have a considerable body of evidence to draw on for that future legislation. I would, however, guard against the assumption that there can be only one vision for the future of crofting. Ultimately, there will be many areas of disagreement, and, in many cases, the bill has kicked those questions further down a very long road.

Consultation cannot be a substitute for a clear vision, and that is where I think that the bill and the Scottish Government's approach fall some distance short. Reform has also been slow going. In all reality, we could have dealt years ago with many of the issues that are raised in the bill, rather than squeezing them in under the wire in the very last week of the parliamentary session. It is my hope that the same sort of inertia on crofting reform is not a feature of the next session. The next Scottish Government, whatever colour it is, will need to be mindful of its role not only to consult but to actively make choices and to move things along where possible.

Part 2 of the bill has resulted in a greater degree of consensus around the chamber. Concerns about resourcing that arose from the consultation were noted at stage 1. Tim Eagle and Ariane Burgess lodged amendments at stage 2, which are now reflected in the Government's successful stage 3 amendment on a review mechanism for the changes. I welcome that approach.

I turn to the contributions at stage 3. My fellow islander Beatrice Wishart successfully moved amendment 1, which was her last legislative amendment as a member of the Parliament. That was on the application of duties to owner-occupied crofters, which was a measure that we were pleased to support.

Also standing down is another islander, Rhoda Grant, who has made a significant contribution to the bill with her amendments and who has helped to guide it through the stages. Rhoda Grant is one of those members who were first elected to the Parliament in 1999, and she will take with her a wealth of experience. As she has made her last speech in Parliament, I pass on the best wishes of all on the Conservative benches.

It was also Richard Leonard's final speech in this Parliament. I cannot believe that I have to say this, but I do not have a crush on Richard Leonard, despite what others in this Parliament—

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Not if the member is going to demonstrate a crush.

Stephen Kerr: I do not have a crush on Richard Leonard, but I have known him for more than 40 years. He has lost none of his fire, passion and principle, and, for that reason, we on these benches quite admire him.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I agree with that. I served with Richard Leonard on the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee in session 5, and, although I accept that his politics and mine will probably never align, he has served those whom he represents extremely well in this place, even if his views are not always welcomed by the front-bench members of his own party.

I pay special tribute to my Highlands and Islands Conservative colleague Edward Mountain, whose work on the bill has been representative of his usual approach. His amendments have secured a commitment to customer responsiveness from the Crofting Commission, a commitment to consultation on common grazings ahead of future legislation and at least a positive indication from the minister on the issues of landlord representation and involvement with the commission.

Edward Mountain has been a good friend and a great colleague over my nine years in Parliament—my nine years so far, I hope—and has always provided sage advice and support. He has been a staunch ally and combative voice for people and businesses outside urban areas. His passion for rural Scotland and experience of rural issues are absolutely unrivalled. The Scottish Conservatives have always been the party that stands up for rural Scotland, and Edward Mountain has very much been in the vanguard on that. To say that we on the Conservative benches, and

many across the Highlands and Islands region and rural Scotland, will miss him is an understatement.

A great deal of expertise and experience around the chamber today will sadly be absent in the next parliamentary session. When significant reform takes place, I hope that new members will look back at the contributions of members who have examined the issue and reflected on it in detail. Although I recognise that there is a great deal of consensus in the Parliament on crofting reform and a recognition that change must come, I believe that we must acknowledge the need for a clear plan for the future. I hope that that can be dealt with early in the next session and that the process will draw on the work that has been done before and during the bill's parliamentary stages.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up the debate.

17:46

Jim Fairlie: In closing the debate, I take a final opportunity to thank all the stakeholders who contributed to the development of the bill. As I said in my opening remarks, the views of the grass-roots crofters and stakeholders were crucial in helping us to better understand the needs and concerns of crofters and landlords. Their lived experience helped us to shape the bill, to identify and address potential issues at an early stage, and to develop solutions. Consultation and continued engagement have highlighted that there is widespread support for the bill across the crofting counties.

I also want to take a moment to thank the members who have spoken in today's debate. There have been some very thought-provoking contributions, and I will continue to reflect on the points that have been made. I will touch on one or two of the issues that have been raised. When we started the debate, I never expected to hear that Tim Eagle had a crush on Richard Leonard—that was the surprise of the afternoon. However, in response to his point about environmental development meaning abandonment, we lodged amendments to ensure that that would not be the case.

Rhoda Grant rightly talked about Donna Smith and Susi Stuehlinger, to whom I apologise if I have pronounced her name incorrectly. Their involvement in the bill has been fundamental in ensuring that we got it right. We did not promise an overarching bill; it was always a bill of technical fixes, because the 2017 consultation was split on what crofting communities wanted. It was the crofters who were divided in their thinking.

Rhoda Grant: Although the minister did not promise an overarching bill, his predecessors did, and it was supposed to be introduced in the last parliamentary session, not this one, so we have waited some time for it.

Jim Fairlie: I reiterate the point that I just made: the 2017 consultation was split on what the bill should deliver, which is why the bill is one that makes technical fixes, including some very important changes.

Ariane Burgess talked about new opportunities. I would like her to note that we have just announced 17 new farming opportunities on Forestry and Land Scotland land. Those opportunities might not be crofting opportunities, but the commission is currently working with the Scottish Land Matching Service to ensure that we create such opportunities in the very near future. We are committed to ensuring that we attract new blood into not only crofting but farming.

I must push back on Beatrice Wishart, who said that the Government does not care about rural Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands and I have worked tirelessly to find workable solutions through the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. However, I wish her well in whatever she chooses to do. I do not think that she has made her last contribution today, but I give her my very best wishes.

Alasdair Allan worked incredibly hard to ensure that his amendments were agreed to, and, in doing so, he added considerable value for his constituents.

I will take a moment to thank all the members who have spoken in the debate. Some thought-provoking points have been made, and I will certainly take them away with me. If I return to office as the agriculture minister, I will certainly bear them in mind.

I hope that all members will support the bill, which will deliver for our people and our communities. Crofting is such a rich part of Scotland's fabric. It is part of our heritage and, indeed, part of our identity as a nation. It is also part of our future. The bill is about securing that future and ensuring that crofters and crofting communities grow and continue to thrive in the years and decades to come. Today marks a significant staging post on that journey to securing the future of crofting, which is a way of life that the Government is determined to support. I urge members to support the bill.

If I may, I will take a moment or two to pay tribute to a number of members for whom today's debate marks their final contributions in the Parliament.

Richard Leonard, as he said himself, has served from 2016 to 2026. He has been consistent and resolute in staying true to his socialist principles

and has been a proud champion of workers' rights throughout his parliamentary career. His passionate speech during the stage 3 debate on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill and his passionate speech today were powerful reminders of his deeply held principles. It would be helpful if his firebrand speeches were accurate, but we will not go into that right now. Comrade, I wish you well for the future.

This debate also marks Edward Mountain's final speech—although you never really know with Edward; he might come back tomorrow and add something else. There are many things on which Edward and I passionately disagree—that is beyond doubt—but what we have in common is a genuine passion and love for rural Scotland. Scottish politics has come so far since the reconvening of this Parliament. It is a place where rural Scotland, in all its diversity, can be represented by members ranging from this humble working-class shepherd to our very own land-owning baronet—who, to clarify, is just a small landowner. Joking aside, I have really enjoyed our robust debates, and I thank the member for his insightful contributions to Scottish public life and his discourse over his tenure. I very much wish him well in whatever he decides to go on and do.

Finally, I turn to Rhoda Grant. I say in all sincerity that Rhoda will be sorely missed in the chamber. Having served almost continuously since 1999, in five of the six sessions of Parliament, as an MSP and party spokesperson, she is without doubt one of the few members who have had the honour of seeing this institution grow and mature from those early days of devolution. Throughout my tenure as a minister, and prior to that as a fellow member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, I have observed Rhoda's work, and she has shown a steady and quiet determination to be a champion for the people of the Highlands and Islands on a diverse range of very important causes—not least through her Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which was passed in 2011.

As Rhoda put it so eloquently in her own words,

"it's the people that make the parliament".

On behalf of the Government and my fellow MSPs, I wish Rhoda all the very best for the future. [*Applause*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 3.

Crime and Policing Bill

17:53

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21179, a motion on legislative consent for the Crime and Policing Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Crime and Policing Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 25 February 2025, and subsequently amended, relating to clauses 15 to 29 and schedule 4 (online advertising etc of unlawful weapons: civil penalties), 31 (offensive weapons), 35, 37 and 38 to 40 (remote sale of crossbows and knives), 44 (duty to report bulk sale of knives), 50 and 51 (offence of child criminal exploitation), 66 and schedule 7 (child criminal exploitation prevention orders: Scotland), 67 to 69 and part 2 of schedule 9 (cuckooing), 76 (child sexual abuse image generators: Scotland), 78 (possession of advice or guidance about creating child sexual abuse or CSA images), 106 (pornographic images of strangulation or suffocation), 110 and 111 (technology testing defence), 117 to 121, 124(1), 125 and 126 and schedule 14 (management of sex offenders), 148 and 149 (offences relating to electronic devices for use in vehicle theft), 167 (powers for British Transport Police), 173 to 180 and schedule 18 (remotely stored electronic data), 181 (access to driver licensing information), 192 (proceeds of crime: expenses protections), 208 to 216 and schedule 24 (creation, maintenance and checking of barred and advisory lists for National Crime Agency/British Transport Police/Ministry of Defence Police/Civil Nuclear Constabulary), 248 to 250 and 262 (implementation of law enforcement information sharing agreements), 254 (criminal liability of bodies corporate and partnerships where senior manager commits offence) and schedule 22 (Proceeds of Crime Act 2002), so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Angela Constance*]

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

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

17:53

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21166, a motion on legislative consent for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2024, and subsequently amended, relating to filters, advertising for public health, technology in devices and intermediary liability for internet service providers, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Jenni Minto*]

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

Armed Forces Bill

17:53

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21167, a motion on legislative consent for the Armed Forces Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Armed Forces Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 15 January 2026, relating to clauses 2, 50, 52, 54, and 55, so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Railways Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21168, a motion on legislative consent for the Railways Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Railways Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2025, relating to clauses 4, 7 to 10, 12, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28 to 35, 39, 43, 48, 66, 75, 78, 80, 81, 87 and 90, paragraphs 1, 2, 8 to 14 and 16 of schedule 2, paragraphs 4, 8, 9, 12 to 18, 22, 25, 26, 33 and 53 of schedule 3, new clauses 61, 62 and 64, new schedule 1, the amendments to clause 7 and clause 90, and the amendments to schedule 3 (inserting new paragraphs 22A, 23A, 24A, 25A, 32A, 33B, 34E, 34F, 34J, 34K, 34N, 35A and 36A to schedule 3), so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Fiona Hyslop*]

17:54

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute, albeit briefly, to today's debate on the legislative consent motion on the Railways Bill.

As colleagues know, the bill represents a significant reshaping of how rail services and rail infrastructure will be overseen across Great Britain. The Scottish Conservatives recognise that many of the revisions before us are technical in nature and that they follow extensive engagement between the two Governments. However, we also recognise that the bill will not alter the Scottish ministers' existing powers over ScotRail and the Caledonian Sleeper or the funding and specification of rail infrastructure in Scotland. It is clear that, in several respects, the bill will strengthen formal consultation duties and will provide a clearer framework for interaction between the Governments. Those are sensible steps.

However, our party has a long-standing commitment to a rail system that grows instead of restricts choice, competition and freight capacity, which brings me to the principal issue that prevents me from supporting the LCM today. My concern is focused squarely on the future of open-access operators and freight services. Those operators, such as those running commercially on key inter-city corridors, have been a vital source of innovation, lower fares and improved customer experience. Likewise, freight operators depend on fair and transparent access to the network to support economic growth, decarbonisation and supply chain resilience.

Evidence that was considered by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee made it clear that open-access operators remain unconvinced that the new arrangements will protect their ability to compete on a level playing field. The committee also heard that, although assurances have been offered at United Kingdom level, operators still fear being disadvantaged in a system in which Great British Railways becomes the dominant operator and the main decision maker on access.

We should not underestimate the value of open access to Scotland. Those services bring genuine choice to passengers and reduce pressure on taxpayer-funded operations, and they help to strengthen cross-border links that matter to our economy and our communities. Any framework that risks weakening that model, whether unintentionally or through lack of safeguards, must be approached with caution.

Similarly, on freight, Scotland has ambitious growth aspirations, but growth depends on confidence that freight paths will be protected, that investment will be worthwhile and that decisions affecting Scottish freight will be taken transparently and in the interests of the wider network. The bill includes duties relating to freight, but I remain unconvinced that those duties alone will offset the increased centralisation of access decisions.

For those reasons, although I acknowledge the Scottish Government's satisfaction with the amendments that have been made thus far, I do not believe that the bill in its current form provides sufficient certainty for operators, passengers or freight customers who rely on open and competitive access to our railways.

The Scottish Conservatives cannot support the motion, but, equally, we recognise the technical nature of many of the provisions and the importance of continued co-operation around rail reform.

17:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): As colleagues know, I have consistently advocated for full devolution of Scotland's railways to better integrate track and train. Unfortunately, the UK Government is not willing to pursue that change at this time. However, I have made it clear that the Scottish ministers would not accept any reduction in our existing devolved powers and that Scotland must benefit from rail reform to the same extent as the rest of Great Britain. The bill respects those requirements, and I and my officials have had long and extensive engagement with UK ministers and the Department for Transport to secure that position for Scotland.

The bill will create a new body—Great British Railways—which will operate, maintain and allocate access to rail infrastructure across the UK.

GBR will also deliver passenger services that are currently the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport.

The Scottish ministers will retain their current devolved responsibilities, including securing the provision of ScotRail and the Caledonian Sleeper and specifying and funding rail infrastructure in Scotland. The bill will introduce new provisions that will strengthen accountability for rail infrastructure in Scotland to the Scottish ministers, including a new and improved infrastructure funding regime and, importantly, new powers for the Scottish ministers to issue guidance and directions to GBR on areas of rail outputs that we specify, fund and set strategy for.

The potential benefits of greater accountability over the infrastructure management cannot be overstated. Our experience of ScotRail and the Caledonian Sleeper coming into public ownership is that greater accountability to ministers results in better outcomes for passengers. Public ownership has allowed for significant benefits to passengers, such as the scrapping of peak fares. Since public ownership, ScotRail's overall passenger satisfaction has consistently been among the highest across Great Britain, at 90 per cent, and the Scottish train performance measure also has ScotRail at around 90 per cent. ScotRail performs better on cancellations than most GB operators, and figures for 2024-25 show that ScotRail had around half as many cancellations as the GB average.

This Government is clear in its commitment to retaining the benefits of delivering passenger services in public ownership, and the bill does not change that. I support the policy intent of the bill, in particular its ambition to maximise the benefits of greater integration while respecting devolved arrangements. The Scottish Government supports open access and freight development and the LCM is about devolved responsibilities. The Scottish ministers therefore recommend that the Parliament should support the motion.

Agreeing to the LCM will help us to defend the powers of this Parliament on rail, just as, for the past 27 years, I have sought to defend, promote and protect the institution of this Parliament in which I have had the enormous privilege of serving. I thank all those who have been on the journey with me: parliamentary and constituency staff; members from all parties; and, of course, the people of Scotland, with their hopes and dreams of a Scotland that is fair and just for all and is the country that they know it can be.

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

Standing Order Rule Changes (Cross-party Groups)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21051, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's sixth report of 2026.

18:01

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The last few motions before us today are the final motions from the committee designed to put the standing orders book in its best possible state for the next session.

The first motion, regarding the sixth report, relates to cross-party groups. We have had some challenges this session with the compliance of cross-party groups. Following a consultation, we propose extending the period of re-registration for cross-party groups, which will allow members to have a better understanding of what their workload is like before they commit to CPGs.

We also propose the introduction of a limit to the number of CPGs of which an MSP can be a member or office bearer.

Finally, we are also introducing some new deadlines for the provision of information about CPG activities, in the hope that they can more easily be complied with. The purpose behind that is to enable the CPG system to be sustainable, so that both members and external stakeholders can benefit from the valuable work that CPGs do.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 6th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Code of Conduct changes – Cross-Party Groups (SP Paper 1017), and agrees that the changes to the Code of Conduct set out in Annexe A of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

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

Standing Order Rule Changes (Miscellaneous and Minor Amendments)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21050, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's seventh report of 2026.

18:03

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Our seventh report deals with miscellaneous and minor amendments, particularly one proposed by the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, which recommended the removal of references to "the EU" from standing orders, because such references are now outdated.

The other items contained in the report relate to guidance that will be published by officials and will take effect from the start of the next session, if agreed tonight.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 7th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Standing Order rule changes – Miscellaneous and minor amendments (SP Paper 1032), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the Annexe of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

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

Standing Order Rule Changes (Miscellaneous and Minor Amendments)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21048, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 10th report of 2026.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Any members who are paying particular attention will understand the challenge that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee has with regard to the post-European Union landscape. We are suggesting an extension until 2 October 2026, which is a temporary rule change to continue the committee's remit so that the issue can be looked into at the start of the next session and to ensure that, in the future, the committee is appropriately titled and its work appropriately defined.

There are some minor rule changes, which clarify conflicting interpretation as to the locations in which committees can meet.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 10th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Standing Order rule changes – Miscellaneous and minor amendments (SP Paper 1052), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in (a) Annexe A of the report be made with effect from 1 April 2026 and (b) Annexe B of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

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

Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 (Modifications) Resolution 2026

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20942, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 (Modifications) Resolution 2026.

18:05

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I sense members' relief that this is the final motion that I will speak to tonight. It comes under section 15 of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016.

I will take a moment to put on record my deep thanks to colleagues across the chamber who sat on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee during this session, in what were some challenging times. I thank the clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre, researchers and all who supported the committee over the session—thank you.

The modifications in the motion relate to the communications that clerks can give to registrants to provide updates, notices and reminders. They also introduce the use of an email address rather than a postal address, to ensure that information can be passed on. Members may wish to note that updated parliamentary guidance on the act is being prepared and will be published by the lobbying register team. It will be of incredible interest to all members who return in the next session.

As is required by the act, the Scottish ministers were consulted on the proposed resolution and the updated guidance. They had no comments—for which I am grateful.

I move,

That the Parliament, in exercise of the power conferred by section 15 of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 ("the 2016 Act") makes The Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 (Modifications) Resolution 2026 and—

(a) resolves that with effect from the day after the first dissolution of the Parliament following the day on which this Resolution is made the provisions which are contained in paragraphs 1 to 4 of this Resolution shall come into force; and

(b) notes that in accordance with section 48(1) of the 2016 Act the Parliament has consulted the Scottish Ministers.

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

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:06

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I invite Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-21190 and S6M-21191, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Antisocial Behaviour (Fixed Penalty Offences) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Marine Licensing (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

18:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are 12 questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is that motion S6M-21120, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass a bill, the question must be decided by division.

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

18:07

Meeting suspended.

18:10

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-21120, in the name of Daniel Johnson, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I cannot get my device to connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app failed to connect in time. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
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)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
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)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
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)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
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)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-21120, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, is: For 121, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21103, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass the bill, the question must be decided by division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Jim Fairlie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise; I am having trouble with my machine. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
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)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
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)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
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)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
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)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-21103, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, is: For 119, Against 0, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21104, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 3, be agreed to.

As this is a motion to pass the bill, the question must be decided by division. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
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)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
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)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
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)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)

Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
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)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-21104, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 3, is: For 119, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is that motion S6M-21179, in the name of Angela Constance, on a motion on legislative consent on the Crime and Policing Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Crime and Policing Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 25 February 2025, and subsequently amended, relating to clauses 15 to 29 and schedule 4 (online advertising etc of unlawful weapons: civil penalties), 31 (offensive weapons), 35, 37 and 38 to 40 (remote sale of crossbows and knives), 44 (duty to report bulk sale of knives), 50 and 51 (offence of child criminal exploitation), 66 and schedule 7 (child criminal exploitation prevention orders: Scotland), 67 to 69 and part 2 of schedule 9 (cuckooing), 76 (child sexual abuse image generators: Scotland), 78 (possession of advice or guidance about creating child sexual abuse or CSA images), 106 (pornographic images of strangulation or suffocation), 110 and 111 (technology testing defence), 117 to 121, 124(1), 125 and 126 and schedule 14 (management of sex offenders), 148 and 149 (offences relating to electronic devices for use in vehicle theft), 167 (powers for British Transport Police), 173 to 180 and schedule 18 (remotely stored electronic data), 181 (access to driver licensing information), 192 (proceeds of crime: expenses protections), 208 to 216 and schedule 24 (creation, maintenance and checking of barred and advisory lists for National Crime Agency/British Transport Police/Ministry of Defence Police/Civil Nuclear Constabulary), 248 to 250 and 262 (implementation of law enforcement information sharing agreements), 254 (criminal liability of bodies corporate and partnerships where senior manager commits offence) and schedule 22 (Proceeds of Crime Act 2002), so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21166, in the name of Jenni Minto, on a motion on legislative consent for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which is UK legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2024, and subsequently amended, relating to filters, advertising for public health, technology in devices and intermediary liability for internet service providers, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21167, in the name of Graeme Dey, on a motion on legislative consent for the Armed Forces Bill, which is UK legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Armed Forces Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 15 January 2026, relating to clauses 2, 50, 52, 54, and 55, so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21168, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on a motion on legislative consent for the Railways Bill, which is UK legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
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) (Ind)
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) (Ind)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (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)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
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)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
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)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-21168, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on a motion on legislative consent for the Railways Bill, which is UK legislation, is: For 91, Against 1, Abstentions 28.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Railways Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2025, relating to clauses 4, 7 to 10, 12, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28 to 35, 39, 43, 48, 66, 75, 78, 80, 81,

87 and 90, paragraphs 1, 2, 8 to 14 and 16 of schedule 2, paragraphs 4, 8, 9, 12 to 18, 22, 25, 26, 33 and 53 of schedule 3, new clauses 61, 62 and 64, new schedule 1, the amendments to clause 7 and clause 90, and the amendments to schedule 3 (inserting new paragraphs 22A, 23A, 24A, 25A, 32A, 33B, 34E, 34F, 34J, 34K, 34N, 35A and 36A to schedule 3), so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21051, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's sixth report 2026, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 6th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Code of Conduct changes – Cross-Party Groups (SP Paper 1017), and agrees that the changes to the Code of Conduct set out in Annexe A of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21050, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's seventh report 2026, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 7th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Standing Order rule changes – Miscellaneous and minor amendments (SP Paper 1032), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the Annexe of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-21048, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 10th report 2026, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 10th Report, 2026 (Session 6), Standing Order rule changes – Miscellaneous and minor amendments (SP Paper 1052), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in (a) Annexe A of the report be made with effect from 1 April 2026 and (b) Annexe B of the report be made with effect from 11 May 2026.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20942, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee motion on the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 (Modifications) Resolution 2026, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, in exercise of the power conferred by section 15 of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 ("the 2016 Act") makes The Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 (Modifications) Resolution 2026 and—

(a) resolves that with effect from the day after the first dissolution of the Parliament following the day on which this Resolution is made the provisions which are contained in paragraphs 1 to 4 of this Resolution shall come into force; and

(b) notes that in accordance with section 48(1) of the 2016 Act the Parliament has consulted the Scottish Ministers.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to put a single question on the two Parliamentary Bureau motions, unless any member objects.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-21190 and S6M-21191, on approval of two Scottish statutory instruments, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Antisocial Behaviour (Fixed Penalty Offences) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Marine Licensing (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Point of Order

18:20

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would appreciate your advice on how a member can correct the record when they have made an omission. My colleague Sarah Boyack, in her very fine final speech in this chamber, omitted to say that, as minister, she was also responsible for the introduction of free bus passes for the over 60s—a policy that was brought in by the Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive at the time. I would be very sad if that were not put on record in the *Official Report* for the benefit of all members. [*Applause*.]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr O'Kane, for wholly abusing the point of order procedure in the chamber, while ensuring that your comments are indeed on the record. [*Laughter*.]

There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Bank of Scotland Branch Closures

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20791, in the name of Clare Haughey, on the closure of Bank of Scotland branches. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Clare Haughey to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the reported decision by the Lloyds Banking Group to close 11 Bank of Scotland branches between June and July 2026, including the Rutherglen branch; understands that this is the latest in a series of bank closures across the UK; believes that these closures will have a significant impact on local residents, businesses and organisations that depend on high street banks for cash access and essential banking services, particularly older people, disabled people, small businesses and charities; considers that the closure of banks is hugely detrimental to the viability of local high streets, and notes the calls on the Lloyds Banking Group to reconsider its decision.

18:22

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I thank colleagues who signed my motion on the closure of Bank of Scotland branches so that the debate could be brought to the chamber.

From Tain in the north to Castle Douglas in the south, 28 Bank of Scotland branches have been closed or are set to be closed this year. However, for many—probably most—of those communities, that is far from the start of the story. In my Rutherglen constituency, Burnside, Cambuslang and Blantyre have all lost their bank branches, and several banks in Rutherglen have closed their doors. Each time, I have worked with affected communities, met with and written to banks, organised petitions and stalls against proposed closures, raised awareness through social media, and highlighted closures in the chamber. I have sought meetings with senior banking representatives and have relayed to them my constituents' concerns. In particular, older people, disabled people, local businesses and organisations, charities and places of worship, and people with no access to the internet have told me that they really struggle without locally available banking services.

When the news broke about the Bank of Scotland branch in Rutherglen facing closure, therefore, there was an understandable outpouring of public anger. At least part of that anger was due to our town's previous experience with a bank in almost exactly the same location.

Another bank, a few doors down from the Bank of Scotland, closed its branch in November 2024. That bank had published a document stating that "only 20 personal customers" used the branch each week. Its doors are visible from my constituency office, and on one afternoon we counted 27 separate groups of people going through those doors within a 20-minute period. It turned out that the bank's definition of a "personal customer" was very selective, so it was no surprise that the bank's customers felt that the wool was being pulled over their eyes.

I have met both Nationwide and Virgin Money in recent months, which both confirmed that they will maintain their Rutherglen branches until at least the start of 2030. During those meetings, it struck me how valuable staff find face-to-face contact with customers, especially more vulnerable customers, who are at increased risk of being targeted by scammers and fraudsters. That confirmation from Nationwide and Virgin Money is therefore welcome news, although it is little comfort to the people who have told me that they have held accounts for decades with Bank of Scotland—a bank that used to market itself as "A Friend for Life".

Within a few short weeks, nearly 700 people signed my petition against the Bank of Scotland closure, with many also popping into my constituency office, which is across the road from the branch, to share their views. Along with Scottish National Party colleagues who are also facing branch closures in their constituencies, I requested a meeting in Parliament with Bank of Scotland to discuss its decision making. Regretfully, however, the bank declined, saying that it would prefer to meet us individually. That is very unfortunate, because although some of the issues are contextual, other issues are universal, which is another reason why I am pleased that this debate is being held today. I will have a meeting with Bank of Scotland next week to discuss the Rutherglen closure, at which I will present my petition and share the concerns that local residents, organisations and businesses have shared with me.

I thank Age Scotland for providing MSPs with an excellent briefing note that perfectly summarises some of the challenges that people face when a branch closes. Those challenges range from community groups struggling to bank the cash donations on which they rely to a lack of easy access to expert support with transferring money and understanding bank statements and support with fraud and disputing charges, as well as reduced levels of high street footfall affecting local businesses.

I pay tribute to the dedication of Cambuslang community council, in my constituency, which successfully campaigned for Cambuslang to be included in the community access to cash pilot. One of the first two banking hubs in the country opened in the town in 2021. The banking hub in Cambuslang was an immediate success, quickly generating high levels of use and receiving excellent customer assessments for the services offered, which include dedicated times when customers can meet staff from their own bank, with staff from a different bank based there each weekday. It was great to welcome the Minister for Public Finance to the hub to see how it is benefiting the local community. Its success has been replicated elsewhere, and there are now 24 banking hubs in total across Scotland.

However, a hub is not a like-for-like replacement for a bank branch. Banking inquiries that are more complicated than withdrawing cash, checking balances and paying bills need to take place on one of the days when a community banker is present. Furthermore, not all banks are represented in local hubs, and when there is only one bank left in an area—which is the case for many Bank of Scotland branches—there may not be enough accounts held with other banks to sustain a hub that is open most days.

That aside, the success and popularity of banking hubs such as the one in Cambuslang show us something very important. They completely refute the notions that high street banks have been trying to sell us: that all banking has moved online and that people do not value or wish to use local branches. That is simply not the case. As Age Scotland pointed out, 25 per cent of older adults in Scotland do not have internet access and 36 per cent do not have the skills or confidence to use the internet successfully. The way that high street banks have abandoned their customers—and, indeed, abandoned towns and villages across Scotland over the years—has been shameful.

I will continue to champion the presence of high street banks in my constituency, and the fight for Rutherglen's Bank of Scotland branch continues. Ultimately, it is the United Kingdom Government at Westminster that holds the levers of power to regulate banks. Westminster Governments have it in their power and responsibility to intervene to prevent more closures, but, sadly, they have never done so. Yes, there are some legislative commitments that are intended to ensure that provision remains within a certain distance of a community, but that distance often does not factor in very practical considerations such as the availability of public transport.

The trend of bank closures, which ramped up during the Tories' time in office, is continuing under the current UK Labour Government. It is imperative that vulnerable people and those who

lack the means to bank over the internet are able to bank safely and securely and to seek financial advice and support. That has to be addressed by the UK Government. If it will not do that, the Scottish Government must be given the powers to do it.

Before I conclude, I pay tribute to my friend and colleague Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, who will make his final speech in response to the debate. He has been here since the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament, in 1999, and he has made significant contributions to my party, to this Government and to the people of Scotland. I wish him well for the future.

18:29

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Clare Haughey on bringing this important and timely debate to the chamber and on all the work that she is doing to save the Bank of Scotland branch in Rutherglen.

I, too, pay tribute to Richard Lochhead, the minister who will respond to the debate and a colleague I have known and respected for decades. This will be Richard's final speech after 27 years here, having spent 19 years in the Government, including nine in the Cabinet. Richard was very ill with sepsis just a couple of years ago. I wish that diligent and unassuming public servant all the best in whatever he does next.

When I last spoke here about bank branch closures, on 30 October, I remarked that high street branches were disappearing "at an alarming rate". Unfortunately, there is no sign that that trend is being reversed. As Clare Haughey mentioned, Lloyds has announced that another 11 branches will close this summer, and I am sure that, every time such announcements are made, colleagues across the chamber anxiously check to see whether their constituency will lose yet another valued branch that local people and businesses rely on.

It is fitting, from my perspective, that we are debating the issue today, because the final bank branch in Largs was set to disappear from the town's main street tomorrow. In December, it was given a stay of execution until 29 July, to allow time for a new cash hub to be set up in the town. Although that is welcome, it does not change the fact that Largs—a town with more than 11,000 inhabitants, including many elderly residents—will soon be without a bank branch. That will also impact customers from the neighbouring communities of Millport, Fairlie, Skelmorlie and West Kilbride. The decision leaves my constituency with only one remaining mainland bank branch, the Bank of Scotland in Saltcoats, which shows the decline in the number of bank branches across Scotland's towns in recent years.

Cash hubs are undoubtedly welcome, and I have been assured by Link that the services available will be the same as those at a Post Office, including the ability to deposit and withdraw cash and to pay utility bills. However, that is no substitute for the high-quality, face-to-face advice provided by bank employees, who can offer complex mortgage discussions and give investment, financial and business advice.

Banks argue that the industry has changed and point to their online services, but many people feel safer and more confident with in-person banking, not least due to understandable fears about online scams and fraud. Customer behaviour has changed in recent years, prompted by the banks themselves, which is why banking hubs that offer easy access to cash and basic banking services are often seen as a solution. Those hubs also provide a private space where customers can talk face to face with staff about more complicated banking inquiries. Unfortunately, I have yet to see a banking hub in my constituency, despite, for years, having made the case to Link for establishing such a hub. When I met Link's chief corporate affairs officer here, at Holyrood, he explained how Link defines an area by mapping the high street to understand who is likely to rely on a hub for cash services and which businesses would be affected by any gap in those services. The remit is limited to whether access to cash is guaranteed and does not consider wider banking services.

The UK Tory Government's Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 gave the Financial Conduct Authority responsibility for maintaining access to cash deposit and withdrawal but, crucially, not access to banking services. At the time, Labour argued that that was wrong and that access to banking services, and not only to cash, should be available; yet, in 20 months of a Labour Government, there has been very little to suggest that that omission will be rectified—surprise, surprise. When asked about that in the House of Commons last month, Lucy Rigby MP, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, vaguely promised to

"keep these issues under review".—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 24 February 2026; Vol 781, c 111WH.]

It is clear that banking decisions taken at Westminster are inadequate for Scotland's needs and especially, but not exclusively, for the needs of rural communities, which have endured bank branch closures at an alarming rate. The FCA will undertake a post-implementation review of the access-to-cash regime later this year. I ask the

next Scottish Government to urge its UK counterpart to change Link's inflexible rules, which prevent Largs and other towns from having a banking hub, and to extend the FCA's powers to access to wider banking services.

18:33

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, thank Clare Haughey for bringing this important debate the chamber.

Decisions to close Bank of Scotland branches, including the one in Rutherglen, have a profound impact on communities, as Ms Haughey explained very well. Any decision is not just about one building closing; it is about local stores, too, and about what that building represents to the people. High street banks are more than a place to withdraw cash or check a balance; they are a cornerstone of community life. They are where small businesses are supported and older residents can speak to a real person they trust, and they are where local charities manage the funds that keep vital services running. In towns such as Rutherglen, and in Springburn, where I live, those things really matter to people. There is a real sense of identity, pride and community spirit, and local services such as banks are part of that fabric. When they disappear, something much bigger is lost.

We have seen this pattern play out far too many times: closures are announced, communities are told to go online, and those who cannot, or should not have to, are left behind. Let us be honest—not everyone can simply switch to digital banking. For many older people, including my own mother, who has a disability, and for those without internet access, face-to-face banking is not a luxury—it is essential. For small businesses, particularly those that operate on our high streets, access to cash services is critical. Removing that infrastructure risks undermining the very local economies that we should be working to support. I recognise the commercial realities that banks face, but we cannot ignore the social consequences of these decisions.

Clare Haughey: I agree with all that Annie Wells has said about the impact on the community. There is also an impact on local charities, churches and community groups, such as scouts and guides, that take in their fees or collections in cash. They are concerned about how they will be able to function with no access to a bank.

Annie Wells: I completely agree with Ms Haughey. That is what I am trying to say—that banks are the cornerstone of communities and we value them. Scouts, girl guides and churches that put their collection money into banks value them so much that banks should not be allowed to hollow out their services piece by piece. If we are serious about supporting our town centres and our high streets, restoring pride in our communities and ensuring that no one is left behind, access to basic banking services must be part of the conversation.

There also needs to be a broader rethink of how we protect access to cash. Ms Haughey has spoken about banking hubs, which I, too, welcome. However, we need to send a clear message that communities deserve investment from, not abandonment by, banking businesses.

The people I speak to are not asking for the world, only for fairness. They are asking to be listened to and that their communities be treated with the respect that they deserve. The closure of the Rutherglen bank risks doing the opposite of that. It risks accelerating decline in a place where we should be supporting growth. It also risks isolating those who are already vulnerable and sending a message that towns such as Rutherglen and places such as Springburn can be left behind. That cannot be acceptable.

I urge Lloyds Banking Group to reconsider its decision before the closure in the summer. I also urge Parliament to recognise that, if we truly care about our communities, our high streets and restoring pride in places, we must stand up and say that enough is enough.

18:38

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I must thank Clare Haughey for bringing this debate to Parliament, as bank closures have also been a big issue in part of my constituency. I will also mention Councillor Ricky Nelson, who has worked closely with me on the issue.

In January, the Bank of Scotland branch in Larkhall closed. As that is in a rural part of my constituency, the branch provided banking services not only to Larkhall but to all the surrounding villages and farms, covering a population of roughly 25,000 people.

For many months prior to that, I had meetings with the representatives of Lloyds Banking Group to urge them not to follow through with closing the branch, which I deemed to be a vital service to the community. However, my pleas fell on deaf ears. They were committed to the closure, apparently in the interests of shareholders, while putting the interests of vulnerable customers at the bottom of the pile. That was regardless of the fact that, when they had made a sow's ear of their banking finances, we the taxpayers bailed them out to the tune of millions—sorry, I mean thousands of millions—of pounds. In hindsight, it is jail that we should have given those so-called big bankers.

I have since spoken with businesses in Larkhall that report the problems that they have had—wasted time travelling to Hamilton to get to a bank and then find parking, make deposits, collect change and access credit. However, it is only in the longer term that we will see the full extent of the economic impact to Larkhall's high street, which has always punched well above its weight—similar to Rutherglen, to be fair—as an independent hub for retailers. When I pointed out to Lloyds Banking Group officials that banking is not the same as selling luxury cars or package holidays because, for quite some time, it has been impossible to live life without access to banking services, they simply glossed over the issues that I raised. The Bank of Scotland is immune to the notion of responsibility. We should not assume that it is interested in the customers that it provides services to—only profit and bankers' bonuses get its attention.

I urge members to visit a Bank of Scotland branch—in fact, any bank—early in the morning. I promise them that the customers they will see are those who are vulnerable in our society. They may be older or have a disability. They might want to send money abroad or they might be desperate to seek a line of credit or forgiveness for being overdrawn, while they are being punished by penalties that they cannot afford to pay. I have no doubt that vulnerable groups of people are not profitable customers for the banks, but supporting vulnerable customers is part of the social contract that banks have entered into and have had for hundreds of years.

That aside, the bank has many customers with broad shoulders. In one way or another, one of those customers is the Scottish Government, which I hope will consider its future relationship with the Lloyds Banking Group. More than that, I hope that the Scottish and UK Governments will be prepared to work together to come down on retail banking conglomerates like a ton of bricks if banks will not independently curtail their detrimental closures of high street branches. Their actions to close high street branches—11 in the Bank of Scotland's most recent announcement and dozens more to come, if it gets its way—will betray hundreds of thousands of loyal customers.

A bank operator that puts profit before its customers does not deserve to make a profit. Maybe we should introduce a profits tax, similar to the tax that applies to the oil industry, for banks. The public should think about whether the company has its long-term interests at heart. We should note its uncaring, callous business model and the fact that the group made £6.7 billion in profit last year. I think that many constituents would find that those billions of pounds would be better spent on the national health service, schools and lowering energy costs, rather than rewarding shareholders and awarding bankers bonuses. The bank's motto should be "Didn't care, didn't listen, won't care, don't care".

I have one more thing to say. I have been here for only a short time, but I wish everyone who is leaving a safe journey through the rest of their life.

18:43

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague Clare Haughey on securing the motion for debate in the chamber. I said earlier during the debate on animal welfare that that was my last speech—well, that was a wee porky. This really is my last speech and, appropriately, it is about my constituency

By email on 11 February, the Bank of Scotland advised me that its branch in Penicuik would close on 4 June. The reason that was given was that its customers are increasingly choosing mobile banking as their preferred way to bank. One could argue that they are given no other choice. Options that have been offered by the bank are helping people with online or mobile banking via their app—whatever that is—or, recognising that not all customers bank digitally, particularly those who are older or have a vulnerability, it has offered telephone banking and the services that are available at the post office. That is all very well, but the post office in Penicuik, which is excellent, is always busy and probably does not have the time, staff or facilities to provide what is being lost: face-to-face meetings.

By return, I wrote:

"I recognise you will have had a flurry of contacts and while I note your alternative proposal , the nearby Post Office is frankly insufficient. I have already had contact from constituents on behalf of elderly and vulnerable adults for whom that 'solution' is not sufficient but require the personal service you once provided so well. Indeed, one might say many, including myself aged 81, use online because there is no alternative—local banks having closed down, and even ATMs, right, left and centre. At one time, banks offered a mobile service, perhaps only weekly for a limited time, in some rural areas, and that would be a much better alternative. Is this something the bank would consider?"

I have yet to receive a reply.

Penicuik has a population of 16,500, according to the 2022 census, and it has no doubt expanded a lot since then. Around 20 per cent—that is, some 3,000—are over 60. Of course, some can go online or use an app, but there will be many who cannot, and for them, it is essential that they speak to a real person at the bank, not a chatbot.

Therefore, I would impress upon the Bank of Scotland the need for it to take up my suggestion of reintroducing mobile services, which I

understand it abandoned in 2024. There should, at the very least, be such facilities; after all, £137 billion of our own money was paid over to bail out the banks in 2007-08 because of their self-made economic mismanagement.

One thing that we can do is move our accounts from the Bank of Scotland. It is the very least that we can do to show it that we mean business on behalf of those who cannot access it locally any more.

Finally, I, too, give my best wishes to Richard Lochhead. We came together in 1999. Wait for it—there is praise coming. He is a thoroughly able and unassuming politician who quietly got things done—and that is high praise indeed.

18:46

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I intend to make just a short speech this evening on a particular closure in my region. However, I begin by thanking Clare Haughey for lodging the motion and securing the debate. I also want to thank all colleagues who are taking part in the debate, and who have expressed many similar issues and themes about the dearth of face-to-face banking services in their communities.

Similar to what happened in the areas that Christine Grahame and Clare Haughey represent, Barrhead's last remaining Bank of Scotland branch closed earlier last year. That had a significant impact, given that it was the last remaining bank in a town of that size. It also caused significant concern, particularly for older people in the community who required face-to-face banking.

What happened then was similar to what we have heard from other colleagues: a community campaign was mounted to try to make the Bank of Scotland and Lloyds Banking Group consider their position and think again. Five thousand people signed the petition, and numerous entreaties were made by me, my council colleagues, the local independent councillor Danny Devlin and our member of Parliament, Blair McDougall. However, all of that fell on deaf ears as far as Lloyds Banking Group was concerned.

That just speaks to the wider approach that Lloyds, and other banks, are taking in devaluing face-to-face services and not having them present in communities. Christine Grahame made an interesting point about mobile services; there also seems to be a shying away—or a moving away—from such services, which I know have been beneficial in other parts of my region.

Lloyds chose not to respond or meet us. Colleagues will not be surprised to hear that, when I took the 5,000-signature petition to the Mound, the man on the door took it and it just disappeared into the system. The community was then faced with a stark choice about what it did. Link, as we have heard from other colleagues, refused to bring a banking hub to the town, because, according to its criteria, the town was adequately served in terms of access by the post office and cash machines.

The community campaigners, the council, the MP and I then came together to think of other ways of getting some level of service into the community, and the credit union movement was very much at the forefront of those considerations. Barrhead—and, indeed, East Renfrewshire more generally—had been without a credit union for a number of years, since Pioneer Credit Union left the town, and we were able, in partnership with Pollok Credit Union, to bring a credit union presence to the main street for the first time in several years.

Of course, what a credit union does is allow people in a community to save, and it then pools those savings to guarantee loans and investments for its members.

Christine Grahame: I have been banging on about credit unions in here for years, and I am pleased to hear that the member managed to get one on his main street. I have only another day to go, but I ask that he emails me about that, because it is something that I would like to see set up in Penicuik, failing our getting a mobile service. Credit unions are much underrated; I am a member of one myself. It is a great thing for people to save and then borrow responsibly.

Paul O'Kane: I would be more than happy, in my last act of service to Christine Grahame, to ensure that those details are passed across to her, because she is completely right. What can also happen through a credit union is that people's benefits, including social security and pensions, can be paid to them, in cash, on the day that they come in. That vital service is now being offered to those who require it.

Of course, there is more to be done to get other services back on to the main street, but I am glad that, out of a negative experience, the credit union movement can play a very strong role in the community of Barrhead and, I am sure, elsewhere around the country. I would be keen to hear what the minister has to say about that and about support for the credit union movement.

Before he makes what will be his final speech in the chamber, I pay tribute to Richard Lochhead for all the work that he has done over my five years in Parliament to help to move these issues forward. I am very grateful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask the minister, Richard Lochhead, to respond to the debate.

18:50

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I thank Clare Haughey for bringing the debate before Parliament. The closure of high street branches and all the changes that that means for people in our communities have been a feature of the past few years. Clare Haughey is an outstanding constituency MSP who always looks out for the vulnerable. I thank her for her kind comments and wish her the best with her petition and the best for her future.

I assure Parliament that the Scottish Government is concerned about the speed at which high street bank branches have been closing. We engage with the Financial Conduct Authority on all those issues; of course, many of the issues that we discuss are reserved to the UK Government. Scottish Government officials met the FCA in October to discuss access to cash on high streets in many of our communities in Scotland. The FCA has committed to undertaking a post-implementation review of its access-to-cash regime, and we will ensure that many of the issues that have been addressed in tonight's debate are part of that review.

I also say to Clare Haughey that, as one of my last actions as minister, over the next 24 hours, I will write to the UK Government to bring to its attention her concerns and those raised by other members who are looking out for the interests of their constituents. The closure of high street bank branches and the changes that we see in how we access our money is just one of the many changes in society that are due to changing technology.

With the permission of Clare Haughey and the Parliament, I will use my remaining few minutes to reflect on my time in Parliament over the past 27 years.

When I delivered my first speech as a rookie MSP, as we all were then, my colleagues Shona Robison, Fiona Hyslop, Kenny Gibson and Christine Grahame were there. We met up the road from Holyrood in 1999 to reconvene our Parliament. Thinking of that, it is difficult for me to grasp that this is my last contribution to Parliament. Indeed, after 17 years in Government, I find myself at the end of a long but rewarding road. To have been returned at every election since then is a debt that I can never repay.

I pay tribute to my colleagues who are here for the debate and who are also standing down for their massive contributions. Christine Grahame, who spoke in the debate, has been a force of nature and has contributed so much to Parliament. Natalie Don-Innes, who is sitting by me, is also retiring from Parliament, as is Bill Kidd, who is sitting at the back. I wish them all the best for the future and I thank them for their contributions to Parliament.

I depart with profound gratitude. I am all too aware that thousands of our fellow citizens step forward to seek elected office. Not all of them make it on to the ballot paper, and even fewer are elected. Public service—in saying this, I know that I speak for many of us who are departing—is more than a career. It is an absolute privilege.

I owe a debt of gratitude to those who have supported me on my journey over the past 27 years and allowed me to hold a front-row seat for experiences from the birth of devolution to where we have got to today. I am sure that my colleagues have similar thoughts about what we have witnessed over so many years.

My heartfelt thanks must go first to my family: my wife, Fiona; my son, Angus, who is in Brisbane and is probably watching this speech at some ungodly hour; and my younger son, Fraser, who is about to turn 18 and is in the chamber's gallery, seeing his dad speak for the first time in Parliament. Of course, he was not even born when I first entered the Government in 2007.

I also thank the people of Moray, who placed their trust in me and whom I have represented to the best of my ability for the last 20 of my 27 years in the Parliament. My constituency staff have been incredible—all of us in here know that they are the real engine; they are the people who do all the real work. I thank the current and three previous First Ministers, who entrusted me with the responsibility of being in Government; the Parliament staff and the civil service for their advice and support; and my private office staff. I thank my friends and colleagues—past and present—in my party group and on all sides of the chamber. We are often defined by division, but we all share the burden of public office and we have that in common.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I know that you are retiring at the election—I pay tribute to you for your service as PO and as MSP for your constituency over the years. When you leave, it will bring a particular clarity that comes with departure from this place. The partisan noise will begin to fade, and the fog of daily argument in which we all involve ourselves will also begin to evaporate.

We in this Parliament have spent nearly three decades building the foundations of a better country and navigating big events, such as the financial crash, Brexit, a global pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Now, we are witnessing a tide of populism across the world, in which people offer deceptively simple solutions to what are often complex problems. As a Parliament, we must look

forward. Despite all those uncertainties, we have much cause for optimism. Our country is known for inventing the world; now we are shaping the future as well.

There are many points of light across our country. Science and technology are generating solutions to our big problems in our universities, colleges, laboratories, burgeoning tech hubs and all our companies. We have world-class life sciences; a growing space industry; deep tech and critical technologies; a great and growing financial sector; an abundance of energy resources; and—one of my favourites—an amazing tourism sector, underpinned by the world-class brand Scotland. Of course, I must mention the global icon that is Scotch whisky, which is always close to my heart and to my lips. I hope that the next Parliament will have a laser-like focus on generating wealth and revenues from all those strengths.

One thing is for certain: the next Parliament is going to experience profound change. More economic and societal change will be compressed into the next five years—certainly compared with the past 25 years and probably compared with our entire history. Artificial intelligence and all the other developments will change how we raise and spend taxes, how we buy things and what we buy. Everything will be impacted by the changes that are taking place before our eyes. Automation will displace labour and it will do other things as well. If we do not address some of those issues, we will end up importing tech and exporting profits, so there will be big challenges for the next Parliament to face.

I joined the Scottish National Party when I was at school, so my views on Scotland's future are clear. We have no time to waste, because all democracies have a need for speed. If we do not act quickly in the next five years, we will fall behind as a country. There are massive opportunities, but we must grasp them and be agile in prioritising and deploying them to make our country a better place.

Across the parties, we all know what needs to be done. I hope that, in the future, we can build a consensus to make sure that that happens—with respect, grace, and good, robust arguments. If we do that better, perhaps we can set an example to other Parliaments in countries around the world.

I wish everyone who is retiring from this Parliament well; I wish the best of fortune to everyone who is standing again; and, to every new MSP who will have the honour of sitting on these benches, I urge them to relish every single moment. I can tell them from personal experience that the first 27 years will go by in a flash.

Finally, I say to the Parliament: farewell, and goodbye.

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

Adoption Support for Families

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20902, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on strengthening adoption support for families. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the findings of the report, Strengthening the Safety Net: A Framework for Adoption Support in Scotland, which was published by the Cross-Party Group on Social Work and highlights what the group identified as serious and systemic shortcomings in adoption support services across Scotland; believes that adoptive families in communities in Coatbridge and Chryston, and across the country, frequently experience fragmented, inconsistent and inadequately resourced post-adoption support; recognises that the Adoption UK Barometer 2025 suggested that 78% of adoptive families in Scotland face significant challenges, with 40% reporting severe difficulties, and that official figures on adoption breakdown are believed to likely underestimate the true scale of family distress due to inconsistent definitions and limited data collection; expresses concern at reports that many families reach crisis point without timely access to specialist, trauma-informed support, respite provision or intensive family services, increasing, it believes, the risk of placement disruption and further harm to children and families; acknowledges that adoption does not erase the effects of early trauma, abuse and neglect, and that adopted children's needs often intensify during adolescence and key transition points; considers that the transfer of post-adoption support from specialist adoption teams to generic children and families services after three years frequently fails to reflect the complexity of adoptive family life; notes the report's recommendations for a national adoption practice model, improved training, mandatory data collection, minimum standards for preparation and support, enhanced crisis intervention and respite services, and greater flexibility in adoption allowances, and further notes calls on the Scottish Government to work with adoptive families, adopted people, frontline practitioners and local authorities to urgently develop and implement a comprehensive national framework for adoption support, and to ensure that families across Scotland, including in Coatbridge and Chryston, can access consistent, high-quality, lifelong adoption support, regardless of postcode.

19:00

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank the colleagues who supported my motion, which provided the opportunity to bring the incredibly important topic of adoption to the chamber. I thank all the members who have stayed on tonight. I know that this is not a great time for a members' business debate, with various other things going on, so it is worth putting that on the record.

I thank the cross-party group on social work for its dedication and leadership in this area. The group has been invaluable in highlighting the realities of adoption support across Scotland. Some of that work came to fruition through the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed last week, and we saw the minister's engagement on that.

The CPG's report presents a clear and detailed picture of adoption support in Scotland today. It shows that the current system is complex, varied across different areas and often limited in its capacity to meet the needs of families. The evidence that was gathered by the group shows that many adoptive families experience support that is fragmented, inconsistent and under pressure. In many parts of the country, including in my community of Coatbridge and Chryston, adoptive families describe a system in which access to support depends on local structures and available resources. That variation creates a different experience for families who might have very similar needs.

The Adoption UK adoption barometer 2025 provides important context for this discussion. It shows that 78 per cent of adoptive families in Scotland face significant challenges and that 40 per cent describe those challenges as severe. Those figures represent a large proportion of families who have taken on the responsibility of providing stable and loving homes for children who have experienced early adversity.

The report also highlights that our understanding of adoption breakdown is limited. Although current figures suggest a relatively small number of recorded breakdowns, there is no single definition in use and no consistent requirement for data collection. As a result, the available data gives only a partial picture of family experiences.

Data is essential for effective policy. When data is available, it supports better planning, stronger accountability and improved outcomes for families. When it is incomplete, it becomes more difficult to understand the full scale of need and to respond effectively. I am grateful to the minister for making it clear last week that the next Government and relevant minister

"should take forward work early in the next parliamentary session to develop a shared definition of 'adoption breakdown' and to consider improvements to the collection and sharing of data."—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2026; c 104.]

I note that, this week, the United Kingdom Government made a similar announcement that it is trying to gather data in this area.

I recognise the contributions of those who have shared their experiences directly. In particular, I acknowledge my constituents Richard McCombe and Kirsteen McDonald, who are in the public gallery today alongside other parents. Richard and

Kirsteen have engaged extensively with my office regarding their separate personal experiences of adoption within their families. Their contributions have provided valuable insight into how the system operates in practice and how it can be improved.

The experiences of both Richard and Kirsteen's families reflect the importance of listening to lived experience. They remind us that policy decisions have a real and lasting impact on individuals and families. I thank Richard and Kirsteen for their openness and continued engagement on the issue. I give Richard McCombe a special mention, because he has led a one-man campaign on the issue not just in Scotland but across the UK. He has found himself appearing on various media outlets, including BBC Scotland, as well as other BBC channels. I thank Richard for the work that he is doing in this area, which has come out of a really difficult situation in his own family.

One of the key messages of the report is that adoption is a lifelong process. The impact of early trauma, abuse and neglect remains with children as they grow. Their needs develop over time, and those needs are often more pronounced during adolescence and key transitions into adulthood. The report explains that many children are placed for adoption at a young age, yet their vulnerabilities often increase in later years. That pattern requires a system that provides on-going and adaptable support.

At present, in the early years, post-adoption support is typically delivered by specialist adoption teams but, often, responsibility transfers to general children and families services after three years. At that time, many families are experiencing no great adversity—or nothing that they cannot handle, for want of a better phrase. However, although that structure is established in legislation, it does not align with the complexity of adoptive family life and what might come further down the road. Specialist knowledge is an important part of effective support. Adoptive families often benefit from professionals who understand trauma, attachment and the long-term effects of early adversity. When support moves into more general services, that level of specialism is not always available.

The report also highlights the importance of early and accessible support. Families describe situations in which support becomes available only when needs have reached a high level. Earlier intervention has the potential to provide stability and strengthen family relationships. The availability of trauma-informed services, respite care and intensive family support is an important part of that approach. Those services support families during challenging periods and help to maintain stability in the home.

The report also sets out a number of recommendations that aim to strengthen the current system. Those include the development of a national adoption practice model, the introduction of mandatory data collection, improved training for professionals and the establishment of minimum standards for preparation and support. The report also recommends enhanced crisis intervention services, greater availability of respite care and increased flexibility on adoption allowances. Those measures reflect the understanding that families' circumstances and children's needs change over time.

I thank the minister—as everybody did, I think, in the debate last week, but I will add to that gushing tribute—for the constructive engagement that has taken place. In particular, I welcome the work to introduce an amendment on peer support for those who are involved in adoption, which was agreed to and integrated into the recent Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill. I know that my constituents in the chamber today—and, I am sure, others as well—appreciate that, because peer support is a consistent theme in discussions with adoptive parents and prospective adopters.

Families often say that being with others who have lived experience of adoption provides reassurance, practical guidance and a sense of connection. The difficulty for a lot of adoptive families is that they find that peer support at a time of crisis and difficulty, and they often wish that they had found it earlier. The amendments to the bill will help that to happen.

Across Scotland, peer support is often delivered by specialist third sector organisations. Those organisations provide a valuable service, although provision varies between areas. As I said, the amendment that was agreed to recognised the value of that support, and placed a duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to promote that awareness and uptake of peer support services. That duty will also involve those who receive adoption services under the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. That is a targeted and practical measure that will support families in accessing community-based support alongside formal services.

The report and the motion also highlight the importance of collaboration in developing a national framework for adoption support. That work will require engagement with adoptive families, adopted people, practitioners and local authorities. Collaboration ensures that policy reflects both professional expertise and lived experience. It supports the development of services that are responsive, consistent and effective.

It is also important to recognise the role of the state in adoption. When a child is placed for adoption, the state has an on-going responsibility to support that placement. That responsibility continues throughout the child's development and into adulthood.

The report's conclusion sets out a clear vision. It describes a system that recognises the complexity of adoption, provides sustained support, responds effectively during periods of difficulty and maintains accountability for outcomes. All members believe that adoption is about providing stability, care and opportunity for children. It is about supporting families to grow and thrive. Therefore, the system that supports adoption must reflect those aims.

Families in Coatbridge and Chryston, and across Scotland, must benefit from support that is consistent, accessible and informed by experience. A national framework has the potential to provide that consistency, while allowing flexibility to meet individual needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Fulton MacGregor: I again thank the cross-party group on social work for its work in bringing forward the report. I again thank the minister for her continued engagement, particularly on peer support. I put on record what a loss her departure will be to the Parliament.

Finally, I again thank all those, including Richard McCombe, Kirsteen McDonald and those who have joined them today, who have contributed their experiences to inform the debate.

19:09

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing the motion to the chamber and for continuing to highlight the importance of strengthening adoption support for families across Scotland.

The issues that are raised in the motion and in the report "Strengthening the Safety Net: A Framework for Adoption Support in Scotland" are serious, long standing and deserving of the Parliament's full attention. Unfortunately, we are not at that stage.

Before I speak to the motion, I wish the minister all the best for the future. We may come from differing sides of the separatist debate, but her drive and determination to see more done to support our young people and the care-experienced community is obvious. I welcome her collaborative approach, and it has truly been a pleasure working with her.

My very first debate on this issue when I became an MSP was a members' business debate on Scotland's forgotten children, focusing on adoption in Scotland and the urgent need to improve post-adoption support. I spoke about fragmented services, inconsistent access to support for families and a feeling of being left to cope alone once the legal process has concluded. This issue has bookended the session for me, but we are four years on and are still discussing many of the same problems, with little meaningful progress, so I am very glad that there has been some movement with the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill.

As everyone knows, my interest in the issue is both professional and personal. I am the proud mother of two adopted daughters and, through our family experience, I have seen first hand the realities that lie behind the statistics and policy papers. Adoption is not a single event that ends with a court order. It is a lifelong journey. At every milestone—starting school, moving into adolescence and navigating friendships, identity and independence—a new challenge emerges.

As a parent, I have had to repeatedly learn, adapt and advocate to ensure that our daughters receive the understanding and support that they need. That lived experience has given me a profound appreciation for the resilience of adopted children and the pressures that adopted families face. The Adoption UK barometer 2025 highlights that 78 per cent of adopted families in Scotland report facing significant challenges, with 40 per cent describing those challenges as severe, as Fulton MacGregor mentioned. Those are not abstract figures. They represent children struggling with the lasting effects of early trauma and parents doing their best to support them.

The motion rightly highlights that official figures on adoption breakdown are likely to underestimate the true scale of distress due to the inconsistent definitions and the gaps in data collection. Without robust, transparent data, we underestimate the scale of the problem, and families go without the support that they need.

Other areas of concern include the robust transfer of post-adoption support from a specialist adoption team to generic children and families services after three years. In theory, that might seem to be administratively tidy, but in practice it fails to reflect the complexity and longevity of adoptive family life. The impact of trauma does not diminish after an arbitrary timeframe. It re-emerges at every area of transition, all the way into adulthood and beyond.

Although I support the aims of the motion, I cannot ignore the fact that we have been here before. We have had debates, reports and cross-

party working groups, yet adoptive families across my region of Mid Scotland and Fife—and in Coatbridge and Chryston, which has been mentioned, and throughout Scotland—continue to report that there are gaps in support.

Further discussion is not needed—decisive action is. The recommendations in the "Strengthening the Safety Net" report talk about having a national adoption practice model, improved training, mandatory data collection, enhanced crisis intervention and a more flexible adoption allowance. Those are not new recommendations—they just need to be implemented.

As an MSP and an adoptive parent, I know how much is at stake. The stability of adoptive placements, the wellbeing of children who have already experienced significant adversity and the confidence of prospective adopters all depend on the strength and support of the system that surrounds them.

This Parliament and the Scottish Government must stop discussing reform and take action now. Adoptive families have waited too long, and they need a system that supports them fully.

19:14

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I begin by thanking Fulton MacGregor for bringing this important discussion on adoption support in Scotland to the chamber. This debate is an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of adoptive families and to consider how our national system continues to grow and improve. I also wish to recognise the work of the cross-party group on social work, which authored the report. Its engagement with adoptive families, adopted people and practitioners is a foundation for discussion. The report provides a clear account of the current position of adoption support across Scotland and offers a practical framework for the future.

Adoption is a lifelong journey. It is a commitment that begins with a placement and continues throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Children who are adopted can often carry the effects of early adversity, trauma, abuse or neglect. Their experiences are part of their early lives, and their needs develop as they grow. Support is therefore an essential element of stability. The evidence presented in the report shows that many adoptive families are managing complex circumstances. As mentioned by my colleagues Fulton MacGregor and Roz McCall, the Adoption UK barometer indicates that

"78% of adoptive families in Scotland face significant challenges, with 40% reporting severe difficulties".

Behind those figures are families who are providing care, security and opportunity for children who require constant support.

Adoptive families across Scotland share many common experiences. Access to support is often shaped by local structures and available resources, rather than needs. That pattern creates different journeys for families, and a national framework is therefore an important step towards consistency. Consistency would be a great source of confidence for families, and it is also a foundation for long-term stability.

The report also highlights the importance of reliable data. Creating a shared definition of adoption, disruption and breakdown is a practical starting point for the standardisation of data. Collecting such data is a viable tool for planning services and measuring outcomes. When information is clear and consistent, policy decisions are stronger and support systems are more responsive.

One of the central messages of the report is that adoption and support are an on-going process. Many children are placed for adoption at a young age, and their vulnerabilities often become more visible during adolescence and transition into adulthood. Those stages of life are periods of growth and change, and they are times when professional support is especially valuable.

At present, support is often delivered by specialist adoption teams in the early years following placement and responsibility then moves to general children and family services. However, families benefit from services that are accessible and responsive at early stages of need. Trauma-informed services, respite care and intensive family support are practical resources that strengthen family relationships and support stability in the home throughout a child's development. Specialist knowledge of trauma and attachment is a valuable element of effective support, and continued access to that expertise is beneficial for families throughout the life of a child. We must ensure that such specialist support is available to those who need it.

Recommendations in the report provide a clear path forward: a national adoption practice model is a foundation for consistent standards; mandatory data collection is a tool for accountability; improved professional training is a pathway for better understanding; and minimum standards for preparation and support are elements that promote quality and trust throughout the system.

Peer support is another important feature of effective adoptive services. Connections between families who share life experiences are a valuable source of reassurance and practical guidance. Community-based support networks are a

meaningful complement to formal services and they strengthen resilience across adoptive communities. Collaboration is a strength that will be central to progress in this area. Engagement with adoptive families, adopted people, practitioners and local authorities creates a pathway to shared understanding. Policy with professional knowledge and lived experience at its core is a source of strength. The partnership approach supports services that are responsive and effective.

Adoption should bring stability, belonging and opportunity. Families across Scotland are providing loving homes and nurturing futures. A national strategy for adoption support is an opportunity to strengthen that work and ensure that services are consistent, accessible and informed by experience.

I recognise the dedication of those who contributed to the report and who shared their knowledge and insight. Their work is a valuable contribution to Parliament, and this debate is an opportunity to affirm our shared commitment to adoptive families and adopted children across Scotland.

I give my best wishes to the minister. Whatever her future holds, I wish her good luck.

19:19

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am absolutely certain that the minister's future will be massively successful.

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank Fulton MacGregor not just for bringing the motion to the chamber but for all his work throughout this parliamentary session on a crucial matter. Stage 3 of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill last week shone a light on some of the most incredible people in our communities. Tonight's debate allows us to shine a very specific light on a much smaller but very important group that sits within that community.

I agree with much of what the motion calls for, and much of what we have heard from David Torrance and Roz McCall. There is a call for data collection and to look at national adoption practices, with the understanding that adoption is not just a snapshot in a person's life. When a child is put up for adoption, which often happens at a very early age, their experience is carried throughout their life. Just as parents continue to feel responsibility for birth children, communities should feel responsibility for all their members. Adoption goes on, although it changes and develops. With young people who have been adopted, some challenges that were not apparent early on often become more apparent at a later stage.

I whole-heartedly agree with the point in the cross-party group's report about seeking a clear definition of adoption breakdown. Again, it is crucially important, both for those who adopt and for adoptees, to understand what we mean by adoption breakdown and how it can be anticipated, as issues becomes more apparent, to try to prevent breakdowns before things go too far.

In my short contribution, I want to concentrate on the report's call for a review of adoption allowances to enable applications to be made throughout the course of adoption as family circumstances change and as children's needs change and emerge. In that very small area, I have had a significant amount of casework relating to the challenge that our system throws up—it is almost a postcode lottery. We need an understanding in local authorities of what the expectation is and what the guidance suggests should happen.

Last year's fostering and adoption statistics show that children who are going through the adoption system face significant delays, with some waiting for six months or longer. That goes back to matters that I raised when talking about the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill last week about permanency and decision taking. We cannot overstate the challenge that our young people feel if they do not have a settled environment in which to live.

Teachers and parents have knowledge of Maslow's pyramid of needs. Sitting right at the bottom of that is the need for a home, a family and security. Without those, children are unable to develop the skills that others do not even know that they are developing, because they are in a sort of flight or fight mode for far too long. We have an opportunity to build on the excellent work that the minister and the Government have done with regard to the bill. The Government that will come after the election needs to build on that.

I reiterate the point that I made last week that far more experienced politicians could learn from the minister's approach of reaching out. Drift and delay in the development of young people are massively important issues. However, the report speaks to the fact that, if we listen to the voices of adoptive families, to the children and to the practitioners, we can ensure that this often forgotten group of children are given the tailored support that they need and deserve.

19:23

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): I, too, thank Fulton MacGregor not only for only bringing the debate to the chamber but for all the work that he has done as the convener of the cross-party group

on social work. I have had the pleasure of being part of that group, which has been very much driven by him. I am grateful for his contribution.

Lest I forget, I add the same comments that others have made about the minister as she leaves this place. I am sure that her future is bright and rosy.

As this might well be my last speech in this session—who knows what the electorate will do in a few weeks' time?—I put on record my thanks to the people of Lothian for allowing me to represent them for the past 10 years. I also thank all the people in the Parliament who look after us and help us. I want to put on the record that their support for me has been outstanding. I made my maiden speech in a members' debate like this one, so it seems fitting for me to conclude in this debate.

As I said in the debate last week on the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, my wife and I have had personal experience of breakdown of adoption. It is not appropriate to go into the details of that, but, from that experience, and having spoken to many other people, particularly here in Edinburgh and Lothian, about their stories, I think that the report shines a light on many of the difficulties that people face, not only once they have adopted but in getting to the point of adoption.

I hope that whoever is returned to the Parliament after the election and whoever forms the next Government will build on what we did last week and continue on the journey. As my friend Roz McCall said, there is still a lot to do and this is not the end of the journey.

In my short contribution, I will make three simple points from personal experience and from picking up on what the report says. First, as Martin Whitfield said, support needs to come at key moments, which will vary for people, depending on their adoption journey. For some, it will mean early intervention and help. For others, it will come when the child hits their teenage years or when they transfer between secondary and further education or job opportunities. It might come at other times in people's lives. We all know that social workers are under pressure, and there is often a lack of flexibility. There is too much of a postcode lottery, as other members have said—not only a postcode lottery but a council lottery. Given the size of our nation, there must be some way in which we can pull together good practice from across Scotland to do this.

Secondly, again, as Martin Whitfield said, there is the financial cost, which is often ignored. It is looked at well in fostering but less so in adoption. If we are to fully support people who take on children, they should have some financial help throughout that journey.

Finally, there is an issue around the process of how the transfer takes place when the child comes into the family. Again, that is often left to a postcode lottery and it often does not happen well. Support is not there, and too many people encounter difficulties and fall at the first hurdle, whereas, if there was just a bit more support at that point, it could be a different story.

I thank Fulton MacGregor, and I look forward to hearing the minister's response. I hope that we all—whether we are in the Parliament or outside—commit to real changes in the next parliamentary session.

19:27

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I thank Fulton MacGregor for securing the debate and for highlighting the work of the cross-party group on social work.

Supporting children and young people to grow up loved, safe and respected sits at the heart of keeping the Promise. For those who can no longer live with their birth families, adoptive families play a vital role in providing safe, loving and nurturing homes. I know that members have personal experiences with that and care deeply about the issue, and I want to be clear that it is a priority for the Government. Last week, I made clear my vision for all care-experienced children, young people and adults to be supported in the way that best suits their needs.

I will respond to a number of points that were raised in today's debate, but, given that this is my final speech, I will take a minute to thank the people of the constituency that I represent—Renfrewshire North and West. Everything that I have achieved over the past five years would not have happened if the good people of Renfrewshire North and West had not put their faith in me at the previous election. It has meant so much to me to be able to represent them, stand up for their interests in our Scottish Parliament and support them when needed.

I also want to say a huge thank you to my office staff, who have been there day and night to assist me. My team and I have worked to ensure that families in my constituency and across Scotland get the support that they need, particularly during the UK Government-inflicted cost of living crisis. Whether on social security, housing support or local issues and priorities; on initiatives and issues such as championing local breastfeeding-friendly support or parking at the Royal Alexandra hospital; or by ensuring that our local play parks get the investment that they need, I have always tried to be a voice for those who do not have one and for those who need it most.

Going forward, the constituency of Renfrewshire North and West will be no more, as the boundary changes take hold, so I say one last time to the amazing people of Bridge of Weir, Houston, Bishopton, Erskine, Langbank, Gallowhill, Renfrew, Inchinnan and Kilmacolm—thank you.

There are too many others to thank, but I will give it a quick go. I want to thank my colleagues across the chamber, my party's spokespeople, Roz McCall, Martin Whitfield, Jeremy Balfour and others I have worked with on a number of issues in the Parliament for their continued engagement with, and dedication to, helping Scotland's children and young people. I also thank them for their lovely words, both tonight and last week. I am not very good at taking compliments, but please be assured that I am extremely thankful for everything that has been said.

I want to thank my private office and the Parliament staff, who go to so much effort to ensure that we MSPs have what we need.

I put on record my thanks to my cabinet secretary, Jenny Gilruth. Ms Gilruth has been such a huge support to me throughout my time in government. Entering government is not straightforward or simple, but it is made so much easier when you have solid experience and support around you. I am so thankful not only to have worked under Ms Gilruth but to have gotten to know her, and I wish her all the best for the future.

Adoption can be hugely positive, but the early adversity and loss of their birth family faced by many children can have lasting impacts on their development, wellbeing and relationships. I recognise that adoptive families might need support at different stages of their journey. As members have said, it is not simply the case that, once an adoption process is complete, support is no longer needed—far from it. That has been made very clear to me when I have been out meeting adoptive families, and it has been raised with me by Mr MacGregor, too.

Our adoption vision statement, which was published in November 2024, was developed with the adoption community. It sets out Scotland's vision for the future of adoption and makes it very clear that consistent and comprehensive post-adoption support, accessible when and where required and, indeed, throughout life, is essential. The vision identified key actions, which we have made significant progress in delivering. We are continuing to invest in that work, and I have a lot to say about that, but I am sure that, given the time, members would rather that I focus on what we will do, so I will move on to that.

During the passage of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, I heard about the challenges faced by many adoptive families in accessing post-adoption support. Those concerns have been echoed again today and in the cross-party group's report. Families have described gaps and inconsistencies in the support that is available to them, and I think that their experiences underline why this debate really matters and why, as other members have said, support must be timely, consistent and aligned with the needs of adopted children and their families.

As I stated at stage 3 of the bill, I will make very clear to the incoming Government the importance of reviewing the adoption support sections of the 2011 adoption and looked-after children guidance. That review should also consider whether new statutory guidance should be issued on adoption support services under the existing powers in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. I believe that that work will provide a structured opportunity to examine the range of issues raised by families and practitioners, including practice models, practitioner training, preparation and support, crisis intervention, respite and the use of adoption allowances, which is, I know, another area where there is great inconsistency. We will work closely with adoptive families and practitioners throughout the process to ensure that any future changes are evidence based and are responsive to children's needs.

Families have emphasised the value of support that is grounded in lived experience. Peer support plays a key role and, to strengthen its consistency and visibility, the bill that was passed last week will require local authorities to promote awareness and uptake of peer support services throughout the adoption process and after adoption has taken place. As Mr MacGregor has highlighted, the issue of timing and when such support is offered is key, and I hope that the changes that I have referred to will help improve things.

Concerns were raised at stage 3 of the bill, and have been raised again today, that current data underestimates the true scale of adoption breakdowns in Scotland. That is why I confirmed last week that I will make clear to the incoming Government the importance of progressing work early in the next session of Parliament to develop a shared definition of adoption breakdown. That work will be developed with adoptive families and delivery partners to ensure that it reflects lived experience and supports a consistent national approach.

I have also heard loud and clear from the adoptive community about the need, when adopted people are accessing services, for more consistent recognition that they are care experienced. Regulations and guidance that will be produced under section 5 of the bill will set out

a broad and inclusive definition of care experience that explicitly includes adopted children and young people. We will work closely with the adoption community to ensure that the guidance reflects lived experience and supports effective access to services.

I began my speech by recognising the commitment of adoptive families in providing safe and loving—

Fulton MacGregor: Will the minister take an intervention?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, of course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Fulton MacGregor to be brief.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcome the minister's engagement on this issue. When she talks about access to services, does that include child and adolescent mental health services, as we spoke about last week? A lot of adoptive families told us through the work of the cross-party group that access to CAMHS is particularly difficult for adopted children.

Natalie Don-Innes: That must be recognised. Child and adolescent mental health services are key for adoptive families, but they stretch into other areas of our work to deliver the Promise, because there are a lot of children and young people who face challenges in that regard. As members will know, the Promise is a shared commitment across the Government. Although we have invested heavily in CAMHS, there might be more to do to ensure that children and young people get the support that they need.

I have acknowledged the challenges that adoptive families face, the need to strengthen support and the dedication of the practitioners who support those families. I again thank Fulton MacGregor for securing this debate. As I said last week, I and the adoptive community are confident that he will continue to champion the rights of adoptive families with great care and dedication. I have certainly enjoyed working with Mr MacGregor throughout my time in the Parliament, and I know that he is deeply committed to this cause.

The Government remains firmly committed to standing alongside adoptive families and to working with them and the wider community as we take forward the actions that I have set out. We will continue to listen, learn and act.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 19:37.

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