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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 16 June 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The first item of business—[*Inaudible*.]

Members: We cannot hear you.

The Presiding Officer: It looks as if the sound is on here.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The lights are off at the back of the chamber. I do not know whether there is an electrical fault.

The Presiding Officer: We will suspend briefly until we resolve the matter.

14:01

Meeting suspended.

14:03

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I have a slight touch of déjà vu. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Amanda Reid, spiritual care and bereavement lead at Children's Hospices Across Scotland.

The Rev Amanda Reid (Children's Hospices Across Scotland): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I thank you for the opportunity to offer today's time for reflection during children's hospice week.

Across Scotland, there are children whose lives are short and families who live with a kind of courage that is quiet, constant and often unseen. In Children's Hospices Across Scotland—CHAS—we have the privilege of walking alongside them. At Robin house and Rachel house, and through our teams in hospitals and homes, we meet families at moments of joy, fear, uncertainty and love.

People often imagine children's hospices as places of sadness, but those of us who work in them know that they are also places of laughter, music, storytelling and deep connection. They are places where lives are lived fully—sometimes in the small moments, sometimes in the extraordinary ones, but always with tenderness and dignity.

In my role as spiritual care and bereavement lead, and as chaplain of Robin house children's hospice, I meet families who are navigating the unimaginable. What strikes me again and again is not only their grief but their love: a love that is fierce; a love that is patient; a love that endures; and a love that asks us, as a society, to ensure that no family walks this path alone.

Children's hospice week invites us to pause and recognise the value of presence—the simple act of being with one another. Presence does not fix what is hard and it does not take away pain, but it says, "You matter. Your story matters. Your child matters."

In the hospice, presence looks like holding a hand, listening to a memory or sitting in silence when there are no words. It looks like staff supporting one another after a difficult day. It looks like volunteers making tea, playing music or tending the garden so that families can just breathe for a moment.

During this week, we also honour the children who have died. Their names are spoken with love and their families carry them forward in stories, in gestures and in the quiet ways that they continue to shape the world around them. Grief does not end, but neither does love.

As we reflect today, I invite us to hold on to three things. The first is gratitude for the children, who teach us how precious each moment is. The second is compassion for the families, who show us what courage looks like. The third is a commitment to ensuring that every child in Scotland with a life-shortening condition receives the care, dignity and support that they deserve. We should carry that gratitude, compassion and commitment well into this session and all that lies beyond.

Thank you for listening and for holding Scotland's children with life-shortening conditions and their families in your thoughts today.

General Question Time

14:07

Queen's Park Glasshouses

1. **Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a member of Glasgow City Council. To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to assist Glasgow City Council in securing the necessary funding, resources and practical support required to keep the historic Queen's Park glasshouses open, preserved and thriving as a valued community asset. (S7O-00060)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The Government appreciates the historic and community value of the Queen's park glasshouses. Responsibility for their operation rests with Glasgow City Council. However, I am happy to engage with the council and with partners. Such discussions can include help to facilitate access to relevant funding programmes, encouraging partnership and community-led approaches, and ensuring that the council has advice and guidance from Historic Environment Scotland on suitable conservation.

Holly Bruce: As the cabinet secretary knows, Glasgow faces a unique responsibility with its array of listed heritage buildings in council ownership, coupled with an acute lack of capital infrastructure funding. In Glasgow Southside, we are already navigating the devastating prolonged closures of Govanhill baths and Langside hall. We cannot allow the historic Queen's park glasshouses to become the next victim of the funding gap. The Glasgow Building Preservation Trust estimates that £400,000 is urgently needed to safeguard this vital community asset. Will the cabinet secretary commit today to meeting me, Glasgow City Council representatives and local campaigners at the glasshouses during the upcoming recess period to explore how we can bridge that funding gap?

Màiri McAllan: Holly Bruce will know that the Government understands the importance of those matters, which is demonstrated not least by the investment that we are committed to making in the People's Palace in Glasgow. My colleague Tom Arthur will shortly update the Parliament on those plans.

Projects such as the Queen's park glasshouses can draw on a range of funding sources. The Government provides direct support for similarly ambitious projects through our regeneration capital grant fund and the place-based investment programme. There is more than £12 million available in annual Historic Environment Scotland grants for conservation, restoration and community engagement, and opportunities also exist through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It is worth noting that a blended approach that combines public funding, partner contributions and community-led fundraising is often the most successful route.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Before I take a supplementary question from Paul Sweeney, I remind members that you should press your request-to-speak button only when you come to your question or wish to ask a supplementary question to someone else's question. There are members who have pressed their button but who do not, I believe, want to ask a question about this specific issue. However, Paul Sweeney is not one of those members.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary outlined an array of funding options. Capital funding is certainly one aspect, but the challenge in the immediate term is ongoing revenue funding. That issue is a direct result of the Scottish Government's disproportionate cuts to Glasgow City Council's core budget. Will the cabinet secretary identify any potential sources of short-term funding that could allow the council to maintain the asset's operation in the next three months in order to bridge the gap so that we can get an agreed new permanent use in place?

Màiri McAllan: I restate that I understand the connection that is felt to the Queen's park glasshouses. Anecdotally, they provided an important day out for my own family in the south side of Glasgow, and we want to see them continue to do so. I have set out my willingness to have discussions with Glasgow City Council, community groups and MSPs who are keen to see the glasshouses back up and running. I have also made clear the range of funding sources that exist. I take on board what Mr Sweeney said about revenue versus capital funding, which is a matter that can be taken forward as part of the discussions that I have offered to have.

Air Pollution Monitoring (City Primary Schools)

2. **Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP):** I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests and declare that I am a serving councillor on Dundee City Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to calls from the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh for a national pilot programme to monitor air pollution around city primary schools. (S7O-00061)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The placement of air quality monitors is prioritised to cover potential

air pollution hotspots. Additionally, over time, local authorities have progressively adapted their monitoring strategies to address specific local air quality issues. That approach ensures that any areas of concern, including locations such as schools where vulnerable groups may be present, will be covered.

Heather Anderson: We know that there is a correlation between areas of high deprivation and poor air quality for children and adults, which exacerbates pre-existing health inequalities. We also know that children are among the most susceptible to harm from air pollution. In Dundee, we are lucky enough to work with Professor Jill Belch, who is a professor of vascular medicine at the University of Dundee's school of medicine. She advised me that only four of our 34 primary schools are within a 250m range of any accurate monitoring equipment. That means that, at present—

The Presiding Officer: Ask a question, please.

Heather Anderson: —in 30 of our primary schools, we do not know how safe our children are from damaging air pollution. Would the cabinet secretary welcome Dundee City Council piloting an air monitoring project at primary schools in our city?

Gillian Martin: I would welcome anything that the council decides to do in relation to where it puts its monitors and any pilot that it might want to go forward with. Improving air quality to protect the health of Scotland's population, particularly children and young people, is a key priority.

The latest air quality data shows that Dundee is meeting its air quality objectives, which is great news and reflects sustained improvements across the whole city. That is underpinned by a robust monitoring network. There are six automatic monitoring stations, which are supplemented by 89 non-automatic monitors located in areas that have been identified by the local authority as having the most need.

The low-emission zone in Dundee is also helping to drive cleaner air. Decisions on where monitors are placed are for the council, but they tend to be in areas of higher pollution. Because those monitors show a decrease in pollution, the low-emission zone is obviously having an effect across the whole city.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The science shows that even modest improvements in air quality result in significant improvements in health, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Will the Scottish Government be revising the current out-of-date air quality standards that we have in Scotland to reflect the better, more up-to-date, more science-based World Health Organization standards, which will start to put some ambition back into our air quality strategy? I know that the cabinet secretary will be revising that strategy, but will the standards reflect the better, more up-to-date WHO standards?

Gillian Martin: Mark Ruskell is absolutely right, and 2026 is a key year in that regard. Proposals for a long-term air quality policy framework will succeed the cleaner air for Scotland 2 strategy when it expires at the end of this year. We are developing those proposals, including assessing the feasibility of matching or exceeding the new European Union targets that were introduced in 2024, and we are making progress towards meeting the remaining WHO guidelines.

Winchburgh Train Station

3. **Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when construction work on Winchburgh train station will begin. (S7O-00062)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): The member knows that the Government is committing to ensuring that there is a new train station at Winchburgh. We are continuing to work with West Lothian Council and Winchburgh Developments in that regard. I hope that I will be able to update the chamber in the not-too-distant future in respect of that.

Jenny Young: Currently, it takes more than an hour to get the bus from Winchburgh to central Edinburgh. That is a journey of under 15 miles. The train to Waverley would take around 15 minutes.

Last week, the cabinet secretary opened a debate on growing Scotland's economy, which I know is a topic that is close to his heart and important to our country. Does he appreciate how important the station will be for the local economy and for Scotland's wider economy? Will he tell my constituents when they will be able to board the first train?

Stephen Flynn: I would love to be in a position to do that here today. It is important to recognise that it is for West Lothian Council and Winchburgh Developments to take forward construction of a new station, but we are willing to engage with them in that process. They have already been in communication with the Government.

I hear the member championing the cause, and I have read that other members championed it prior to the election, too. I assure her and her constituents that I am very conscious of that.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am an elected member of West Lothian Council.

I welcome the Scottish Government's clear commitment to delivering a Winchburgh station, including reference to it in this year's budget statement and in the Scottish National Party's election manifesto. The cabinet secretary will also be aware of the important work that was undertaken by his predecessor, Fiona Hyslop, as the previous local constituency MSP, and by Jim Fairlie, in his ministerial role, in convening partners through a steering group. Will he commit to building on that work and to continuing to provide the leadership that is needed to bring partners together to ensure that this long-awaited station is delivered?

Stephen Flynn: It is important to place on record the important work that was undertaken by the former constituency member, Ms Hyslop, and by Mr Fairlie in his ministerial role. I look forward to working with the new constituency member to take forward the matter, and I am sure that we will be able to do so in a collegiate fashion.

Flood Protection (Grangemouth)

4. **Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made regarding funding for the Grangemouth flood protection scheme. (S7O-00063)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government is in close contact with Falkirk Council on how to progress the Grangemouth flood protection scheme. In February, we provided £1.6 million to the council, which will be used to support the next stage of the scheme's development. That is in addition to the £23 million that the council has received from the Scottish Government for the scheme since 2016-17.

Martyn Day: Falkirk Council deserves credit for the years of work that it has put into managing flood risk. With climate change increasing the risk of flooding around Grangemouth and upstream, plans to protect 6,000 people, 2,760 homes, 1,200 businesses and 23km of roads from a major flood event are very welcome. As initial design work is about to start, what discussions has the Scottish Government had with the major industrial companies in Grangemouth about their financial contribution to the Grangemouth flood protection scheme?

Gillian Martin: I thank Martin Day for that important supplementary question. We will continue to work with Falkirk Council, the United Kingdom Government, businesses and investors to secure a long-term sustainable future for the industrial cluster. My officials working on flood policy have been invited to join the Grangemouth future industry board, where substantive discussions on how local companies can contribute to the scheme can happen. I am certain that offers of private contributions will be greatly appreciated by the local authority, given that the scheme will ultimately protect those businesses as well as residents.

More generally, Scotland's national flood resilience strategy commits to exploring new ways in which public and private finance can contribute to creating flood-resilient places.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): That scheme is so big that it is of UK significance, and it has always been my view that the UK Government should help to fund it. Has the cabinet secretary been in any direct discussions with the UK Government about sourcing funding for the scheme?

Gillian Martin: I agree with the substantive premise of Graham Simpson's question. Flood defences are for the Scottish Government to provide, but given the size of the scheme, any contribution would be welcome. Obviously, the UK Government has been working with the Scottish Government on issues around the industrial cluster, but the member raises an important point. In multifaceted schemes such as this one, we need to look at where we can find additional support where it is needed. I do not think that I have asked the UK Government for any assistance with this scheme, but I will certainly take Mr Simpson's suggestion on board.

Road Infrastructure Commitments (North East Scotland)

5. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will honour, in full, commitments made by previous ministers for transport to upgrade road infrastructure in the north-east of Scotland. (S7O-00064)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): Yes.

Liam Kerr: I am grateful to hear that reassurance, because the minister will know the dangers of the A90 north of Ellon, particularly at the Toll of Birness and Cortes junctions, which the Scottish National Party Government has shamefully failed to address. In fact, in 2007, Alex Salmond promised to dual the A90 in his first 100 days as First Minister.

With the SNP Government having failed to deliver on that for approaching two decades, will the cabinet secretary commit to a completion date,

or will he follow his predecessors by abandoning communities north of Ellon?

Stephen Flynn: Of course, in order to get to Ellon from the south, people right across Scotland have the opportunity to drive on the Aberdeen western peripheral route—a nearly £1 billion project that was delivered by the SNP Government of the time and which Mr Kerr seems to have forgotten even exists.

In relation to the junction—indeed, the road slip—that Mr Kerr refers to, which I go past often on my way to Peterhead, we made a clear commitment on that in our manifesto, and we will stick to it.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary remind the chamber what improvements to road infrastructure the SNP Government has made in the north-east and outline what more it will deliver in the future? [*Interruption*.]

Stephen Flynn: Of course I can, but I appreciate that members are conscious of time, so I do not want to list them all. I can draw Mr Middleton's attention to what I drew Mr Kerr's attention to, which is the Aberdeen western peripheral route. It was a huge investment in the north-east of Scotland and the city of Aberdeen that has improved the lives of many of Mr Middleton's constituents and ensured that we have consistent economic growth in our city.

Teaching Contracts

6. **Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress it has made towards reducing the number of teachers on short-term or temporary contracts. (S7O-00065)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Local authorities are responsible for teacher employment practices, as they are the employer of teachers. However, the Government is doing everything possible to maximise the number of teaching jobs that are available, including permanent posts. The 2026-27 budget continues to provide local authorities with an additional £186.5 million to protect teacher numbers. The number of teachers in Scotland's classrooms has increased by more than 2,700 over the past decade as a result of investment, and we have the best teacher pupil ratio in the United Kingdom.

However, in recognition of difficulties in securing permanent posts, we have committed to delivering the reforms that are necessary to provide a jobs guarantee for a minimum of three years for newly qualified teachers.

Katherine Sangster: Teaching unions have raised concerns that the way in which local authorities advertise temporary contracts is making work difficult to access for some teachers, by creating an inequality for those with caring responsibilities and those who are unable to check their phones because they are working.

The advertising sites are not collecting data that would highlight the scale of the issue. Will the cabinet secretary commit to looking into ways to collect that data to ensure that all teachers have equal access to work?

Màiri McAllan: As we do the careful work that is required to design and, thereafter, implement the conditions for a three-year teacher job guarantee, I will, of course, consider, among many other issues, the points that Katherine Sangster has put to me about the very practical question of how roles are advertised and the ways that individuals with different needs can access the roles. That is but one important part of developing the right conditions for the three-year teacher job guarantee that the Government is undertaking.

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I hope that we can all welcome the Scottish Government's plans to deliver the reforms that are necessary to provide a teacher job guarantee for a minimum of three years for newly qualified teachers. How does the cabinet secretary anticipate that that measure will support Scotland's teaching workforce?

Màiri McAllan: I recognise, and the Government recognises, that the lack of available jobs after probation has, for some prospective teachers, been a significant concern. The commitment to a teacher job guarantee demonstrates that we have listened to that and are prepared and determined to work with partners to find solutions. The measures will provide greater certainty at the start of a teacher's career, supporting early career retention and morale, while helping to ensure a more stable and sustainable workforce.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): The former education secretary and now Deputy First Minister, Jenny Gilruth, said in January this year that teachers would need to relocate to where the jobs are. Mike Corbett from the NASUWT condemned those comments. Does the new cabinet secretary agree with the Deputy First Minister, or does she agree that the issue comes down to a dysfunctional teacher supply system that still sees teachers trapped in short-term or temporary contracts?

Màiri McAllan: On the substance of Meghan Gallacher's question—setting aside any misquoting of cabinet secretaries—the fact is that, as I put to Colm Merrick, the Government has

invested significantly in the retention of teachers and the growth of teacher numbers in Scotland. We understand the importance of finishing one's probation and then being able to move into secure employment. That is why, alongside the other investments that we are making, we are committing to a teacher job guarantee and doing the work required to develop that. I look forward to working with members and with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as we develop that.

Pupil Support Assistants (Rural Primary Schools)

7. **Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** I refer to my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I am a sitting councillor on Highland Council. To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how any reduction in hours or withdrawal of pupil support assistant posts will impact rural primary schools, particularly in the Highlands and Islands region. (S7O-00066)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Pupil support assistants play an absolutely vital role in our classrooms and schools and in our young people's education. They are essential and valued members of the school learning teams and communities. That is why we continue to provide £15 million each year to help local authorities to maintain record levels of investment in those vital staff.

Andrew Baxter: I thank the cabinet secretary for recognising the importance of our PSAs. However, every summer, pupils, parents, teachers and pupil support assistants are left wondering what their classrooms will look like after the holidays. One PSA recently told me that they were informed before the start of the school day that there was no allocation for their post beyond the summer. Having just moved into their first rented flat, they do not know how they will pay the bills.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that the annual cycle of uncertainty is failing staff and pupils? What action will the Scottish Government take with local authorities to ensure that young people receive the support that they need to reach their full potential?

Màiri McAllan: I recognise the seriousness of the issue that Andrew Baxter raises. It bears repeating that local authorities are the employers of teachers and that, therefore, any assessment that is done regarding the reduction of hours or the withdrawal of pupil support staff in schools in the sort of rural setting that he mentions, or in any school, is a matter for the local authority. However, I am clear that local authorities must allocate resources, including for pupil support staff, on the basis of local needs and priorities and, crucially, through meaningful engagement with the school community.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): Pupil support assistants have an essential role to play in our classrooms. Can the cabinet secretary provide any update on the steps that the Scottish National Party Government is taking to support schools, including in Scotland's rural areas, to deliver more pupil support staff?

Màiri McAllan: I can. It is worth noting for a moment where we are now. The latest figures show that, in Scotland, we have 16,908 pupil support assistants, which is the third highest number on record and an increase of nearly 1,645 since 2020. However, in our manifesto, the Government committed to considering ways that we can support the career pathways of pupil support staff by enhancing training, development and accreditation in order to improve recruitment and retention, which will ensure that those valued members of staff can make an impact on young people's lives.

Air Quality (Scottish Transport Emissions Partnership)

8. **Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work carried out by the Scottish transport emissions partnership in relation to local air quality management. (S7O-00067)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): We all recognise the importance of clean air, particularly those of us who walk around with weans. Unfortunately, the Scottish transport emissions partnership is no longer active, but I advise Katie Hagmann that action is currently driven by the cleaner air for Scotland strategy.

Katie Hagmann: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the A77 trunk road runs through Girvan in my constituency, carrying significant heavy goods vehicle traffic to and from the port of Cairnryan. Local groups, including GoGirvan, which is a community regeneration group, seek support in order to monitor air quality, noise and vibration impacts in Girvan. Given Transport Scotland's responsibility for the trunk road network, can the cabinet secretary outline what direct support his officials can provide, and is he willing to meet the group to discuss its concerns and its request for a feasibility study on a bypass for the town?

Stephen Flynn: I am sympathetic to the campaigners' arguments—it is very hard not to be. I have asked my officials to engage with those campaigners and to feed back to me as quickly as

possible whether any action could be taken that is within the Government's scope.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Thank you, colleagues. That concludes general questions. I apologise to those whose supplementary questions were not called due to time constraints.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:32

Men's Football (World Cup)

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Thanks to the First Minister's decision to call a bank holiday for Scotland's first world cup game in almost 28 years, my constituents were able to watch one of our own—Lewis Ferguson, who was raised in the village of Quarter and trained by Hamilton Accies—help to deliver our first world cup win in 36 years, without worrying about the recovery on Monday.

Could the First Minister tell the Parliament what his visit to America achieved for Scotland and how he intends to build on our men's team making history and get people across the nation to take up our national sport, particularly after we win the world cup?

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I appreciate the ambition.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I express the warmest congratulations of everyone in the Scottish Parliament and, indeed, the whole of our country on the outstanding performance of Steve Clarke, Andy Robertson, the Scotland team and the tartan army, who were an absolute credit to our country in the United States at the weekend. [*Applause*].

It was a particular pleasure to see our fans making such a positive impression in Boston and capturing the city's imagination and interest. On Friday evening, the governor of Massachusetts and the mayor of Boston both indicated to me their joy in what the fans had brought to the city. On Saturday, I was, like everyone else, able to witness our team's success as it won against Haiti, which augurs well for the remainder of the world cup campaign.

In response to Mr Kerr's question, the success of and the capturing of the country's imagination by the weekend's sporting events helped to reinforce sport's importance in our society. The Government has announced a variety of initiatives to encourage a summer of sport, which includes support for the world cup fund to support young boys and girls to follow their sporting dreams, and £275,000 of funding to support the work that is delivered across the country by Street Soccer Scotland. The summer of sport contains a number of other welcome initiatives to encourage sporting participation in the country.

After the weekend, we should all take stock and be very grateful for the tremendous inspiration

offered by the Scotland national team and the tartan army, who are a credit to our country.

Health and Social Care Partnerships (Budgets)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Thanks to Scottish National Party cuts, health and social care partnerships across Scotland face a £0.5 billion gap in their budgets this year. In Renfrewshire, if nothing changes, the disability resource centre in Paisley will close, the autism connections programme will be cut back and day centres for adults with learning disabilities will be merged. Those are vital services, and Friday is decision day. What are my vulnerable neighbours and their families meant to do if the cuts go ahead?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In the Government's budget for the current financial year, we put in place increased financial support for the health service and for local government, and the health and social care budgets, to which Mr Bibby referred, come from those two increased budgets.

I understand and appreciate the significance of all the projects that Mr Bibby mentioned, but we rely on health and social care partnerships to take considered decisions about the delivery of services within localities. Mr Bibby has put on the record his point about the importance of supporting services for the vulnerable, and the Government increased the budgets for health and local government to enable such support to be provided.

Mr Bibby's question highlights the need for reform in how we deliver care and support at the local level, and the Parliament has an opportunity to engage to address together some of the important questions that he has put to me. The Government will set out proposals on the reform of health and social care in our communities to ensure that people's needs are met. I look forward to engaging in constructive discussion with people such as Mr Bibby, because, if we want to deliver for the vulnerable in our society, we all have to prepare to take tough decisions to ensure that services meet the needs of people in our communities.

University of Dundee (Job Losses)

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): This morning, I was dismayed to learn that the principal of the University of Dundee has gone ahead with an announcement of a further £20 million of cuts, which would require up to 200 more job losses at the university. The impact that that is having on staff at the university and our town cannot be overstated. I am particularly concerned that the university has, in my view, failed to adequately engage with trade unions, despite significant public funding having been provided to prevent further job losses. Does the First Minister share my deep concern on behalf of my constituents, and will he provide an update on the Scottish Government's engagement with the university's leadership?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As a member who represents a constituency that adjoins the city of Dundee, I have local interests in the matter, but I will answer the question as the First Minister.

The University of Dundee's announcement this morning of a consultation on further job cuts is extremely disappointing. Heather Anderson is absolutely right that public funding is involved, and the utilisation of those public funds must be compliant with the conditions that were associated with the section 25 direction that was given by ministers previously.

The Scottish Funding Council has looked at the University of Dundee's proposals and, in its assessment, believes that the university has complied with the funding conditions. However, ministers have not been assured on the details, and we will require to see them, as the direction came from ministers. We have to be careful about the accountabilities, because the University of Dundee is an independent institution and the Scottish Funding Council acts independently. However, on this particular issue, a ministerial direction, using powers in section 25 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, directs how the funding can be used. The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic has spoken to the university's principal, its chair of court and the Funding Council about those issues, and the Government will continue to engage with them.

I give Heather Anderson the assurance that the Government attaches the greatest priority to meaningful and effective dialogue with members of staff, who, I recognise, will be feeling deeply alarmed by the announcements that were made by the university. The Government's conditions require there to be substantive engagement with staff and trade unions, and the Government will ensure that that is the case.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency (Payments)

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): When the call comes, coastguard rescue officers drop everything, leaving work, family and home to help to save lives. I am sure that the First Minister shares my concerns about proposals from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to remove payments for emergency call-outs and training. Will he join MSPs from across the Parliament in calling on the United Kingdom Government and the MCA to think

again? What action will he take to highlight the vital role that coastguard rescue officers play in keeping our communities safe?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am grateful to Mr Baxter for raising such an important issue, which arises out of a recent court decision that has resulted in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency withdrawing payments to individuals who volunteer as part of the coastguard service. Mr Baxter is absolutely right about the significant dependence that we have on individuals volunteering. The removal of payments, as opposed to the payment of expenses, is a significant factor to be wrestled with by volunteers in the coastguard team.

I will happily write to United Kingdom Government ministers on this question. It is an entirely reserved issue, as Mr Baxter correctly sets out. In setting out our view, I will say that Mr Baxter has raised the matter with me in the Parliament and that the issue commands support across the political spectrum. I will reflect that in the communication to the MCA.

The Presiding Officer: Unless we get shorter questions and shorter answers, we will get through a lot fewer questions than we did last week.

Council Tax Debt

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Research from the GMB trade union has found that more than 1 million people in Scotland are now affected by council tax debt arrears, with almost 250,000 threatened with court action last year. Will the Scottish Government consider reforms to debt collection processes similar to the reforms that were announced for England by the United Kingdom Government and those that have already been implemented in Wales?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has more extensive support in place for council tax payments, as council tax benefit exists in Scotland whereas it does not exist in other parts of the United Kingdom, which is because of policy decisions taken by this Government. We are providing practical support to people in the payment of their council tax bills.

We have written off a certain amount of council tax debt, but council tax payments are obviously essential to support the delivery of local services. I will explore what other measures can be taken to ensure that advice and support are available to people so that they can pay council tax. I stress that many people are eligible for council tax benefit in Scotland, but not in other parts of the UK.

Motability Scheme

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Changes made by the United Kingdom Government mean that the Motability scheme's annual allowable mileage is reducing from 20,000 miles to 10,000 miles; critically, excess mileage charges are going up fivefold to 25p per mile. One of my constituents has been in contact with me to say that she is concerned that she cannot afford a lease for a new car, which is a lifeline service.

Although the 1 July deadline does not apply in Scotland, will the First Minister outline when proposals were announced for the agreement for the service in Scotland? What can be done to offset another Westminster attack on the disabled?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Brown raises a significant issue, particularly for Motability car users in rural Scotland, where distance issues will be far more extensive than in more urban communities. The changes were made by the United Kingdom Government as a consequence of changes to tax exemptions in the November budget last year, which were implemented and taken forward by the UK Labour Government. As Mr Brown quite correctly says, that erodes the rights of disabled people. The 1 July 2026 commencement date that was announced by Motability for its changes in the rest of the UK will not apply in Scotland. However, other changes might be required.

I will ensure that relevant ministers are in dialogue with Motability and with Mr Brown to ensure that the legitimate concerns that he raises with me are properly pursued to protect users in Scotland, particularly those in rural areas.

Human Rights (Refugees and Migrants)

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): Will the First Minister join me in celebrating the contribution of refugees and migrants to communities across Scotland? Can he provide an update on when his Government will introduce the long-awaited Scottish human rights bill, so that the freedoms of new Scots are protected?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is working on the proposed human rights legislation, which we will bring forward when it is fully developed. It is complex legislation, and it will require substantive dialogue with the Parliament.

I associate myself entirely with Holly Bruce's comments on the welcome to refugees. Scotland has always been and, certainly under my leadership, will always be a welcoming and inclusive country.

On the streets of Glasgow at the weekend, there was quite a contrast between the many thousands of peaceful individuals setting out their welcome to refugees and a limited number of balaclava-wearing individuals doing Nazi salutes—on the

streets of our country. I could not condemn those individuals and their behaviour more strongly today in this Parliament. This is a welcoming country and the behaviour of the far right has no place on our streets.

Defence Priorities (North Sea)

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Offshore Energies UK has warned that North Sea energy infrastructure should be designated critical national infrastructure and, as such, should be guarded by the navy and air force to protect against potential Russian attacks. The Westminster United Kingdom Government has failed for years to properly invest in adequate defence provision in our North Sea, leaving our energy infrastructure vulnerable. Does the First Minister agree that it is urgent that additional defence investment is directed towards the North Sea as a priority? Will he join me in calling on the Westminster Government to do so?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There has obviously been a great deal of debate on the issue in the past few days, subsequent to the resignation of the Secretary of State for Defence. The point that Dawn Black puts to me is important, because we have huge maritime interests around the coastline of Scotland, which, in my view, are not adequately protected due to the disproportionate investment that is made by the UK Government in weapons of mass destruction that the UK cannot now adequately support while maintaining our defence footprint to protect the vital interests and infrastructure that Dawn Black refers to.

A shift is required in UK priorities to protect our coastline and to make sure that, to the north of Scotland, we have some capability to stand up to the threats that we face from Russia under the Putin regime; those threats require us to reshape our defence priorities. A greater investment in conventional maritime defence forces and the removal of our commitment to nuclear weapons would be a far more sensible defence strategy for this country.

Rare Diseases (PANS-PANDAS)

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): My constituent Hugo is nine years old. Following a case of strep throat, he developed severe obsessive-compulsive disorder, tics and hallucinations and had significant weight loss. He was eventually diagnosed with the autoimmune condition PANS-PANDAS—paediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome and paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections. Today, Hugo is doing much better, but only after his family spent more than £6,000 to enable him to see a private specialist in London.

Sadly, Hugo's experience is not unique. Families across Scotland have been forced to seek private treatment because PANS-PANDAS is not recognised in national health service clinical guidance. Does the First Minister agree that no parent in Scotland should be forced to pay thousands of pounds just to make their child well? Will his Government take steps to ensure that PANS-PANDAS is properly recognised in NHS guidance?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am sorry to hear about the circumstances that Mr Harley raises about his constituent Hugo. The condition he describes will come into the category of rare diseases, because, as Mr Harley referred to, relatively few cases will exist. The Government has measures in place through the rare disease action plan, which tries to address the very issues that Mr Harley raises with me by identifying what steps we can take within a very broad national health service to ensure that the needs of absolutely everybody and their specialist requirements are met.

I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care to engage directly about this constituency case and see whether any further action can be taken. I reassure Mr Harley that, on the general question, the Government is focusing on trying to ensure that rare diseases are properly and fully appreciated in the NHS.

High Streets (Empty Units)

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am a sitting councillor on Angus Council.

In recent days, the BBC has highlighted the long-standing issues with empty units on Arbroath high street, which is a key priority for my constituents. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to support Scotland's high streets, including that in Arbroath, so that they can remain the thriving hearts of our communities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One of the steps that we have taken is to devolve empty property relief to local authorities, with a concurrent transfer of £105 million each year to local government. Further, to incentivise the reoccupation of empty non-domestic properties, eligible properties may claim 100 per cent fresh start relief for up to 12 months. We are determined that, alongside the steps that are in place, which will benefit many of the businesses or properties to which Mr Melville refers, those businesses will be eligible for the small business bonus scheme. The Government is supporting regeneration in town centres, with more than £50 million committed in the 2026-27 budget. I hope that those measures will be effective and successful in supporting the

work that Mr Melville is taking forward to support development in Arbroath.

Alcohol Marketing (Young People)

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): With the world cup under way and the Commonwealth games due to take place here in Scotland over the summer, thousands of children and young people in Scotland are being exposed to alcohol marketing, in which alcohol branding is associated with national pride and with sport. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of such alcohol partnerships, given that there is clear evidence to suggest that the more often young people are exposed to alcohol marketing, the more likely they are start consuming alcohol at an early age?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One crucial part of that work is the Government's engagement with stakeholders that are concerned about the issues that Carol Mochan raises. Another is the participation of the alcohol industry in taking responsible approaches to alcohol consumption and ensuring that that forms part of our wider discussions.

From my discussions with organisations such as the Scotch Whisky Association I know that they attach importance to being active participants in the promotion of that responsible message, so that individuals who are in any way, shape or form exposed to alcohol marking are able to make a considered judgment about the issues concerned with the consumption of alcohol.

Prisons (Capacity)

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In last weekend's *Sunday Post*, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice announced a significant shift away from custodial sentences, as part of the Government's efforts to reduce Scotland's prison population. Given the implications for victims, public safety and confidence in the justice system, why was that policy announced through a newspaper interview, rather than to the Parliament? Does the First Minister accept that the answer to prison overcrowding is to provide sufficient prison capacity and not to send fewer offenders to prison?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not sure that the article to which Mr Kerr refers was, in any way, a development of Government policy; I think it was a statement of Government policy. I am very attuned to the importance of the Government setting out its policy position to Parliament first, and that is exactly what we will do. However, it is important that ministers engage in interviews with representatives of the media, and I am sure that we would be criticised if we did not do that.

The Government must strike a balance by ensuring that the prison estate is safe for prisoners and staff but also that those who have committed significant and heinous crimes are incarcerated. Mr Kerr will be aware that we are currently seeing longer sentences being given because of the nature of the crimes being committed, and that that is driving the increased prison population. The Government has always taken an interest in—and made a policy priority of—ensuring that community justice plays a part in the approaches that we take. All those elements are part of the wider delivery of Government policy on justice.

Mounjaro (NHS Health Board Delays)

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): One of my constituents is unable to secure a national health service prescription for tirzepatide, which is better known as Mounjaro, for weight management, despite criteria approved by the Scottish Medicines Consortium in June 2024 indicating approval for restricted use, including in the circumstances that impact my constituent. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde does not yet include the treatment in its formulary for weight-management prescriptions and says that that work is ongoing. Does the First Minister agree that two years after SMC approval is simply too long to wait for health boards to add Mounjaro to their formularies so that prescribing it can be considered? What action can the Scottish Government take to tackle that delay by health boards?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Individual health boards must respond to judgments made by the Scottish Medicines Consortium. We want that to be undertaken on a timely basis to ensure that individuals can have access to treatments and that they can be deployed. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care to explore the steps being taken by Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, to ensure that the necessary urgency is being applied in that respect.

Whitesands Flood Defence Scheme

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The First Minister recently visited the Whitesands in Dumfries, where, despite significant local opposition, work is under way on a controversial £70 million flood defence scheme. The community fears the impact on businesses and the environment and has concerns about soaring costs amid reports of insufficient Scottish Government flood defence funding.

Will the First Minister confirm that, in relation to this Scottish National Party Government-backed flood defence scheme, his Government will not move the goalposts by capping or delaying its £55 million contribution? Will he provide assurance that hard-pressed taxpayers in Dumfriesshire will

not be asked to foot the bill if cycle 1 of the national flood fund runs dry or if the project experiences significant cost overruns?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Whitesands flood defence scheme in Dumfries has been under consideration for many years and I accept that there are divided opinions about it. Equally, however, I have been in the Parliament for long enough to hear members for Dumfries come here to express concern and horror for their constituents when they are affected by the flooding that takes place at the Whitesands. I have considerable experience of flooding in my constituency and I know how terrible it is for members of the public.

I am not actually sure what Mr Hoy wants. Does he want to leave people vulnerable to flooding in their community? Is that what he wants? At some point, Mr Hoy, who is now the MSP for Dumfriesshire, has to decide whether he is acting to protect his constituents or just coming here to get another press release put out. It is not really how a responsible local member of Parliament should operate.

Mr Hoy will also realise that there are enormous challenges in construction projects just now because of external factors over which this Government has absolutely no control—principally, the construction price inflation that has arisen as a result of the war in Ukraine. Those are legitimate factors that we will work on in partnership with local authorities. What does not help is the constant haranguing from the miserabilists on the Conservative benches who just come here to complain and offer no solutions. It is no wonder that there are hardly any of them left.

Gas Boiler Systems (Optimisation)

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Many homes in Scotland are still using gas boilers, which we know are very ineffective. There are many oversized boiler systems that have heat load issues and are not on the right settings. Will the First Minister consider doing something fairly simple in the short term and ensure that gas boiler systems are optimised in order to reduce carbon emissions and lower costs for people across Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Part of the Government's approach in that respect is to move towards more sustainable heating solutions that will be good for the planet but also good for householders because they will involve lower costs. I agree with Angela Ross that we need to get to a situation where we have lower heating costs for householders. I have to say that I am not a world expert on the specifics of the configuration of gas boiler schemes, but I will have the issues explored. However, I say to Ms Ross that, in principle, the prevailing direction of Government policy is to encourage a move to more sustainable heating solutions, and good progress is being made on that. That will be reflected in the heat in buildings legislation that the Government will introduce.

Solar Farm Developments

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): On 7 April, I attended a community council meeting in Newarthill regarding the proposed solar farm development on the north field at Biggar Road. Residents raised concerns about its proximity to housing and the cumulative impact of further developments in the area, including a proposed data centre. There are also concerns that Oakes Energy has provided misleading information about the project and its local impact. Does the First Minister agree that Scotland needs a clear energy strategy to guide such developments? Does he agree that developers must engage openly and honestly with communities so that projects are developed with them rather than visited upon them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much agree with Meghan Gallacher's last point. Local dialogue on such projects is really important. I am conscious of a number of very sensitive projects. During First Minister's question time the other week, a question was raised with me about an artificial intelligence data centre, and I am conscious of the concern that exists in local communities. The point that Meghan Gallacher makes about good, active and engaged local dialogue by developers is critical.

Such issues have to be considered as part of the wider energy generation measures that we take forward, and the Government has a clear policy direction to support and encourage the development of renewable energy in Scotland.

Fuel Duty

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): The Scotland chair of the Federation of Small Businesses has warned that the increases that there have been in fuel and energy prices hit small businesses

"particularly hard because they do not have the buying power to smooth out price bumps or hedge prices."

The federation is

"calling on the UK Government to introduce a time-limited 5p cut to fuel duty while the higher prices remain."

Does the First Minister agree that Westminster must act to protect businesses in Scotland? Can he provide any update on the Scottish Government's engagement with the United Kingdom Government on the issue?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Ministers wrote to the United Kingdom Government about the proposed 5p increase in fuel duty that was due to take effect from September this year. Thankfully, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has indicated that that will not take its course. However, there remains the substantive issue that Martyn Day has raised, which is that many businesses and householders pay a very high cost for their energy in what is an energy-rich country. My view on all that is that we will receive much more benefit from Scotland's energy bounty if Scotland's energy is in Scotland's hands.

Murray's Initiative Women's Service

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): As I stand in the chamber, the Sisters Against Cuts group in my region is pleading with the Government to step in and stop the proposed cuts to the Murray's Initiative women's service, which provides essential support to survivors of substance misuse and gender-based violence. Reportedly, service users fear what the future may hold. Does the First Minister agree that the loss of that service would also mean an immense loss to the protection of women and girls in Glasgow? Will he commit to exploring options for funding to retain those vital services?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the importance of services being provided to women and girls who are the victims of domestic and gender-based violence. Through the equally safe programme, the Government provides funding for a range of different projects around the country and supports local authorities to provide financial support to individual organisations.

I will explore the specifics of the case that Iris Duane has put to me, to ensure that any steps that the Government can take will be taken to ensure the provision of effective services that meet the needs of women and girls who go through the horror of experiencing domestic or gender-based violence.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. I apologise to the many members whose questions I was unable to take.

Aberdeen's Union Street and Glasgow's People's Palace (Investment)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Our next item of business is a statement by Tom Arthur on Scottish Government investment in Our Union Street and the People's Palace.

15:03

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): I welcome the opportunity to update the Parliament on progress and further investment in two significant projects—Our Union Street in Aberdeen and the People's Palace in Glasgow—both of which will support wider regeneration of their local communities. Our commitments on those projects, which were set out in our manifesto, form part of our commitments for our first 100 days. I will lead on the statement, in which I will reflect on both the Our Union Street project and—on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic—the People's Palace commitment, which sits in the culture portfolio.

Although the two projects are located in different cities, they both play an important role in driving place-based regeneration and supporting the physical, economic and social renewal of local communities. Through our regeneration strategy and targeted investment programmes, we are supporting thriving places and regions, which are central to Scotland's long-term economic success. That is reflected in our commitment of up to £52 million in the 2026-27 budget to accelerate regeneration across the country.

I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will provide up to an additional £600,000 for the Our Union Street campaign, building on our existing funding of £400,000. That will bring total investment of up to £1 million. That funding will complement wider Scottish Government investment in the north-east, including £125 million over 10 years through the Aberdeen city region deal and £13.4 million in regeneration capital investment since 2014.

Union Street has long been the heart of Aberdeen and, like many town and city centres, it has faced significant challenges in recent years. In response, in 2023, local businesses and communities came together to form Our Union Street, a volunteer-led movement aimed at tackling vacancies, improving the streetscape, supporting new businesses and rebuilding civic pride. A defining feature of that initiative has been its strong community engagement. More than 70

local groups were engaged with, more than 500 people attended a major public meeting, and more than 10,000 ideas were generated to help to shape the future of the street.

Three years on, there has been a reduction in the number of vacant units. With support from our £400,000 of investment to date, the project has delivered tangible outcomes, including shop-front improvements, cleaning and maintenance, volunteer mobilisation and stronger partnership working with local organisations and businesses. The Our Union Street team has worked closely with landlords and agents to bring vacant units back into use. Simple interventions, such as cleaning empty premises, have helped to attract new tenants and have created opportunities for new hospitality and commercial activity. There have also been visible improvements to the street itself, including exhibits and makeovers of vacant units that have drawn people back into the centre. I was particularly impressed by the efforts to work with local artists, including the graffiti grannies, a local street art group of over-60s that not only helps to tackle social isolation but has also reinvigorated neighbourhoods with local art.

Our investment has supported innovative digital solutions in reimagining the city. In particular, the introduction of a smartphone app is helping people to engage with the city centre in new ways. Launched last month, the app acts as a guide to local events, gives users exclusive deals at independent shops and has interactive trails uncovering Aberdeen's lesser-known history and heritage.

Those practical interventions are making a real difference on the ground. Increased occupancy and footfall have helped to reinforce confidence in the city centre as a place to live, work and invest. My officials have already met the Our Union Street team and Aberdeen City Council to discuss delivery of the commitment, and we will ensure that the additional funding builds on existing investment and momentum in revitalising the city centre.

Crucially, the project can complement further action led by the Aberdeen Inspired business improvement district, which is another key player in driving the economic and cultural vibrancy of Aberdeen city centre through initiatives such as the Nuart Aberdeen art festival and the biannual Aberdeen restaurant weeks. In parallel, initiatives such as the award-winning upper floors project, which is being delivered by Aberdeen City Council and the Aberdeen Inspired BID, are addressing long-standing challenges by converting underused upper floor spaces into homes, workplaces and creative hubs. Together, those efforts are helping to revitalise Union Street and breathe new life into Aberdeen's city centre. They reflect a town centre first approach that we are committed to supporting across Scotland. The work of Our Union Street is something that others can look to and learn from.

Presiding Officer, the additional investment in Our Union Street is about more than physical change. It also sends a clear message that Aberdeen city centre is open for business and committed to attracting investment, talent and new enterprises. It is about supporting communities, strengthening the local economy and fostering a strong sense of place. Our Union Street has already played a key role in that progress and I look forward to seeing what more can be achieved.

I turn to the People's Palace and winter gardens project, which aims to save a cornerstone of Glasgow's cultural heritage. The People's Palace opened in 1898 at the iconic Glasgow Green, with a pioneering vision to create a cultural, educational and recreational community space for the working-class residents of the east end.

At the heart of the People's Palace redevelopment project is an ambitious vision for the local communities in the east end of Glasgow. The project will use a community-led approach to create a museum by the people, for the people. Inclusion, access and participation will be increased through that approach, and the project will focus on local and national priorities including supporting learning, wellbeing, skills development and net zero. It will reimagine the People's Palace to create one of the world's most socially engaged and internationally significant local museums.

The restoration project will also demonstrate the benefits of reusing and adapting historic buildings to ensure that they can thrive again and support the wellbeing of Scotland's people and the economy. A significantly improved and accessible cultural venue will also make the local area a better place to live and will support local businesses and jobs. It will create new employment opportunities during the redevelopment and beyond.

The project aims to build on the success of the redeveloped Burrell Collection, which generated more than £21 million in economic value in its first year of reopening, and almost £25 million in its second year. It is clear that the renewed People's Palace will play a pivotal placemaking role in one of Glasgow's most deprived neighbourhoods. However, the grade-A listed museum is now at risk of permanent closure, and we must ensure that that does not happen. That is why I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will establish a partnership group to support the redevelopment of the People's Palace, recognising its status as a building of national cultural and historic significance and its role in the regeneration of Glasgow's east end.

The group will bring together key partners, including Historic Environment Scotland, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Glasgow Life, Museums Galleries Scotland and Scottish Enterprise, alongside wider sectoral expertise, to work collaboratively with Glasgow City Council in progressing the refurbishment of the People's Palace and winter gardens. The partnership group will facilitate the sharing of expertise, support the achievement of value for money for the public purse and seek to agree a viable and deliverable funding package, including appropriate match-funding arrangements.

Investing in Our Union Street and the People's Palace demonstrates our clear commitment to regeneration that is locally led, nationally supported and focused on delivering real change. By investing in our places, we are investing in people, opportunity and long-term prosperity. I am confident that, together, we will continue to build stronger, more resilient communities across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We will now have questions. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we must move on to the next item of business.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as a sitting councillor on Glasgow City Council. I thank the minister for providing advance sight of his statement. I will focus my question on the People's Palace in Glasgow.

Reform members welcome the announcement, although, as a Glaswegian, I regret that it has taken so long. The images that we saw leaked a few years ago from inside the winter gardens were devastating for Glaswegians. The museum is a pillar of working-class history and heritage for our city, and it is vital. Will the local community therefore be involved in the partnership group that has been announced, in particular the hard-working and dedicated local activists from the Friends of the People's Palace, Winter Gardens and Glasgow Green group?

Lastly, unless I am mistaken, there is no solid announcement of funding—but then, we do not have a by-election coming up in Glasgow. Will the minister tell Glasgow, therefore, how much the Government will cough up to help the redevelopment go forward?

Tom Arthur: I highlight that the commitment in Aberdeen was a manifesto commitment—I want to put that on the record to avoid any dubiety or misunderstandings that members may innocently stray into.

However, I welcome the member's question, which recognises the importance of the People's Palace and winter gardens, and the fact that it is cherished by many, not only across the east end of Glasgow but across Scotland. Indeed, many members in the chamber will have childhood memories of visiting it, perhaps as part of a school outing.

The member's two central points were about the funding that the Scottish Government will bring forward and the securing of ongoing community engagement. I want to be clear that the work must be community led—I sought to reflect that in my statement. I want to ensure that the work of the partnership group that we bring together complements that engagement and provides national support for something that is community led. I am open to all suggestions from members to ensure that the voices of communities are heard. Too often, communities, particularly those in places such as the east end of Glasgow, had things done to them, not with them. This is their People's Palace, and I want to make sure that their voices are not just heard but integral to what comes next.

With regard to funding, there have been challenges, which have been recognised and covered in the media. I want us to sit down and work with a range of partners, recognising that there are many shared interests and funders, to identify an appropriate funding package to make sure that that work can be delivered. With regard to the commitment from the Scottish Government, I will endeavour to keep Parliament up to date.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the hard work that Our Union Street is doing to re-energise Union Street and the centre of Aberdeen. The project is working along with partners to bring together a shared vision of the future of the city centre.

Can the minister say a little more today about how the Scottish Government will assist with the funding of that regeneration and the delivery of the shared vision that the partners are developing?

Tom Arthur: I join Mr Marra in recognising the hard work of all those involved in Our Union Street. To date, we have committed £400,000 to the project and, today, I am announcing an additional commitment of up to £600,000, which will mean a total investment of up to £1 million. As I touched on in my statement, my officials have already met local partners, and we will continue to engage.

Having rejoined the regeneration portfolio, which I previously covered, my reflection is that what is of the utmost importance is not what ministers—or even members—think should happen, but is the utilising of the expertise of local communities. When we look at Our Union Street

as a model, we see that the involvement of partners such as the chamber of commerce and the BID is integral to the success of the project. We see that in other examples of successful regeneration elsewhere in Scotland. At the heart of that success are community and business voices.

I want to ensure that we are focused not just on the quantum of funding but on maximising its impact. That is about ensuring that we work constructively with local partners to ensure that every pound that is invested has the maximum impact. That will be achieved by having close, ongoing engagement on the ground. I will be happy to keep members updated and to engage with any members who want to discuss the matter further.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): For too long, Aberdeen has paid the price for Westminster mismanagement of our energy industry. My constituency is the energy capital of Europe, and it should look and feel like it, so I welcome the significant Scottish National Party regeneration package for Our Union Street. Will the minister outline the wider benefits that he hopes that it will deliver with regard to high street footfall and Aberdeen's wider economy?

Tom Arthur: The benefits that will be conferred are significant in and of themselves. An immediate impact can be achieved simply by improving the appearance of an area. For example, dressing a shop front can significantly change attitudes and perceptions. Such simple, small interventions can be impactful in catalysing an investment. I highlighted some of those small interventions in my remarks—the shop-front improvements, cleaning and maintenance of the street, and digital innovation.

Cumulatively, all of that can help to boost confidence, but it creates a multiplier effect because, when one shop becomes occupied and starts trading, that acts as a catalyst for shops next door to become occupied. It draws more people into the centre and, indeed, can help to encourage more residents to move into the centre as well. The investment that has been put in over the past few years, as well as working in partnership, is having a positive impact and we are keen to accelerate that, which is why we are going to provide additional investment of up to £600,000.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The welcome investment in Our Union Street should not simply regenerate buildings but empower communities and ensure that the wealth created by Union Street's revival is retained locally for the benefit of the people of Aberdeen.

Will the minister commit to ensuring that the investment in Our Union Street is accompanied by practical support for community asset transfers, co-operative enterprise and social economy initiatives, so that the town centre first approach delivers not only physical regeneration but democratic ownership and community wealth building in the heart of the city?

Tom Arthur: Maggie Chapman raises important points. One of the lessons of regeneration in previous decades has been that, although it is possible to come in with significant capital investment to improve infrastructure and buildings, if there is not accompanying work to rewire local economies, we can sometimes, 10, 15 or 20 years later, find ourselves back at square 1. Regeneration must be about more than coming in and improving just the façade and appearance of an area; it must be sustainable. The points that Maggie Chapman made about retaining the wealth that is generated in a place are crucial in that regard.

This week is Scotland loves local week. The small local businesses that will be populating Union Street and many other high streets the length and breadth of Scotland disproportionately employ and procure locally, and the wealth that they generate therefore remains within their communities.

Such an initiative, which involves working in partnership with the business improvement district, is consistent with community wealth building. Of course, community wealth building is now on the statute book, and we can look forward to its implementation over the course of this parliamentary session.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The deeply cynical timing of this statement—reannouncing money that was promised months ago, £400,000 of which has been repackaged from three years ago, two days before the Aberdeen South by-election—will fool no one. We all know that this statement has been made because the Scottish National Party is hearing on the doorsteps that it is the Scottish Conservatives who stand against the SNP's catastrophic presumption against oil and gas, who found £10 million for Torry reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete victims and who defend the people of Aberdeen against the disastrous low-emission zone and bus gates.

The chair of Our Union Street, Bob Keiller, has argued that the SNP's sky-high business rates regime is a significant obstacle to Union Street's regeneration. Does the minister agree? If so, what concrete action will he take?

Tom Arthur: I do not know whether the member misheard me. Just in case he missed it, today, we have announced additional investment in Aberdeen. The SNP Scottish Government is investing up to £1 million in the centre of

Aberdeen. [*Interruption*.] I will say that again, because I do not think that Mr Kerr caught it the first time: up to £1 million of investment is being put into the centre of Aberdeen by the SNP Scottish Government. He could at least show some cheer and support that.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for providing advance sight of his statement. Union Street is vital to the local economy of Aberdeen and the wider north-east region, and we want to see it full of life once more, so that the granite can shine.

I welcome the Government's announced investment, but I agree with Mr Kerr that we must ensure that it does not become too expensive for businesses to remain on Union Street and all our high streets. That is why we need action on non-domestic business rates and to build on the rates relief that the Liberal Democrats secured in the previous parliamentary session. Will the Scottish Government look into reforming business rates to ensure that shops and businesses have a secure future?

Tom Arthur: Yi-pei Chou Turvey raises an important point about non-domestic rates—in fairness, Mr Kerr did so as well. We recognise some of the challenges that have arisen following the revaluation, which was reflected in the package of reliefs that was brought forward as part of the budget process. From memory, that package now totals in excess of £870 million—that is an £870 million tax cut from this Government to businesses.

However, we recognise that there is more work to do, and we are committed to engaging constructively, including in the process of reviewing our rates system. It is open to all members to make representations to the Scottish Government on those matters ahead of the annual budget process.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Folk tend to go into city centres not because they are city centres, but because of the businesses that occupy them and the events that take place there. Will the minister share with us how the Scottish Government is supporting Aberdeen to tell the story of Union Street and what is happening in the city centre?

Tom Arthur: Jackie Dunbar raises a really important point. It is about how we utilise retail and hospitality. On a day-to-day basis, there is a functional element to city centres—people need to pop out for a pint of milk and a loaf of bread, so they go into a shop to buy them—but there is also an experiential element, which is about the range of shops, particularly unique ones that are specific to a place, the environment and the interaction between the retail and hospitality offer. That is extremely important.

The other, intangible aspect is heritage—the cultural history and stories of a particular place. Community-led regeneration projects are important because they bring to bear the stories and shared experience of a place.

The Our Aberdeen app is just one example of the work that the Our Union Street team have been involved in. It is an innovative digital tool that has helped to engage the community and showcase the wide range of activity that is taking place across the city centre. It is an outstanding example of using contemporary technology—a digital app—to enable people to fully explore an area's heritage and to discover the fantastic range of shops and services that are on offer.

Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a member of Aberdeen City Council.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government is supporting the Our Union Street campaign in Aberdeen. Our Union Street is a tremendous community-led organisation that has become essential in helping to regenerate and reinvigorate the city, especially given the backdrop of the downturn in the oil industry and the many negative impacts on footfall from SNP policies such as the LEZ and bus gates.

My understanding is that the SNP manifesto specifically promised £600,000 extra funding. However, the statement seemed to water that down somewhat by suggesting that the funding is only up to £600,000.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Can we have a question, please?

Duncan Massey: Yes. Will the minister confirm that Our Union Street will get the full £600,000, or does he see that as a contingent number? If so, on what contingency is it based?

Tom Arthur: For the avoidance of doubt, the total investment is up to £1 million. The amount will be determined through engagement with Our Union Street to ensure that effective project management systems are in place to maximise the impact of the funding. We have committed to delivering up to £1 million—that is on the table for the Our Union Street campaign.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's ongoing support for the regeneration of Aberdeen and the north-east. Does the minister share my view that community-led regeneration initiatives such as the Our Union Street campaign demonstrate the power of local people to shape

the future of their neighbourhoods and that they deserve our full backing here and elsewhere?

Tom Arthur: I concur entirely with Dawn Black. A powerful point that cannot be stressed enough is the importance of community-led regeneration. Empowering communities and giving them national support is a fundamentally different approach from what prevailed in decades past, when things were done to communities.

Community-led regeneration is not just good in terms of engaging communities in the here and now—it leads to better outcomes. No one knows their place as well as the people who live there. Harnessing that expertise, as the Our Union Street campaign is doing, is leading to the excellent, tangible results that we are seeing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak button.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): In 1898, when the People's Palace was opened, it was declared

"open to the people forever and ever".

I am sad to say that it has been closed for two years now. However, I pay tribute to the friends of the People's Palace, who have kept its spirit alive, particularly the pioneering curator, Dr Elspeth King, who passed away in November 2025.

We have been waiting two years. It was due to reopen next year, but a £12 million funding gap that the Scottish Government refused to fill has left the project stalled indefinitely. During the election, the SNP promised Glasgow all the funding that it needed to complete the restoration, but now that the votes have been counted, that promise seems to have shrunk to starting yet another partnership group, with no sign of the remaining £12 million in capital funding that Glasgow City Council needs to get the restoration project under way.

Will the minister guarantee that that group will not be just another talking shop that covers for more delays? Will he upgrade the "appropriate match funding" to a guarantee that all necessary capital funding will be found, and set a firm reopening date for this key Glasgow cultural institution, which has been largely closed to the public for nearly a decade?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the member's significant and long-standing interest in this area. He is right to draw attention to what was promised when the People's Palace was opened in 1898. That is a commitment that we have a collective responsibility to keep, so I assure him that there is no watering down of it. I want to ensure that we are working collaboratively; we recognise that a range of partners is involved in the delivery of the project—including, most importantly, the local community—as well as a range of funders.

I recognise the member's interest in the matter, and I am happy to engage with him closely on it. I assure him of the Scottish Government's commitment to working constructively with partners to ensure that the People's Palace and the winter gardens are reopened.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): In the 1970s, the then-Labour Glasgow City Council proposed demolishing the People's Palace building to put in a motorway—a potential work of historical vandalism of epic proportions. That was followed by decades of the Labour council not adequately investing in the building or the winter gardens, which allowed one of the most precious buildings in Glasgow to go to wrack and ruin. Therefore, I welcome the minister's statement and commitment to forming a partnership group to ensure the survival of the People's Palace.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Can we have a question?

Clare Haughey: Will the minister assure my constituents and the people of Glasgow that the People's Palace will reopen, and can he give a timescale for that work to be completed?

Tom Arthur: I assure Clare Haughey and her constituents of the Scottish Government's commitment on that. I am not in a position to give a definitive timescale for the reopening, but, naturally, I want that to happen as quickly as is practicably possible.

Clare Haughey highlights to the chamber another important point, which is the value of learning lessons from history, particularly of the post-war era, when many treasures of our architectural heritage—not just in Glasgow, but more widely across Scotland—were lost to post-war planning. That is a mistake that we must never repeat. The People's Palace and its winter gardens are a treasure and a national asset, as well as an asset for the east end of Glasgow. We have to work constructively and collaboratively to save them, and that is what the Scottish Government will do in partnership.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am hoping to squeeze in two more questions. I call Iris Duane, to be followed by Colm Merrick.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the minister for sight of his statement before the debate.

I share the concerns of my fellow Glasgow region MSPs about funding for the People's Palace, but I am thankful that the minister has

recognised that it is a cultural icon in Glasgow. It is quite disappointing, however, to hear that the Scottish Government is only using convening powers that it could have—and should have—used before now.

Will the minister confirm whether funding from the Scottish Government will be forthcoming as part of the collaborative package that he speaks of, and whether, in the scenario in which a funding partner is not found, the Government is willing to shoulder the cost?

Tom Arthur: I appreciate the question that the member asks. I want to provide reassurance on the Government's commitment to working constructively towards the reopening of the palace and winter gardens. I do not want to pre-empt where those discussions will lead to and the specific funding package that will be brought together, which could include elements of match funding.

However, we are committed to working on that constructively. I have come to Parliament, proactively, to make a statement on the back of a manifesto commitment—and Government commitment—to working towards the reopening of the People's Palace. I hope that that provides the member with reassurance.

As the discussions progress, I am happy to keep Glasgow region members—and, indeed, members across the wider chamber, should they be interested—updated on the nature of the discussions and the progress that we are making, including specifically on the financing of the project.

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As many people across Glasgow will be today, I am delighted to welcome the support for the People's Palace. As its name suggests, the People's Palace has always been at the centre of the community and it holds a special place in the hearts of Glaswegians.

Therefore, what assurances can the Scottish Government provide to Glaswegians that their voice will be at the heart of the plans for the palace, to ensure that it has a sustainable, inclusive and accessible future for generations to come?

Tom Arthur: I have covered some of those points in previous answers, but I note that community voices have been central to shaping the project, with more than 6,300 people contributing their views, stories and lived experiences. That extensive engagement has directly informed the refurbishment designs, ensuring that the museum will reflect the diversity and identity of the city. It is a significant project, and I reiterate the Government's commitment not just to working with partners to deliver it, but to ensuring that it reflects the priorities, views and values of the people who live in the area.

Partnership with the Third Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:36

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Last week, I had the privilege of attending the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations Scottish charity awards. The positive impact of the third sector and the incredible people in it was on display once again that night, as it is in every community, every day, right across Scotland. Their work and volunteering change lives, strengthen communities and provide support to people where and when they need it most. However, to be clear, for that support to continue, a sustainable, thriving and independent third sector is essential. It is on that note that we will be supporting the amendments from the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Greens and Labour today.

The third sector works across a huge number of policy areas, from healthcare and education to reducing the impact of child poverty and advancing climate action. As one of our key partners, the third sector directly contributes to the Government's four missions. What sets the third sector apart is its deep knowledge of communities, which makes it uniquely placed to identify and deliver real solutions. That knowledge cannot be replicated by any Government, national or local.

The Government recognises that, to tackle the biggest challenges of the day, we need to work in partnership with the sector. Further, we recognise that we have a responsibility to protect the independence of the sector and respect the remarkable work of those organisations. The Government fully supports the rights of charities to campaign on behalf of those whom they represent and to influence changes in policy, regardless of their funding status. Questioning the integrity of the third sector erodes trust and harms communities at a time when community support could not be more important.

To that end, the Government will formalise the relationship to demonstrate the value that we place in third sector bodies, not simply as service providers but as partners in shaping, informing and delivering. That ambition forms the foundations of our third sector partnership agreement. It is important to recognise that support for the third sector is not new for the Government. Over the previous parliamentary session, the Government took meaningful steps to strengthen and support the sector, most significantly our ongoing commitment to fairer funding. That delivered significant progress to embed multiyear funding across Government, supporting organisations as diverse as Scottish Mountain Rescue, a number of disabled people's organisations and Apex Scotland, to name but a few.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have been thinking about what the cabinet secretary just said about questioning the integrity of the third sector. I assume that she does not mean that it is inappropriate for us, as members of the Scottish Parliament, to question the public funds that third sector bodies and charities receive, and what those bodies are doing with those moneys and whether they are delivering the expected outcomes from the funds that are expended. I assume that she does not mean that, because otherwise she would be trying to tie the hands of Parliament as we do our business of scrutinising the work of third sector organisations.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am certainly not suggesting that people should not question the third sector or, indeed, the Scottish Government on the funding that we give to it. I am saying that some third sector organisations will welcome Scottish Government priorities, some will think that we do not go far enough, some will think that we go too far and some will disagree with us entirely. That is utterly appropriate and is, in fact, a valuable and commendable part of the system that we have in Parliament and is helpful for all politicians.

I recognise that multiyear funding alone does not make for a sustainable sector. Many organisations face uncertainty and funding delays, which impact on service delivery and staffing decisions ahead of financial years. Although that issue is not wholly devolved to the Scottish Government, it is a priority area for improvement. In the past financial year, we have, despite a compressed timetable, worked to ensure that as many organisations as possible received their funding decisions early. Those improvements have been recognised by the sector, and the feedback has been that the action that was taken showed a strong amount of care for the system as a whole. However, we know that we need to go further.

At the heart of the third sector are its volunteers. The first week in June marked volunteers week, which was a chance to celebrate the extraordinary contribution of volunteers across Scotland. Volunteers, including trustees, are the backbone of Scotland's third sector, and many of the activities and support that we rely on would simply not exist without them. I am delighted to highlight that, through the £2.2 million volunteering support

fund, we are helping 116 organisations to grow and diversify their volunteer base.

Alongside steps on fairer funding and volunteering, significant steps have been taken to strengthen the framework in which the sector operates. The Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Act 2023 has now fully commenced, and the updated legislation improves the public's access to information about a charity's operations, provides the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator with stronger powers and aligns Scottish charity law more closely with charity regulation elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Together, those actions demonstrate the clear commitment to supporting the third sector to deliver for Scotland.

Successful collaboration between the Government, local authorities and the third sector is delivering real change. Collaboration is central to eradicating child poverty, which is a defining mission for this Government and not one that we can deliver alone. Through the new £20 million whole family support third sector delivery fund, the Government will enable third sector organisations to deliver holistic wraparound services for families who are experiencing or at risk of poverty. Applications to the fund are currently being assessed, and I look forward to announcing the successful applicants in the coming weeks. Subject to the agreement with the successful organisations, I expect that the funding will move to being allocated on a multiyear basis.

That collaborative approach speaks directly to and aligns with the Government's ambition on public service reform, which will empower those working in front-line services to deliver for people. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform set out the Government's vision for more effective, person-centred services. The third sector is central to achieving that vision. As members have highlighted, further work is needed across Government and with funders and commissioners to ensure that funding, procurement and policy approaches truly enable organisations to thrive in an integrated system.

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: until last month, I was the chair of Cranhill Development Trust.

I very much welcome any moves that we can take to reduce bureaucracy for a lot of small organisations, such as Cranhill Development Trust. We want to see people being able to get on with the job, rather than having to spend huge amounts of time filling in forms to apply for grants and doing the analysis after that. I welcome what the Government has said and look forward to seeing such changes being borne out, because they would be very welcome indeed.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: David Linden made a very important point that relates particularly to—but not only to—smaller organisations. The aim is to let them get on with the job; appropriate reporting and analysis is part of that work, but it must not become overburdensome and prevent them from getting on with their very important jobs. I very much agree with the sentiment behind David Linden's remarks.

I welcome that the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform will shortly meet the SCVO to explore opportunities around public service reform, and the partnership will align with the public service reform programme to strengthen collaboration. I also welcome that other charities have proactively reached out to the cabinet secretary, which once again demonstrates the sector's readiness to innovate for the benefit of all those whom we are here to serve.

Alongside that progress, I must make clear the importance of listening to the concerns that the sector shares. We have repeatedly heard that the current system is unsustainable. The demand for services continues to increase, as do challenging financial pressures, which are worsened by costs such as the UK Government's decision to hike employer national insurance contributions, placing pressure on employees and volunteers.

We recognise that the Scottish Government has a shared responsibility with the sector and other third sector funders not only to deliver services but to strengthen the foundations on which delivery relies. In February, I announced my intention to co-design a third sector partnership agreement. Following a strong endorsement of that vision in the recent election, I am delighted to take that work forward and, ultimately, create a strategic partnership of equals. Importantly, the partnership will include the whole sector; it will not reach only organisations with a direct funding relationship with the Government.

Work is at an early stage, but we have begun to identify key themes that will shape the first phase of engagement. Those themes will not dictate the outcome; instead, they will provide a baseline for open, meaningful and collaborative discussion.

First, on developing a partnership of equals, as I have emphasised, we want the third sector to actively inform and shape policy development. That means supporting transparency, sharing knowledge and embedding a culture in the Government that values the sector's contribution.

Secondly, to support a strong and independent sector, we will explore governance, leadership and workforce resilience to ensure that the sector is

equipped to meet future challenges within an effective regulatory environment.

The third theme is improving financial sustainability. The fiscal environment continues to place significant pressures on the sector, and the issue is recognised as a key driver of instability. We will encourage honest conversations about those challenges, identify opportunities for improvement and build on our fairer funding approach.

However, we must bear in mind that the Scottish Government does not receive multiyear funding and that providing multiyear grants for any organisation, including those in the third sector, takes away flexibility within the remainder of budgets. I ask members to bear that in mind, as we move through budgetary discussions, if they are requesting further multiyear settlements.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary will know that multiyear funding is the third sector's number 1 ask. Although she is technically correct in saying that the Scottish Government does not receive multiyear funding from Westminster through the block grant, we can predict 95 per cent or more of the quantum from year to year, so surely there is more scope to give the third sector greater clarity through multiyear funding.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is exactly why we have been trying to provide a greater level of multiyear funding. Murdo Fraser has gone through enough budget rounds to know that there are always changes to UK Government decisions and to UK budgets, so we have to wait for the UK Government's budget to be passed before we know what is happening with the Scottish Government's budget. We cannot get away from those intrinsic links. I say that to demonstrate the context, not as an excuse not to deliver further multiyear funding, which is definitely the direction of travel that the Government wishes to go in.

Ensuring accountability at all levels of the partnership is another important part of the framework. We will work with the sector to develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation, which ties into the point that David Linden made, so that the delivery of the partnership is embedded across the Government and the third sector. I am also committed to ensuring that voices from across the sector contribute to shaping a partnership that is rooted in trust and respect, that supports the sector's long-term sustainability and that drives better outcomes.

I have heard calls from some to give the partnership a statutory footing akin to that of the Welsh third sector scheme. I am also aware of calls from those in the third sector in Wales to review that scheme. We have an opportunity to learn from the Welsh approach and work with the sector to explore what would work best for Scotland. Although I will not take that option off the table, I suggest that giving something a statutory footing is not always the most effective approach and that more work is needed to get this right. Legislation is both time and resource intensive. The Parliament would rightly expect us to continue to progress third sector policies such as those relating to charity law, volunteering and fairer funding, and I would not want the development of legislation on the framework to impede any of the wider work that the Government intends to take forward to support the third sector.

A sustainable and thriving third sector benefits us all. It benefits the workforce, it benefits the people of Scotland and it benefits the Government, through stronger delivery, better outcomes and more resilient communities. That is why the development of the partnership is such an important way to demonstrate and implement our support for the third sector right across Scotland, in every community.

I move,

That the Parliament commends the essential role that the third sector plays in supporting people and communities; recognises the contribution that the third sector provides to the delivery of many Scottish Government key priorities, including eradicating child poverty; acknowledges that the Scottish Government understands it has a shared responsibility alongside other funders and those who contract out to the third sector to take action to ensure that the sector is sustainable; agrees that a Third Sector Partnership Agreement provides the opportunity to formalise the relationship between the Scottish Government and the third sector, building upon the Scottish Government's progress in delivering on its Fairer Funding commitments to date and responding to the views of the sector, and agrees that the Third Sector Partnership will be co-designed with third sector stakeholders to embed their knowledge and experience, demonstrating the value that the Scottish Government places on the sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind those who wish to move amendments or speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:50

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I declare an interest as a trustee of the John MacDougall Mesothelioma Trust and the Glenrothes & Area Heritage Centre. I thank the minister for her comments.

As a Fife councillor, I am all too aware of the work that people in the third sector do, much of it unpaid, to step in where council budgets and personnel have, unfortunately, been stretched too thin. I think that everyone in the chamber agrees that third sector providers become vital lifelines in many communities because of that. We all want to

do the right thing in supporting them. The reason I lodged my amendment is that I hope to work constructively with the Government on this important issue, as too much is at stake for it to involve the usual Punch and Judy politics of previous sessions.

My feedback rests on three main points: first, the future structure and framework of any proposed funding model, which has been touched on; secondly, the role of local government; and, finally, our expectations for the third sector.

On my first point, I truly believe that no problem can be solved simply by throwing money at it. Although more money is, of course, welcome for anyone who receives it, the way in which the money is given and the conditions that are imposed clearly have massive ramifications for service delivery. Speaking to representatives of colleges and other organisations across my region that are dependent on public funding has been a massive eye-opener for me. A big problem that I have noticed across most Government funding projects is that they lose sight of the issues that they hope to address.

For example, I recently raised with the First Minister the fact that, although colleges and employers receive funding from the Scottish Government, it is structured in such a way that it disincentivises the creation of new apprenticeships, and it does not guarantee the long-term security of some campuses that are at risk of closing. The point that I tried to make then, which the First Minister either did not pick up or refused to answer, was not that the sector needs more money but that the funding structure for how the money is spent is completely at odds with the needs of the college sector and skills development in Scotland. In short, it is all about priorities.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government will consider multiyear funding as a minimum standard, as has been advocated by organisations such as Citizens Advice, so that providers can plan services years ahead instead of just crossing their fingers at the end of every Scottish or local government budget. We also need to be aware of the vital role that our councils play in the execution and funding of those services.

Many of us in the chamber have served, or continue to serve, on councils in our respective areas, and we all know that the constituents we represent come from communities with different priorities and different needs—in different council areas or even in neighbouring wards. Too often, policies are ring fenced when the funding from the Government needs to be bespoke to the needs of different council areas. We cannot ignore that. Councils are sometimes forced to use Government funding for certain areas although it is unneeded and they have other entire service areas that are literally dying for want of essential cash.

The duplication of funding and service provision is too common a problem. Therefore, we must ensure that our councils and third sector providers can properly co-ordinate funding and activities so as to streamline service delivery. I would argue that that discussion should be held not just between the Scottish Government and one collective body or sector. All 32 of Scotland's councils need to have their own unique input into how future funding can best be used in their communities. That emphasises my point about the longevity of third sector providers. We cannot have a situation in which communities are wholly reliant on those services only for Government money to dry up and councils to be unable to fund them.

My final point is about having realistic conversations about what we expect from our third sector. Much of the third sector prides itself on the unique way in which it delivers its services. It is a major part of the appeal of third sector provider services, and it is why they can be favoured over similar services offered by public bodies. However, I feel that we are moving to a point at which third sector provider services are becoming a permanent and necessary appendage of local public service offerings and not just a welcome addition. A deeper conversation about that is needed, as it will change the relationship that we all have with the third sector, and I hope that we can have that conversation not too long after today's debate.

There should be a commitment by every organisation that is in receipt of Government funding to demonstrate full value for money, to ensure that their presence represents an overall saving from public investment. I lodged my amendment as an open hand to all members in the chamber to engage in more forward thinking when it comes to supporting the third sector. We all value third sector providers. Some of us have needed them, and we, on the Reform benches, are certainly not opposed to funding them where they can fill a genuine gap in local public services. However, we cannot keep going down the same path of funding first and worrying about sustainability later. Sustainability must be baked into the funding from the very start; it must not be just another bumper slogan attached to an obscure policy memorandum. We must prove to the public that we can do things differently, that we can work constructively together on the issue and that we are listening to them. That is why I hope that members will support my amendment.

I move amendment S7M-00356.2, to insert at end:

"; further agrees that a key part of sustainability can include long-term support for organisations, beyond initial funding periods, where there is clear evidence that continued support delivers continued value; recognises the potential efficiencies that organisations can make with long-term budget certainty, and believes that organisations that are in receipt of Scottish Government support and public funds have to commit to deliver the same value for money and reform agenda that was agreed by Parliament."

15:56

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Today's debate on Scotland's partnership with the third sector is welcome. I hope that we can have an open and collaborative discussion on the best approach to strengthening Scotland's partnership with a sector that is vital to the economy and society.

The third sector is at the forefront of efforts to tackle poverty, build social cohesion and protect the environment. From grass-roots groups to health and social care organisations, communities depend on the sector for support and advice. These charities and organisations can make a real and lasting difference to families and individuals right across Scotland, and they deserve to be respected and seen for the contribution that they provide.

Scottish Labour welcomes the Government's motion and its commitment to establish a third sector partnership agreement. Formalising the relationship between the third sector and the Government is long overdue. Scotland is the only part of the UK not to have an established formal partnership with the voluntary sector. Although the approaches taken in Wales and Northern Ireland and by the UK Government are all different, it was welcome to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing speak about the Welsh approach. We hope that we can learn lessons from some of those agreements, which might help us to take forward some of the points that we want to action.

The agreement presents an opportunity to reset the relationship with the sector, align priorities and deliver on some of the sector's long-term asks, such as its calls for the introduction of multiyear funding arrangements, which we have all touched on. That is why Scottish Labour has lodged an add-on amendment that makes it clear that multiyear funding should be "foundational" to the agreement. Multiyear funding not only provides more certainty for the sector and allows for better planning but enables charities and organisations to take preventative measures, and it provides long-term savings by removing the costs of repeatedly having to apply for single-year funding—I think that we all recognise that. The sector has consistently asked for multiyear funding, and I hope that the Government will agree that delivery of that should be a top priority and an essential part of the agreement.

Our amendment asks that a greater requirement for due diligence on fair work principles be embedded in the framework. We discussed that in the previous parliamentary session. Given the precariousness of third sector funding, workers often have shorter contracts and less job security. If we are serious about strengthening the Government's relationship with the sector, consideration of workers' rights, job protection and proper pay and conditions must be at the forefront. I know that the cabinet secretary accepts that point, and we, on the Labour benches, will do what we can to work with the Government on it.

That is why it is also crucial that the third sector is involved in co-designing the agreement. I welcome the commitment in the Government's motion to ensure that stakeholders are involved in, and not omitted from, the design process. Current experience from within the third sector tells us that organisations often feel that they do not have a strong relationship with public bodies and that their experience is sometimes not positive. Last week's debate about the public service reform agenda showed that the Government believes that the third sector will be key to that work, which means that working together is essential. Mutual respect and shared recognition must be at the forefront of the partnership agreement, so I really welcome the commitment from the Government and the cabinet secretary to include the third sector in the co-design process.

As in any partnership, the detail and delivery will be fundamental to success. The partnership must be supported by clear accountability mechanisms and there must be strong leadership at the forefront to drive ambitions and delivery. I have heard about some of that from the cabinet secretary today, and I hope that we can work together on it. The key asks from the sector include the setting out of a clear timetable and road map for developing and implementing the agreement, with clear lines of accountability within the Scottish Government.

There is also the question of who will be subject to the agreement and how smaller independent organisations will be represented and heard. I heard about that from some third sector organisations when I was a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. In my experience, some smaller organisations punch above their weight, so we need to include them.

In the past, we have raised the question of how public funds are distributed to the third sector. Are they used effectively? How do we ensure that local charities are prioritised instead of funding always going to national charities or lobbying groups?

Perhaps the cabinet secretary or the minister could provide more detail on that during their closing remarks. How do we focus on the grass-roots organisations that are right on the front line? I would welcome the Government's thoughts on how we can go beyond the larger groups that we usually engage with.

The Liberal Democrat amendment refers to the fact that smaller charities can find that engagement more "difficult", and Scottish Labour will support that amendment today, because we agree that some of the smaller grass-roots organisations often miss out on funding. We must be clear about whether that is because of the time and effort required to apply repeatedly for funding or whether it is because some of the larger organisations just tend to be favoured. We need to understand that.

I again welcome the Government's motion and the commitment to the third sector, which has faced precarious short-term funding and has criticised Parliament for that. Today's motion and many of the amendments look towards a more financially sustainable approach. As others have said, third sector organisations often fill gaps in statutory services. In the light of the public sector reform agenda, the value and role of the third sector must be part of our conversation and part of the development and delivery of the partnership agreement that we have been talking about.

I thank everyone for their contributions to the debate and hope that we can work together to establish a really good working relationship with the third sector, because that will, in turn, mean that our communities will do better.

I move amendment S7M-00356.1, to insert at end:

"; and believes that multi-year funding and stronger due diligence on fair work principles should be foundational to a new Third Sector Partnership Agreement."

16:03

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which says that I am a member of Glasgow City Council. I thank the cabinet secretary for collaborating with the Greens on this important motion.

I begin by thanking the third sector workforce, who are there for us day in, day out. They are the ones who step up when schools close, when the national health service is stretched to its limit and long after the police leave. They ensure that the vulnerable have a safe bed for the night, provide solace to people fleeing domestic abuse, listen to the voices of young people and stand side by side with children experiencing poverty. They do not just provide services; they guide people through the most traumatic experiences of their lives. I also thank them for their expertise ahead of this debate—most notably the SCVO, the Corra Foundation, Volunteer Scotland and the Poverty Alliance.

There is one unifying experience among staff who work in the third sector in Scotland, regardless of whether they are specialists in crisis support or in advancing human rights, and that is the experience of funding. Entry-level jobs in the third sector are routinely part time and temporary with one-year contracts, as Carol Mochan pointed out, and that is a direct consequence of how the Scottish Government and other bodies structure their funding. Funding is isolated and it is often provided for single projects with tightly restricted budgets, which completely ignores the charity's core costs. What about the maternity cover, the human resources costs and the legal requirements for the charity simply to exist?

Core funding for charities is essential, yet it remains painfully elusive. For people working in the third sector, those precarious contracts create a gruelling treadmill. For decades, that has driven good, passionate staff away to other sectors that offer them stability. However, it does not have to be like that.

Nowhere is the crushing precarity of short-term funding felt more acutely than in services tackling violence against women and girls. As former chair of the violence against women and girls partnership in Glasgow, I wrote to the former Minister for Equalities, Kaukab Stewart. Although we were successful in securing inflationary increases for that financial year for those sectors, the reality is that that sticking-plaster funding is no longer enough. We must fairly and sustainably fund the third sector for the life-saving work that it delivers.

I take a moment to pay tribute to Kaukab Stewart for her historic time as the first woman of colour to be elected to this Parliament and as a tireless, authentic champion for equality.

Earlier this week, I met Sisters Against Cuts, which is a grass-roots feminist campaign that is fighting the closure of the women's service at Murray's Initiative. As my colleague Iris Duane pointed out, it is a vital trauma-informed sanctuary for survivors of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and addiction.

A service user shared her reality with me, and I thank her for trusting me to share her experience. She said:

"Whenever we ask for support, we are told these cuts are due to tough choices, but why are women's services always the first to be attacked? Murray's keeps us alive. After fleeing domestic abuse, being homeless for two years with

two disabled children and surviving rape, this service was my lifeline. We just want to live free from violence and recover with dignity."

Do tough choices mean abandoning women who have survived the unthinkable?

The system is fundamentally broken. When will the Government move past temporary fixes and provide multiyear, inflation-proof funding that will keep such lifelines open? I am pleased that the cabinet secretary indicated in her speech that there will be some changes in multiyear funding.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that the SCVO's 2026 manifesto calls on the Scottish Government to bolster the third sector and ensure the survival of what are essential, often life-saving charities. The SCVO says that that should be underpinned in statute, and I agree. I respectfully disagree with the cabinet secretary's point that it is a time and resource-intensive experience to put legislation through this Parliament. The two things can go in tandem. There is a glaring lack of consistency between some Government departments in relation to legislation and strategies, and it is pushing the sector to the brink.

Since 1999, Wales has legally embedded third sector collaboration into its government. Through a 25-member council that meets the Welsh Government twice a year, the scheme provides charities with high-value recognition, strengthening accountability and cross-Government co-operation. We can learn from our devolved nation counterparts.

The First Minister's decision to create a Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform signals that cuts are coming. However, we know from decades of austerity that, when statutory services are slashed, the third sector is left to plug the gaps, acting as the last line of defence for our most vulnerable.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Holly Bruce: I will respectfully not take an intervention in this debate, but I would be happy to have a conversation with the cabinet secretary offline.

If the Government is truly looking for efficiencies, it should look at how it allocates its money. As I mentioned, I am pleased to hear that multiyear funding is being looked at. The Corra Foundation has said that simply moving to a default of multiyear funding structures would save an astonishing £900 million that the third sector wastes on the endless annual application cycle. Carol Mochan also mentioned that. If we truly want to transform public services, we must start to fund our third sector sustainably. I welcome the beginning of that, which the cabinet secretary confirmed today.

The job of third sector organisations is, of course, much bigger than being on the front line. The policy work that is undertaken by many charities in Scotland offers a truly unique insight into people's lived experience.

I have mentioned and outlined the unifying piece that we have heard throughout, which is that of funding. The crux of the Green amendment is for a transition to multiyear funding as a default. The primary barrier to multiyear funding is that the Scottish Government is restricted by single-year allocations from the Westminster Government, and financial stability is restricted by the UK Government's failure to reimburse to our third sector the £75 million annual cost of increased employer national insurance contributions. Although long-term funding remains our absolute aspiration, Scottish Labour must also work with us to demand both a fairer multiyear settlement and the full mitigation of those NICs from their Westminster colleagues.

I move amendment S7M-00356.5, to insert at end:

"; believes that the third sector would benefit from a transition to multi-year, simplified, flexible funding models that considers inflationary increases and covers full operating costs as the default; calls on the UK Government to reimburse Scottish third sector organisations for the cost of increased employer NICs, which are currently estimated at £75 million per year; recognises that those working in the third sector, such as organisations addressing violence against women and girls or supporting migrants, carers and disabled people, are also experiencing multiple and overlapping inequalities, secondary trauma and harm, and that they would benefit from an approach to third sector funding that includes the Real Living Wage and fair work principles, and further recognises that some third sector organisations, particularly those working with marginalised communities such as trans people and migrants, are experiencing threats to the safety of their staff, volunteers and service users."

16:11

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the debate and I pay tribute, as others across the parties have done, to all who work in the third sector. It is a reality that, without the third sector and its organisations, Scottish society and our economy would be much poorer. Indeed, across many parts of the public sector—particularly in areas such as health, social care or education—were it not for the contribution of third sector organisations, the Government would not be able to deliver many of its policy objectives.

I could namecheck many organisations, but I will restrict myself to one, because I visited it very recently: the Strathmore Centre for Youth Development in Blairgowrie—SCYD—which does

so much good work for youngsters who need support. It celebrated its 25th birthday just last month, and I had the privilege of attending to see, once again, the excellent work that it does.

As has already been said in the debate, the third sector is full of individuals who are working hard with very limited resources. Many organisations depend on volunteers, whom we should salute for giving up their spare time to help others. That is a contribution of incalculable benefit to the Scottish economy.

However, the reality is that the third sector is in crisis, as anyone who engages with it will testify. According to *Third Force News*, 81 per cent of charities and voluntary organisations face financial challenges, while the Scottish third sector tracker has found that charities face a triple threat of rising demand, falling income and rising costs. In the meantime, the Scottish National Party Government has cut third sector funding in real terms. The amount of cash has fallen by £177 million in real terms—5 per cent of the total—between 2021 and 2023.

Today, the cabinet secretary has talked about a new third sector partnership agreement, and we look forward to hearing more about the detail of that, as will those in the sector. There is certainly a case for a reset and a new approach in respect of a number of different issues.

First, I will address the question of funding. The overall quantum of funding is important, but it is only part of the story. The number 1 issue that we hear from organisations—we have heard it already in this debate—is the issue of security of multiyear funding. Over the years, I have met too many bodies that complain of a hand-to-mouth existence and rely on year-to-year financial settlements. I can quote examples of organisations that are already well into the new financial year before they even know how much cash they will get in funding. That makes life extremely difficult for managers, those who organise financial projections and staff who are working without any ongoing job security. That means that those organisations regularly have to issue redundancy notices. Inevitably, that leads to experienced and valuable staff looking for jobs elsewhere, to try to get job security, while they await decisions from the Government, local authorities or other public agencies.

I heard with great interest what the cabinet secretary has had to say today about multiyear funding. However, we have been hearing that for more than a decade, and it has not been delivered. The SNP had a previous commitment to deliver fairer funding by 2026—by this year—but, so far, all we have seen is a pilot scheme worth £130 million over two years. That is the biggest single change that would make a real difference to the sector. Holly Bruce made an important point about the amount of money that the sector would save if that multiyear funding was put in place, because the sector would not have the administrative cost of issuing redundancy notices and potentially losing staff as a result.

In her response to my earlier intervention, the cabinet secretary said that the Scottish Government does not get multiyear funding from the UK Government. Undoubtedly, that is usually the case, but we know the Scottish Government's budget—we know, overwhelmingly, what the value of it will be—and, although there are in-year revisions, inevitably those in-year revisions put the budget up, not down, so I think that there is much more flexibility in relation to the solutions that the Government could find.

We also need to ensure that third sector groups that are in receipt of Government funds do not then feel bound to support Government policy—a point that is referenced in the Liberal Democrat amendment. I am sure that members will recall when my former colleague Douglas Ross introduced the Right to Recovery (Scotland) Bill, which was supported by many working in the drug and alcohol sector. However, some leading organisations that were heavily dependent on Scottish Government funding came out and opposed the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Fraser, you may wish to wind up and to move your amendment. Thank you.

Murdo Fraser: There was a suspicion that that was because those organisations did not want to bite the hand that feeds them.

There are many more points that I would make, Presiding Officer, but my time is up.

I move amendment S7M-00356.4, to leave out from "a Third Sector Partnership" to end and insert:

"Scotland's third sector requires sustainable, long-term funding settlements, including greater use of multi-year funding arrangements, to provide the certainty needed to plan services, retain staff and support communities, and calls on the Scottish Government to undertake a review of organisations registered as charities that are substantially dependent on public funding and whose primary activities include lobbying or campaigning, to ensure transparency, accountability and public confidence in the use of taxpayers' money."

16:16

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): I declare that I am a councillor for Highland Council and a volunteer for Lyme Disease UK and the Lyme Resource Centre.

It is no secret that the third sector is very close to my heart. As many members know, I have a

long-term illness. When the national health service could not provide the support that I needed, it was the Lyme disease charities that picked up the pieces and signposted me to the help that I needed to get me to where I am today, in this chamber. Sadly, many of those charities no longer exist. I tell this story because the third sector is not some abstract line in a budget. It is about people. It is about the volunteers who pick up the phone when no one else will. It is about the organisations that catch people who have slipped through the net. The third sector employs around 5 per cent of Scotland's entire workforce. It is an essential part of how our country is run and it is about time that we treated it as such.

That point about employment is important. As I said, the third sector employs around 5 per cent of Scotland's workforce, but it goes much deeper than that. The third sector is far more likely to employ those who find it difficult to get into work in the first place. Recent estimates are that 27 per cent of those who are employed in the third sector are disabled, compared with just 21 per cent in the public sector, and even less in private companies.

With a turnover of almost £10 billion, the third sector contributes massively to the Scottish economy. To explore one aspect of how the third sector impacts my local area, the Highlands and Islands region has the highest density of social enterprises in Scotland. They include organisations such as New Start Highland, which provides employability training and housing support to those in crisis, and the community-owned distillery in Dingwall, which is using green energy to bring back distilling to the area for the first time in more than 100 years.

In fact, there are more than 1,200 social enterprises in the Highlands and Islands alone, supporting more than 7,000 jobs and generating hundreds of millions of pounds for the economy and the community. In a region such as mine, which suffers from depopulation and rural poverty, those figures are not to be overlooked. The reality is that the money that we invest in the third sector comes back to us and to our community many times over, so we should not be afraid of throwing the full weight of the Scottish Government behind those organisations.

There is nothing in the Government's motion with which we disagree, which is why the Liberal Democrat amendment seeks to add to the motion by calling for proper long-term multiyear funding that lasts for more than two years and a grant system that provides smaller charities with equal access to Government cash. Importantly, charities need the right and the confidence to be able to criticise the Government publicly without worrying about losing funding or facing repercussions.

Without all that, we simply cannot provide the security and the certainty that those charities need. A quarter of charity staff are on fixed-term contracts, and many have no idea whether they will have a job in the next 12 months. Surely we can do better than that. Yes, the fairer funding scheme is a great step forward, but it falls short of what the sector is asking for. Third sector organisations need a funding model that provides them with true sustainability, proper flexibility and more autonomy in what they can do with their money.

That is why I have lodged the amendment, and I thank the Government and other parties for their support.

I move S7M-00356.3, to insert at end:

"; understands that the third sector employs over 130,000 paid staff in Scotland, providing employment opportunities for those who find it harder to gain work, including disabled people, and often offering flexible working conditions, which has resulted in women making up 64% of the workforce; notes that Scotland's charitable and voluntary sector contributes significantly to the delivery of government policy objectives, yet relies heavily on public donations and fundraising; believes that the sustainability of many charities depends on multi-year funding and appropriate government support; considers that any diversification of funding should assist smaller charities that can find it difficult to participate in public funding rounds, and believes that any charity in receipt of public funding must retain the absolute licence to criticise, as well as to shape, public policy and the actions of government."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate.

16:20

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor on Aberdeenshire Council and chair of the charity Kincardine and Mearns Youth Clubs.

I welcome the debate on improving and strengthening the Scottish Government's relationship with third sector partners; I suggest that it is long overdue, and that some of our local authorities could perhaps be encouraged to follow the approach. I also welcome the supportive tone of the cabinet secretary's statement.

Increasingly, public services are reliant on the third sector to deliver the services that the public sector cannot deliver as a result of budget and capacity constraints. Those in the third sector, whether they be national organisations or local initiatives, Scottish charitable incorporated organisations or social enterprises, are delivering services that are vital to the wellbeing of our local communities. Some will be managing to employ staff, but many also rely on the good will of volunteers, and some are run solely by volunteers.

Those organisations, no matter what their focus is, all have one thing in common: to make a tangible, positive difference in the lives of the communities they serve so that folk can live healthier and happier lives. An example is Montrose Community Trust at Links Park stadium in my constituency of Angus North and Mearns, which I had the pleasure of visiting during the recent election campaign. Its services range from football coaching for youngsters and walking football for those who are less able, to Montrose connections, its dementia service, and the "breakfast in a box" free breakfast club, alongside household budget advice, an international speaking club for those for whom English is a second language and the trust's latest initiative, the midlife matters programme for women who are experiencing menopause.

Significantly, it is ambitious to do far more, with its Gable End project to provide the dedicated dementia centre that Montrose and the surrounding area deserves. The impact that the trust has locally cannot be overestimated. It employs 16 people, who, along with 112 volunteers, deliver 32 educational, health and sporting programmes that serve more than 6,000 participants annually, and it has invested almost £850,000 locally since 2012. That is a record of which to be proud—it is an organisation to be encouraged and championed, and it is just one of many.

We need to be supporting such organisations with multiyear funding so that they can plan ahead and have stability for both the programmes that they currently deliver, and that they aspire to deliver, in their mission to help people to live happier, healthier lives, built on inclusion, connection and purpose.

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Dawn Black: Yes, I will give way.

Calum Kerr: I thank Dawn Black—[*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Is the microphone not working, Mr Kerr? Maybe you have not got your card in, or it might not be in properly. If there is a problem, perhaps you could move to another microphone—

Dawn Black: The member can use mine.

Calum Kerr: Is my microphone on now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): It is, yes.

Calum Kerr: Okay. Right—we got there. Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests—until March, I was chair of the Borders Citizens Advice Consortium and chair of Peebles and District Citizens Advice Bureau, and I have 14 years of experience in citizens advice.

Dawn Black makes an important point about multiyear funding: that it is not just on the Scottish Government; it is for other funding bodies to do the same. As chair of the consortium, I negotiated a five-year contract with Scottish Borders Council: three plus two. Will the member join me in encouraging local government as well as central Government to use multiyear contracts?

Dawn Black: I absolutely agree with that—no matter where the funding is coming from, whether it is local authorities or the National Lottery Community Fund, we need to look towards the sustainability of our third sector so that it can plan ahead.

We need to ensure that the Scottish Government is providing funding that is more easily accessed for both revenue and capital projects, with less restrictive criteria and longer spending periods. Scotland-wide, organisations need appropriate spaces to deliver their services, as, increasingly, public spaces are unavailable, unsuitable or restrictive and not fit for purpose. Rejuvenation and renovation building projects to house third sector initiatives should also be supported, because it is known that a pound that is in the hands of the third sector can go much further than if it is used by the local authority or the Government. Let us make the most of that and trust those organisations to deliver—of course with appropriate safeguards and monitoring in place.

Currently, far too many obstacles are put in the way of the third sector, especially smaller charities that are run by volunteers, such as my youth club organisation. As has already been mentioned, there are overly onerous funding applications and processes, and community asset transfers are being stalled or rejected by local authorities, which totally goes against the spirit of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Let us sweep those obstacles away.

Rightly or wrongly, in a quirk of human psychology, something that is given is often not as valued as something that has been worked for; it tends to be taken for granted. When communities, organisations and volunteers come together to provide facilities and services, they are more highly valued and respected by those using them, because they take ownership and have a sense of purpose and pride in them. Let us help to make that happen for our third sector organisations by working with them in partnership because, if they build it, people will come.

16:27

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am chair of Moving On Inverclyde and I am also an ambassador for Ocean Youth Trust Scotland.

Long before my election to the Parliament, I had a firm belief that the state cannot fix everything. Sometimes, the state is the bearer of the problems in the first instance, so it is crucial that we have a strong third sector in our communities. The third sector can be more flexible and act more quickly in dealing with events, which often makes it more efficient. It can also take a more person-centred approach, in contrast with some public sector services, where impact is measured by how many people can be seen. Safe Harbour Inverclyde is a prime example of that person-centred approach.

Having both public and third sector organisations working together in our communities is essential. I have previously spoken in the Parliament of my involvement with Moving On Inverclyde. Over the past decade, the organisation has changed immeasurably. It is now engaging with many more people locally, has a stronger reputation locally, will be expanding into new premises in Port Glasgow and has a partnership agreement with Your Voice, which is another third sector organisation, to deliver a particular project for the Inverclyde alcohol and drug recovery service. Flexibility and improved outcomes for people who need those services are important, irrespective of who delivers them.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought trauma and pain for many people. It also resulted in some remarkable activity in all our communities. The public sector pivoted practically overnight in many cases; the number of people volunteering was remarkable, and the third sector pulled together like nothing I have seen before. Fundamentally, the partnership between the public and third sectors was imperative. Neither could have supported my community alone. I have given just a couple of local examples of why the third sector is absolutely crucial to the nation.

On a national scale, I welcome the SNP Government's delivery of multiyear funding and its commitment to develop an agreement with the third sector to strengthen its voice and improve lives. This third sector partnership, as the cabinet secretary touched on, will set out how the Scottish Government and the third sector can work together to enhance services. That includes protecting the sector's future and independence with fairer funding, focusing on shared goals to improve outcomes for people and communities, and providing greater opportunity to contribute to policy and service design.

Stephen Kerr: I do not want to let that passage in Stuart McMillan's speech pass without offering a correction, which is that I am not sure that the cabinet secretary made a full-on commitment to multiyear funding. She is approaching the subject very gingerly—some people might say too slowly. I do not think that there was a wholesale commitment to multiyear funding—at least, I did not hear that—but perhaps the cabinet secretary will contradict me.

Stuart McMillan: Mr Kerr is accustomed to challenging members, and rightly so. I thought that I heard from the cabinet secretary and also earlier in the discussion that—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: Sure.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: This is a rather strange way of addressing Stephen Kerr's points, but I am grateful to Stuart McMillan for giving me the opportunity to say that we have already progressed fairer funding. That is why 60 per cent of grants in my portfolio are now in fairer funding, and there is a commitment to continue that progress towards fairer funding right across the Government. I hope that that helps Stuart McMillan and Mr Kerr.

Stuart McMillan: Sadly, Mr Kerr is shaking his head in disagreement—not for the first time in the Parliament, as we all know.

The pilot is the first step in mainstreaming multiyear funding agreements more widely across the third sector, which will give organisations the ability to plan and make the most of their resources. I touched on Moving On Inverclyde.

The Green amendment refers to the annual £75 million that charities need to pay for their employer national insurance contribution, which is affecting organisations across the country. That is £75 million that is being spent on something that could be utilised on the front line. The decisions that will be taken to manage that extra burden will have a wider knock-on effect for communities. British Heart Foundation has announced that it will close about 150 shops across the UK and Cancer Research UK is also planning to close about 190 of its high street shops by April 2027. The policy, which was introduced by Labour at Westminster, is highly destructive. It is destroying jobs and making the trading environment impossible for many good local organisations.

The Conservative amendment is somewhat confusing and it would add another bureaucratic nightmare to manage. Third sector organisations obtain funding from a wide variety of sources on an annual basis; they do not get money from only the Government. In one year, an organisation

might fall into whatever criteria the Conservatives are arguing for in their amendment, but, in the next year, it might fall out of that criteria because of where its funding comes from. That means that whether organisations should report could potentially fluctuate on an annual basis.

The Conservative amendment is quite ridiculous; its proposals would add costs and make things even more bureaucratic for organisations. I find it strange that the Conservatives are arguing for more red tape rather than trying to reduce some of the red tape, which would allow organisations to deliver in our communities.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, Mr Kerr, but I am just about to finish—unless the Presiding Officer will let me take the time back. I see that she will not.

Fundamentally, without the third sector, our communities would look very different, and our constituents are much the richer for its existence in our communities.

16:33

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Before I turn to the substance of the debate, I want to take a moment to say how proud I am to once again represent the wonderful people of East Kilbride in the Scottish Parliament. It is perhaps fitting that one of my first speeches of the new session is on the subject of Scotland's partnership with the third sector, because East Kilbride is home to countless organisations, volunteers and community groups whose dedication strengthens our town every single day.

Scotland's third sector is essential to the wellbeing of our communities. There are great charities that work at the national level to deliver services and tackle poverty and inequality in alignment with Scottish Government priorities. Solutions are more effective when they are designed with communities rather than for them, and I want to mention just a couple of the many fantastic local organisations that we have in East Kilbride.

Loaves and Fishes was set up more than 30 years ago and initially offered a street meals service. The charity, which is led by Lesley Davidson, has since evolved and now provides more than 250 food parcels a week, including fresh and frozen produce. It also runs a community cafe with computer facilities in Greenhills. In addition, people can use its clothes and dishes section, where they can access clothes and household goods without paying money for them.

Citizens Advice Scotland is another organisation that is working hard to support local people. Last year, East Kilbride Citizens Advice Bureau assisted more than 2,500 people in obtaining around £800,000.

Healthy and Active East Kilbride is dedicated to enhancing the lives of local people. It runs the shopmobility scheme in the town centre and its meeting place cafe provides a nice space for people to socialise and enjoy food and drink.

Using an electric minibus funded by the Scottish Government, Healthy and Active also offers community transport. Just like Loaves and Fishes, the charity works holistically, by providing classes and drop-in sessions to support people in East Kilbride.

Third sector organisations work on the ground every day and possess a wealth of expertise. They can identify barriers before they become apparent elsewhere. However, sometimes, there is a lack of innovation, due to the short-term nature of available funding.

In the previous session of Parliament, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee engaged widely with the third sector, including on the funding arrangements that such organisations require if they are to carry out their vital roles as best as possible. I remember one person mentioning that, particularly during the Covid lockdown period, committee members should watch our language. They said that, rather than calling that body of organisations the "third sector", we should call it the "essential sector".

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): I point to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am an NHS nurse.

The member said that the third sector is essential. Does she agree that it plays a dovetailing role and saves money in the long term, and so investment in it is crucial?

Collette Stevenson: I whole-heartedly agree. It is all about prevention.

One big ask from the committee's engagement was for multiyear funding, and I am delighted with the SNP Government's commitments on that. As has been mentioned, a fairer funding pilot is already under way. That has given multiyear funding certainty to a number of charities and is the first step in mainstreaming multiyear funding agreements more widely across the third sector.

However, as happens in many cases, the positive steps that are being taken in Scotland are being stymied by Westminster. The rises in national insurance that Labour introduced, which a few other members have mentioned, are

estimated to cost charities here £75 million a year. Like SNP MSPs, Labour MSPs should demand that the UK Labour Government fully compensate the third sector over that highly destructive policy.

In addition to aiming for financial security for the third sector, the Scottish Government will develop an agreement with it. The third sector partnership, which is backed by SCVO, will strengthen the third sector's voice, secure its future and, ultimately, improve people's lives.

Having worked in several charities before I was elected, I have seen the benefits that third sector organisations bring both to Scotland and to my home town of East Kilbride. I commend the essential role that the third sector plays in supporting people and communities. The UK Labour Government must compensate the sector for its damaging national insurance hikes. I want these organisations to get the financial security of mainstream multiyear funding so that they can continue to evolve, support people and tackle inequalities. I fully support the Scottish Government's plans to strengthen our third sector.

16:39

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I declare that I am a councillor on East Renfrewshire Council.

The third sector is the glue that holds our communities together. That is certainly true in my constituency of Glasgow Anniesland. Across that constituency, local organisations provide support where and when it is needed most, whether it be by tackling food insecurity, helping young people to access opportunities, promoting community wellbeing or providing advice and advocacy services. Those organisations are deeply rooted in our communities. They understand local needs because they are part of those communities, and they are often both the first to respond when challenges come along and the last to walk away.

That is why I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to developing a new third sector partnership agreement that is co-designed with the sector itself. True success for any partnership depends on genuine collaboration, and it is right that the organisations that deliver so much for our communities have a central role in shaping the framework that will govern that relationship.

I am particularly encouraged by the commitment to draw upon the key principles that are outlined in the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations 2026 manifesto. The principles that SCVO sets out reflect many of the issues that organisations have consistently raised with me. They recognise the need to protect the future and independence of the sector through further funding arrangements, to focus on shared goals and outcomes for people and communities rather than on the burdensome process and short-term targets, and to recognise that third sector organisations must have meaningful opportunities to contribute to policy development and service design from the outset, rather than being consulted only after decisions have already been made.

Unlike some of the debates that we have had so far in this session, this one represents a breath of fresh air. I hope that it shows us what we can achieve if we work together.

The amendment in the name of Morven-May MacCallum rightly highlights a point that is sometimes overlooked when we discuss the third sector: that it is not only a provider of services but a major employer. More than 130,000 people work in Scotland's third sector. Many of the organisations within it provide opportunities for people who might face barriers to employment, including disabled people, carers, those returning to work after periods of illness, and people with caring responsibilities, and such organisations often lead the way in adopting flexible working practices. As Ms MacCallum's amendment notes, women make up around 64 per cent of the third sector workforce. That reflects both the opportunities that the sector provides and the important role that it plays in creating accessible and inclusive workplaces.

A thread clearly runs through a number of the amendments that are before us. As is reflected in the amendments lodged by Morven-May MacCallum, Holly Bruce, Carol Mochan and Julie MacDougall, there is a growing consensus across the chamber, and within the sector, on the need for multiyear, simplified and flexible funding arrangements. For far too long, many organisations have been forced to operate in a cycle of short-term funding settlements that create uncertainty for staff, volunteers and service users alike. Organisations spend valuable time applying for funding, reapplying for it, and planning for funding cliff edges, when that time could be far better spent on delivering services and supporting communities.

The sector has welcomed the move towards the provision of further funding, but clearly there is more work to do. Where multiyear funding is possible, it gives organisations the certainty that is needed to retain skilled staff, plan strategically and focus on outcomes. Simplified funding processes can reduce administrative burdens, particularly for smaller community organisations, which often lack the resources to navigate complex application systems. I hope that, as we move forward, the third sector partnership agreement will provide a

meaningful opportunity to build on that welcome consensus.

I would also welcome hearing further details of who will be involved in the co-design process. How will the Government ensure that the voices of smaller grass-roots organisations are heard alongside those of larger national bodies? How will organisations that represent marginalised communities be included? Most importantly for constituencies such as Glasgow Anniesland, how will local organisations be able to feed directly into the design and development of the agreement?

Scotland's third sector has demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges. It deserves a relationship with Government that reflects the sector's importance, respects its independence and supports its sustainability.

16:45

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for bringing this crucial debate to the chamber. Communities across Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse are incredibly well served by the work of the third sector. I know that because I have seen it at first hand as part of my work as the late Christina McKelvie MSP's community engagement officer and again more recently during this year's election campaign.

From the very beginning of my career, I have had the privilege of seeing some of those organisations grow. They include the fantastic Supporting Our Community network in Hillhouse, which is commonly known as SOC. It was founded by volunteers from Hillhouse, Burnbank and Blantyre, including Mark and Donna Rouse, who have been a driving force in providing support for the community after the tragic death of their 16-year-old daughter Darian. That tragedy drove Mark and Donna to expand the original aim of SOC far beyond that of expanding access to mental health care, with the result that it has become the award-winning organisation that it is today. It now offers a huge number of programmes, classes, courses and training events. Through their actions and the services that they provide, Mark and Donna have touched the lives of countless people in their community—people who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks

We all know that many people like Mark and Donna do such work day in, day out in communities across our country. In most cases, it would be entirely unsustainable in the long run for the public sector to provide those services directly, which is a fact that I firmly believe is not appreciated nearly enough across all spheres of our political life, and one that is always at the forefront of my mind when considering how public money is best spent.

That stark and inescapable reality is not one that we in this place should fear. As long as we have the courage and humility to work in partnership with the wider society that we strive to serve, we can deliver affordable public services that truly meet the needs of the citizens of our nation. At the end of the day, who knows better what the needs of our citizens and communities are than the people who live in those communities? Our job should be to empower our communities to deliver what they know is needed locally and to use what they have established as a base to build on while including them in the design and delivery of the services that they use.

Empowering individuals and communities is one of the key principles arising from the report of the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services—a key document that informs the Parliament's work on public service reform. It is worth reminding ourselves of its other principles, to guide us in our decision making. They include: integrating service provision by working

"much more closely in partnership"

to improve outcomes; prioritising spending on services that prevent negative outcomes from occurring in the first place, to tackle problems at source; and, crucially, increasing efficiency in the delivery of our public services by

"reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible."

I firmly believe that, if we keep those principles at the forefront of our minds throughout this session of Parliament, we will be able to deliver public services that our communities can be proud of.

On Christie's final principle—that of increasing efficiency by reducing duplication and sharing services—I encourage members across the chamber to engage with organisations that are delivering in their local areas and to ask them for their views. I have had some fantastic conversations of that sort. Last month, I spoke to Nancy and Terry of the Larkhall community plan group, who are involved in a host of local initiatives in the town, from growing to planning and a host of other services. In the process, they have highlighted a particularly obvious example of duplication that is getting in the way of empowering our local communities and which offers a great opportunity to help to share services locally. I will write to the cabinet secretary to raise that example with her, with the aim of moving forward public service reform at a local level, too.

I have also had the pleasure of re-engaging with the Larkhall and District Volunteer Group, which is run by Sandra McCrory and which does fantastic

work, particularly with older residents, to tackle social isolation and loneliness—issues that are often not given the significance that they deserve. The group's free call line offers regular friendly phone calls for lonely or vulnerable people who live in the Lanarkshire area, with volunteers making daily calls from Monday to Friday, in either mornings or afternoons, for a friendly chat and to check that members are safe and well. The service provides reassurance and social contact for those who live alone and feel isolated. That is another service that the public sector would find it incredibly difficult to deliver on its own.

I end by putting one of our fantastic community organisations in the third sector back at the centre of the debate. I extend an invite to the newly appointed minister, Simita Kumar, to come along and see the work of the Larkhall and District Volunteer Group at first hand.

I again thank the cabinet secretary for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to closing speeches.

16:49

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): In closing the debate for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I declare an interest: I am a councillor on Aberdeenshire Council and I sit on the board of trustees of the Barn arts centre and of La petite French School d'Aberdeen.

My team and I have contributed to and helped in the journey of all the third sector groups that we are part of. In the north-east of Scotland, we are buzzing with such people, who are helping, willing, caring and working for free or begging for pennies to support people in their daily lives. Over the past 20 years, many of the vital public sector jobs that we spoke about only last week have migrated to the third sector—they are in community-led, community-delivered, specialised services that have been co-developed with the service users themselves. We might think that that is amazing, but those organisations face insecure funding. They rely on the good will and expertise of volunteer trustees and have to support thousands of people to negotiate their way through complex public services, especially in our justice system. Victim Support Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid, Citizens Advice Scotland and the Wise Group are just a few of the many organisations that help people in their daily lives.

Every day, those third sector organisations face real pressures. They do a fantastic job, but I know from my experience as a beneficiary, a trustee and a councillor, and my role here in the Parliament, that they deserve more support than they are given. As colleagues across the chamber have said, the third sector is crying out for multiyear funding. Time and money are wasted creating systems that rely on annual funding cycles and the financial insecurity that that creates. As highlighted by my dear neighbour as a councillor, Dawn Black, third sector organisations need to be involved in design and decision making as equal partners.

As a Liberal Democrat, I am driven by our commitment to localism and to decentralising decision making right down to the hearts of communities. A commitment to co-design cannot be for show only; we need to listen to the third sector, even if what it tells us feels uncomfortable. That is why I call on members to support the amendment that was lodged by my colleague Morven-May MacCallum, which calls for the third sector to be given a licence to criticise. Those who are best placed to feed back, guide, contribute to and strengthen the partnership between the Scottish Government and the third sector should never fear—in fact, they should be encouraged to speak out in a way that will challenge the status quo.

I also commend colleagues for highlighting the vital role that the third sector plays as an employer. Public and private employers could learn from the third sector when it comes to creating flexible and inclusive roles for carers and people with disabilities.

Too often, public bodies of all sizes overlook the voluntary sector or do not treat them equally when planning or delivering services or making decisions on delivery. If we are to truly strengthen our partnership, the third sector needs to be embraced as an equal partner across the board. A formal commitment that is built into the structure across all levels of government and public bodies will ensure that the warm words that we often say are actually put into action.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Stephen Kerr. You have up to five minutes, Mr Kerr.

16:53

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I begin by recognising the outstanding contribution that is made by genuine charities and voluntary organisations right across Scotland—I see it every week, and I see it everywhere in Mid Scotland and Fife. They support vulnerable families, help people through crisis, tackle loneliness and strengthen our communities. Scotland would undoubtedly be poorer without them.

However, what concerns me today is the increasingly opaque relationship between the Scottish Government and parts of the third sector. For years, my office has tried to follow the money. We have submitted parliamentary questions,

pursued freedom of information requests and trawled through annual reports. It should not be that difficult to establish where taxpayers' money is going, yet there is no single source of information. There is no straightforward way for parliamentarians, journalists or taxpayers to understand who receives public funds, how much they receive and what they spend it on.

Following public money should not require a treasure hunt, but my concern goes beyond transparency. I have repeatedly raised concerns about organisations whose principal activity appears increasingly to be political activism rather than charitable work—organisations that campaign, lobby and try to shape public policy, including organisations that increasingly seek to influence what children are taught in our schools.

Earlier this year, Daniel Sanderson, the Scottish political editor of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, performed what I believe was a significant public service. His investigations exposed the extent to which public money is being used to sustain organisations that are presented as independent voices that support Government policy. Perhaps the most revealing contribution of all was from Alex Neil, a former SNP cabinet secretary—a man who sat around the Cabinet table. He spoke about ministers approaching what he described as "friendly organisations" to support "controversial" policies. Let us think about that. A former SNP cabinet secretary described a system in which the Government funds organisations that support Government policy, with that support presented as evidence of independent backing. That claim is not from an Opposition member, although I agree with it; it is a warning from somebody who was there.

If members think that this is merely a theoretical issue, I can give many examples, but let me give only a couple. Over many years, LGBT Youth Scotland has received substantial sums of public money while it has become increasingly embedded in Scotland's education system through educational resources, training programmes and discussions around gender identity and sexuality, including in primary schools. The Scottish Drugs Forum, which receives substantial grants from Scottish Government funds, has been integrated in the policy-making process by lobbying for drug consumption rooms and against the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill. Let us call it out for what it is.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to Stephen Kerr for taking an intervention, but I am concerned by his argument. There are organisations that support the Government's purpose on, for example, tackling child poverty and climate action, as it should be, but there are other organisations that support Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat policies. That is part of the democratic system. Organisations choose which policies they support, which party best represents them and which changes they think that we should make. Surely it is a good thing that organisations speak out; I assure Stephen Kerr that they regularly speak out both for and against the Government.

Stephen Kerr: I am quoting from Dan Sanderson's article that was published in *The Sunday Times* in March. I am illustrating his investigative journalism through specific examples that were quoted in the article, including the words of Alex Neil. The Government undertakes a deliberately cynical exercise to attract organisations that will lobby in support of Government policy.

David Linden: Just so that members are clear, as Mr Kerr will be aware, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator has a statutory role. Many of the organisations that he has referenced have not, to my knowledge, expressed concern about OSCR. Therefore, is he directly attacking the work of OSCR, which is independent of us?

Stephen Kerr: I thank David Linden for his intervention, because he has highlighted the wording of our amendment. To be frank, yes, I am expressing concern about the genuineness of some organisations based in Scotland that call themselves charities and are registered with OSCR, and I believe that the regulator should take a closer look at them.

David Linden: Will Mr Kerr take another intervention on that point?

Stephen Kerr: I must press on—I apologise, but I am happy to talk to David Linden about these issues at any time.

David Linden: I was talking about OSCR.

Stephen Kerr: I am talking about organisations that are—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Members must not make interventions unless the member who has the floor has indicated their agreement to taking an intervention.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that, Deputy Presiding Officer, but I am also grateful to David Linden for highlighting an issue that I am more than happy to discuss outside the very limited time that I have for this speech. There are other points that I wish to make.

The organisations that I have been describing are not politically neutral. They have clear ideological positions, they campaign for those positions, they lobby for those positions, and they seek to influence public opinion and public policy in pursuit of those positions. They have every right

to do so; what I question is why taxpayers are funding them. Some of those organisations are funded by public funds to the tune of 80-plus per cent of their entire funding. That should cause us concern.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: When a Government funds organisations to lobby the Government and then points to them as neutral experts in support of their policy, to shut down dissent, surely that cannot be described as anything other than a corruption of our democratic process.

Alex Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am going to have to press on, as I am being encouraged to do so.

Stuart McMillan: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Stephen Kerr: I would love to have longer to speak. Perhaps members can organise it between themselves so that we have more time to speak.

The public are not fools. They are entitled to know who is funding whom. They are entitled to know who is influencing whom. They are entitled to know whether supposedly independent voices are, in fact, substantially dependent upon Government support and funding. Too often, the taxpayer is paying for both sides of the argument: they fund the Government and they fund the organisations that tell us how wonderful the SNP Government is. The SNP has spent years building an echo chamber and then presenting the echo as independent evidence. That is not healthy, it is not transparent and it undermines public trust.

The solution—[*Interruption*.] I have a solution. [*Interruption*.] Yes, I come bearing solutions. The solution is straightforward. Let us start with this. Whenever an organisation appears before a parliamentary committee, it should be required to declare how much funding it has received from the Scottish Government over the previous five years and what proportion of its total income that funding represents. That is not asking too much.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must start to wind up.

Stephen Kerr: The declaration of interests is part of the normal processes of parliamentary committees and, indeed, parliamentary debate in this chamber. The Parliament should know, the public should know and taxpayers should know.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must wind up.

Stephen Kerr: That is not an attack on charities; it is a defence of transparency and accountability, and it is long overdue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member had five minutes and has spoken for eight and a half minutes. I appreciate that he took interventions, but he must stick to time.

17:02

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I was going to start by saying that I felt that there was overwhelming cross-party respect and support for Scotland's third sector, but I now feel that that might not be true of all parts of our chamber. However, it feels like there is strong recognition from most of us that our third sector is not only integral to community health and wellbeing and harm prevention but a valued source of expertise and knowledge for most of us, and a vital vehicle for community power.

It has been great to hear about meaningful local initiatives such as walking football and the breakfast boxes in the north-east that Dawn Black mentioned, and about the compassionate staff behind the work of health charities such as Lyme Disease UK, which Morven-May MacCallum mentioned.

It is also clear from the debate how precarious things are for the third sector right now, with organisations facing delays to funding decisions and the long-term impacts of underfunding, cuts and the threats of cuts. Far too many organisations are facing the possibility of job losses and closures. We have heard about the funding crisis that Murray's Initiative in Glasgow is facing. It is not alone in this precarity, as 64 per cent of members of the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland reported financial insecurity at the end of last year, up from 49 per cent in March 2024. The Dumfries and Galloway Citizens Advice Service had its core funding cut by 20 per cent in the most recent council budget, despite the fact that it put £9.8 million back into clients' pockets and into the local economy—as Stuart McMillan mentioned earlier.

The Scottish Huntington's Association, which provides a nationwide specialist service for families impacted by Huntington's disease, told me that statutory funding for the service, where it is provided, is typically allocated on a 12-month basis via a complex jigsaw of local funders with different reporting requirements, who often cannot confirm funding until the eve of the new financial year. That causes anxiety and uncertainty for front-line staff and, more importantly, for the extremely vulnerable people living with the condition.

I welcome the Government's commitment to fairer funding, a third sector agreement and responding to the needs of the sector. As we know and have known for a really long time, we urgently need to move away from the traditional forms of funding and towards easily accessible, multiyear,

flexible funding as the default. Such fairer, longer-term models of funding should enable organisations to cover their core costs, which are rising, retain their autonomy and values, set their own priorities and work on their own terms, and be flexible and responsive to the changing needs of their communities, which they know best. We should be looking to get organisations off the hamster wheel of needlessly competitive and onerous funding applications and to move away from the constraints of project-by-project cycles.

We must recognise that today's debate is not just about central Government funding schemes for the third sector; it is about properly funding our local government. Edinburgh Green councillor Alys Mumford has helped to secure the continuation of funding for some local organisations who had their funding cut without warning, establishing a new funding stream for those specifically impacted by integration joint board cuts in Edinburgh. However, our councillors and local organisations should not be put in such a position in the first place. We need to move towards stable, multiyear funding in the local government settlement and rebuild the trust that we are losing locally.

Although I welcome the support across the parties in the chamber for the importance of multiyear funding, it is extremely telling that we have a Labour Party that is willing to champion multiyear funding for the third sector while denying the same long-term financial sustainability for this very Parliament. We will support the Labour amendment, but, in exchange, Labour members must commit to working with us and their Westminster colleagues to find a solution that allows our Parliament to meaningfully budget in a multiyear way.

An area that has not been covered in much detail this afternoon—although Carol Mochan mentioned the importance of smaller front-line organisations—is the really important role of small grass-roots organisations in our having a thriving third sector in Scotland, and how we ensure that our funding models are able to support organisations that perhaps do not have the governance structures, banking set-up or history of grant management that are required for certain pots of funding. The smaller grass-roots organisations are often those that face the most acute safety and security issues, as they face rising racism and transphobia in an increasingly hostile environment. Many of our community-led organisations are staffed by volunteers and workers who themselves are experiencing multiple overlapping oppressions, trauma and burnout while supporting others. What can we do to better support those organisations with things such as emergency hardship funds and quick access to cash, to allow groups to cover essential costs such as food, transport, security equipment and childcare? Can we support social spaces where groups can organise, create and recuperate, eat together and plan together—spaces run by and for grass-roots groups? Can we properly invest in the broader infrastructure that can support smaller groups to thrive?

I am really pleased to see a commitment in the Scottish Government's motion to the principle of co-design, but I would like a commitment to open government principles and a human-rights approach to participation as part of that.

Fundamentally, today's debate is a question not just of partnership but of power. It is about a willingness on the part of Government to treat the third sector as an equal partner; to meaningfully involve a diverse range of third sector and community voices in decision making and properly resource those conversations; to fund courageously, trust generously and have honest and transparent conversations about funding; to share and redistribute power through processes that we use; and to recognise that every decision has the potential to shape what grows, what survives and what and who remains marginal.

17:08

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The register of members' interests will show that, until 8 May, I was employed as a director of Scottish Autism, which is a third sector organisation. It is precisely because of that background that I have been heartened to see the cabinet secretary lodge the motion, resulting in the consideration of the needs of the sector so early in this parliamentary session.

Last week, in the debate on public service reform, I argued that public service reform and the new deal with the third sector need to be considered in the round. I repeat that sentiment having heard today's speeches; that was certainly evident from last week's debate.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to Joe Long for giving way, particularly when he has just got started. The public service reform aspect is very important, because it is about delivering better public services. For example, preventing homelessness is better for the Government and it is better for the individual involved. It is not about cuts; it is about better public services for everyone, including the people we are here to serve.

Joe Long: Absolutely: I fully recognise and agree with that.

There certainly seems to be cross-party consensus about the need for multiyear funding. We have repeatedly heard that from across the

chamber today. I know from my own experience that year-on-year funding agreements can cause significant financial risk for organisations, some of which, as has been said, are very small and have limited reserves to draw on. Colm Merrick mentioned a cliff edge and Kate Nevens described situations that are very real. I know of instances of charities waiting several months into the financial year to find out whether they would be funded from that April. As Murdo Fraser said, that is a real circumstance, so I am pleased to see it being addressed and discussed in the open today.

In that context, I will say a word about third sector boards. We have not talked much about boards today, but trustees are themselves third sector volunteers and often take on significant responsibilities for governance and finance. The precarious funding situation means that they are often weighing fiduciary responsibilities against loyalty and concern for their staff, who they want to employ and do not want to see go while they are waiting for funding decisions. They have a concern for their workforce who, as we have heard from several members, including Holly Bruce, are often in quite precarious positions. When we talk about engaging the sector, volunteer boards must be particularly thought about.

On the subject of the precarity of employment, we are, at the moment, seeing a compounding of the inequalities in pay and conditions between the public and third sectors. We can take social care as an example. Last October, a report from the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland showed that the difference between the salary of a band 3 NHS worker and that of a social care worker in a third sector organisation could be as much as 14 per cent, although their jobs require a similar level of skill and responsibility. That is not a point about the politics of envy because those in the NHS absolutely deserve the pay, recognition and rewards that they get—and more—but there is a fundamental inequality at the moment. Without even taking into account things such as unsocial hours payments or defined benefit pensions, third sector social care providers are not only facing competition for employees from the retail or hospitality sectors but risk losing staff to local government services and to the NHS when their own contracts with local government or Government mean that offering similar pay and conditions is just not possible. That sort of inequality must be looked at and understood.

Calum Kerr: Joe Long has made a number of important points. As someone who has been on many boards, I know the challenge of finding a treasurer in particular.

There is one aspect of funding that has not come up much in today's debate. We have spoken about year-on-year funding but there is also core funding. So much of the funding that is allocated is project based, but organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland, which supports 200,000 people a year, often struggle for core funding. Does Mr Long have any reflections on that as we try to come up with a fair funding model?

Joe Long: That was going to be my next point and has been well made by the member, as it was in Holly Bruce's contribution earlier. The costs borne by the third sector do not come just from the pay of front-line staff, although we might be forgiven for thinking that when we see the contracts that come from local authorities around April. We must ensure that an ethical commissioning process sees full contract value being taken into account when contracts are uplifted during April funding rounds, because organisations must also employ managers, back-office staff and all the other people who keep the wheels moving and support the work. I thank the member for the intervention.

There has been some discussion today about the campaigning and advocacy role of third sector organisations. I welcome the Liberal Democrat amendment and the cabinet secretary's comments about the right of third sector organisations to campaign and speak up. If charity-sector organisations and service providers find themselves increasing their campaigning and lobbying, that may be because they feel that Government has historically failed to listen to their expertise or to the lived experience of those that they support through their channels and engagement.

We should not expect funded organisations to live in a state of eternal gratitude that means that they cannot speak up for the people who are being failed. In the third sector, the duty to care for groups who are marginalised or disadvantaged and the duty to speak up for those groups are often of a piece—they come together. That is what makes the third sector what it is, and that is why it makes such a rich contribution to our society. I welcome the recognition of that in the Liberal Democrat amendment, which makes it very clear.

I imagine that there will be some relief and good cheer among my former colleagues in the third sector at the consensus and the tone of today's debate, although that might be tempered by a bit of scepticism among professionals who have heard warm words and sympathetic noises before. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): The member alluded to the point in the Liberal Democrat amendment that the third sector must have the licence to criticise as well as to shape policy. I worked for most of my life in the Scottish third sector and, as members across the chamber

have said, it is difficult for people who are under funding pressures and find themselves saying, "Can I really say this to the Government? Will it have an impact on the funding stream that is coming down the line?" I do not know what the answer to that really difficult challenge is, but it is worth recognising it.

Joe Long: I thank the member for his intervention and for the Liberal Democrat amendment, which recognises that.

As I said, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We have a fair funding pilot going on, but the third sector is very used to pilots and they often do not end up with initiatives being scaled up or rolled out to create real, systemic change. We need to ensure that, whatever lessons are learned from the pilot, they are implemented at speed, with structural change. We need political decisiveness to raise the third sector's status, put organisations on a sustainable footing, and recognise and reward the highly skilled, specialist workforce. Without those changes, there are, even now, organisations that will not survive the current parliamentary session.

Alex Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Joe Long: I am wrapping up, so I will not take any more interventions.

I hope that the proposed measures will be implemented without delay. There is the political will across the chamber for that to happen, as we have heard today. Labour will certainly put our weight and our votes behind meaningful change if it is brought forward, and we will support the Scottish Government's motion to that end today.

17:17

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): As others have mentioned, the third sector in Scotland is not just a "nice to have" but is often the backbone of care, compassion and community support. With more than 46,000 organisations employing more than 133,000 people and holding assets worth tens of billions of pounds, the third sector proves that civic society and not central Government is often best placed to meet local needs. It must be treated by Holyrood with the economic respect that it deserves, not as an afterthought.

These organisations step in every day where the state falls short, supporting cancer patients, veterans, those with neurological conditions and many others. Macmillan Cancer Support provides specialist nurses and holistic support. Erskine Veterans Charity delivers vital care to those who served our country. The Scottish Huntington's Association offers expert help to those who are living with a devastating neurological condition, and Alzheimer's Scotland provides essential day care and respite services. Alzheimer's Scotland was a lifeline to my family when my father had dementia. The practical support and respite that it offered helped us to cope and allowed my father to live with dignity.

These organisations do far more than deliver services—they fill critical gaps in statutory provision. Councils and integration joint boards turn to the third sector because it is often more cost effective, agile and responsive than large public bureaucracies. It stretches public funds further through charitable fundraising, volunteers and specialist expertise. These charities bring community trust and a person-centred approach that statutory services frequently struggle to match. They prevent crises, reduce the number of hospital admissions and often deliver better outcomes for less money.

Despite warm words about partnership, however, too often, the reality on the ground is chronic underfunding and instability, as we have heard. The sector is in crisis. Some 64 per cent of third sector organisations are financially insecure, and that figure increased sharply from 49 per cent in the previous year. More than 60 per cent have faced direct cuts to core grants and many are being forced to run down their reserves just to survive in their daily operations. The crisis is manufactured, however, as the current public funding model is actively pushing Scotland's front-line defences to the absolute brink. Running down emergency reserves to fund day-to-day services is completely unsustainable and represents financial negligence by public funders.

Macmillan Cancer Support has been forced to make significant redundancies and cut services in recent years due to funding pressures, leaving cancer patients with reduced access to the specialist support that they desperately need. As Kate Nevens pointed out, even more stark is the situation that is faced by the Scottish Huntington's Association, which wrote to me recently to say:

> "While the Scottish Government rightly talks about the crucial importance of the third sector in delivering public services, the reality on the front line can be somewhat different. While there may be talk of the third sector being equal partners, when funding challenges come all too often IJBs look to essential third sector services to bear the brunt, as if they can be removed without consequence. Glasgow City IJB, for example, recently withdrew funding for Scottish Huntington's Association to provide a specialist Huntington's service unilaterally and without consultation, in so doing being chastened by its own Audit department. This despite the previous Health Secretary Neil Gray saying the Scottish Huntington's Association service keeps families 'well in the community, prevents crisis admissions to hospital and lessens the risk of suicide.'"

I therefore ask the cabinet secretary to meet urgently with the Scottish Huntington's Association

to resolve that situation and others like it.

Treating trusted specialist third sector partners in that way does not suggest that they are equal partners that deliver essential preventative services; it treats them as second-class citizens, useful in good times and expendable when budgets tighten. The situation is unsustainable. We must prioritise efficiency, clearer accountability and value for money in public services, ensuring that resources are directed to front-line services rather than bureaucracy.

I thank Murdo Fraser, Stephen Kerr and Duncan Dunlop for sharing their concerns about political activism among some so-called charities. All third-party organisations must be politically neutral. They must not support a particular party. That is a legal position, and it is the very definition of what the third sector is.

Duncan Dunlop: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member is winding up, so she cannot take an intervention.

Amanda Lindsay: The proposed new third sector partnership agreement is welcome, but it must mean more than warm words. As members including Dawn Black, Collette Stevenson and Murdo Fraser have pointed out, it needs fair, sustainable and genuine multiyear funding that matches the true value and cost of the third sector's work. On that, I believe, there is cross-party consensus. Scotland's third sector and the vulnerable people it serves deserve better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind members of the convention that there should be no interruptions or interventions during a first speech. I call Simita Kumar to make her first speech and to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government.

17:23

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): As this is my first contribution, I begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the people of Edinburgh South Western for placing their trust in me to represent them. It is a profound honour and privilege. For those colleagues who are unfamiliar with the Edinburgh South Western constituency, it is defined by both its stunning natural landscape and its strong sense of community. On the approach to Edinburgh, the majestic Pentland Hills rise on the horizon, marking the beginning of the Water of Leith, which winds its way through our capital. However, not only the beauty of the landscape but the people who call it home make my constituency incredibly special. Across our communities, there is a spirit of kindness and resilience that I am proud to represent today.

I would also like to pay tribute to my predecessor, the formidable Gordon MacDonald. When I first met Gordon, I was struck by his determination and steadfastness. However, through working alongside him, I came to know the kindness, generosity and genuine care that sit behind that determined exterior. Over time, he has become not only a colleague but a friend, a mentor and a source of wise counsel. For his guidance, support and encouragement I will always be grateful.

After 15 years of service, Gordon chose to stand down at the last election and retire—although, knowing Gordon, "retirement" may not be quite the right word. He has already spoken enthusiastically about the number of charities he will be volunteering for, so it is with great pleasure that I make my first speech on strengthening the third sector, as it is something that both Gordon and I are passionate about. It is also the first debate that is in my portfolio and that of the social justice secretary.

I thank all the members who have contributed to the debate. There was a lot of consensus and genuinely good debate in this room. Of course, the debate took an unfortunate turn in some of the contributions that chose to demonise some charities. However, I will move on to cover some of the points that I found really valuable.

As an ex-councillor, I recognise some of the challenges that Julie MacDougall highlighted, so I thank her for doing that. I reassure Carol Mochan that I truly believe in what she said about grass-roots communities and organisations and I look forward to working with her in that space to see what we can do and what we can do better. Holly Bruce thanked the workforce in our charity sector, and I absolutely believe in them as well. On her point about public sector reform, I note that reform does not simply mean cuts; it means having a prevention agenda at the core of our approach.

One theme that came across quite clearly is the message that the third sector is a fundamental part of how we deliver support, tackle inequality and strengthen communities throughout our country.

In my own portfolio, the third sector's contribution is clear and we have committed to a significant multiyear settlement for key disabled people's organisations, recognising their central role in achieving disability equality. This represents an important first step, and we will keep the approach under review as part of our wider work with the third sector.

Multiyear funding provides the stability that is needed to plan for the longer term, invest in staff,

develop services and build relationships that drive lasting change. With greater certainty, organisations can move beyond maintaining services to improving and expanding them, reaching more people and delivering better outcomes across Scotland. It also enables more meaningful co-production, ensuring that organisations can consistently shape policy and services, embedding the principle of "nothing about us without us". Ultimately, multiyear funding strengthens organisations' ability to deliver a sustained long-term impact.

Furthermore, community-level impact is being strengthened through the improving access fund, through which 33 organisations across more than 30 local authority areas have been awarded £1.5 million to improve access to essential services, support independent living and enable disabled people to participate fully in society.

Despite ongoing budget challenges, we remain firmly committed to a fairer, more inclusive Scotland and to advancing equality and tackling discrimination across a wide range of priorities. I am new to this chamber, so perhaps this is my naive optimism, but we all spoke passionately about multiyear funding and, whatever political party we represent, we all have representation at Westminster, so I genuinely ask members to appeal to their colleagues at Westminster to provide Scotland with that multiyear funding so that we can provide it to our charities.

I also want to recognise the vital role of volunteers in our society. Earlier this month, during volunteers week, I visited Maslow's community hub in Govan—an incredible hub that offers classes, workshops and one-to-one support. I heard at first hand about its work in supporting people who face barriers to volunteering, including those from ethnic minority communities, those experiencing intersectional barriers and those with lived experience of the asylum process. I saw how volunteering fosters community cohesion and reduces social isolation while growing the volunteer base.

I thank Alex Kerr for the invitation to come to his constituency to see the fantastic work that he mentioned. If my diary allows, I would love to take him up on that offer.

The hub that I mentioned is just one of many examples across Scotland that show the wider impact of volunteering. Volunteering contributes an estimated £5.3 billion each year, but its value goes beyond that. Volunteering tackles loneliness, improves wellbeing, builds confidence and opens pathways into employment. Quite simply, volunteers are at the heart of our communities and our third sector.

However, we must be honest about the challenges ahead. We know that the current system is not sustainable and, if we are to secure the essential support and services that the third sector provides, we must take meaningful action together. It is in that context that the development of a new third sector partnership agreement represents a critical and necessary next step. The agreement will lay the foundations for a stronger and more sustainable sector. It will be co-designed with the sector, not imposed on it, and it will recognise the third sector as a true partner in shaping and delivering solutions for the people and communities of Scotland. The themes that it identifies are developing a strategic partnership of equals, supporting a strong and independent sector, improving financial sustainability and ensuring accountability at all levels. It is a real opportunity for the Scottish Government to demonstrate that we have listened and that we are committed to meaningful, lasting change.

As we take that work forward, I want to be clear about our commitment. We will work alongside the sector in genuine collaboration, listening carefully to the voices, experience and expertise across the sector in order to deliver a meaningful partnership agreement that reflects our shared ambition. We truly cannot achieve that alone, and we must formalise our relationship. I go back to what Morven-May MacCallum said about understanding the strength of our third sector—that is something that I truly believe in, and I look forward to working with the sector on that aspect.

By working collaboratively, we can ensure that the third sector partnership agreement is not just a statement of intent but a lasting agreement that supports a stable and sustainable sector and delivers real change for the people and communities of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Thank you. That concludes the debate on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector.

Business Motion

17:33

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-00388, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a revision to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 17 June 2026—

after	
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Affordable Bus Fares
insert	
followed by	Appointment of Law Officers—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:34

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are six questions to be put today. The first question is, that amendment S7M-00356.2, in the name of Julie MacDougall, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:34

Meeting suspended.

17:36

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S7M-00356.2, in the name of Julie MacDougall, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector. Members should cast their vote now.

For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00356.2, in the name of Julie MacDougall, is: For 26, Against 77, Abstentions 17.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S7M-00356.1, in the name of Carol Mochan, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I think that the app has not registered my vote. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My vote has not registered; I tried to vote no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)

Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00356.1, in the name of Carol Mochan, is: For 111, Against 8, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00356.5, in the name of Holly Bruce, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Abstentions

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00356.5, in the name of Holly Bruce, is: For 77, Against 25, Abstentions 17.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00356.4, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote was recorded; I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: It was recorded—thank you.

For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00356.4, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 23, Against 96, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00356.3, in the name of Morven-May MacCallum, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not record my vote; I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded—thank you.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)

Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00356, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on strengthening Scotland's partnership with the third sector, as amended, is— [*Interruption*.] Do you want to hear the result of the vote or not? The result is: For 78, Against 26, Abstentions 16.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament commends the essential role that the third sector plays in supporting people and communities; recognises the contribution that the third sector provides to the delivery of many Scottish Government key priorities, including eradicating child poverty; acknowledges that the Scottish Government understands it has a shared responsibility alongside other funders and those who contract out to the third sector to take action to ensure that the sector is sustainable; agrees that a Third Sector Partnership Agreement provides the opportunity to formalise the relationship between the Scottish Government and the third sector, building upon the Scottish Government's progress in delivering on its Fairer Funding commitments to date and responding to the views of the sector; agrees that the Third Sector Partnership will be co-designed with third sector stakeholders to embed their knowledge and experience, demonstrating the value that the Scottish Government places on the sector; believes that the third sector would benefit from a transition to multi-year, simplified, flexible funding models that considers inflationary increases and covers full operating costs as the default; calls on the UK Government to reimburse Scottish third sector organisations for the cost of increased employer NICs, which are currently estimated at £75 million per year; recognises that those working in the third sector, such as organisations addressing violence against women and girls or supporting migrants, carers and disabled people, are also experiencing multiple and overlapping inequalities, secondary trauma and harm, and that they would benefit from an approach to third sector funding that includes the Real Living Wage and fair work principles; further recognises that some third sector organisations, particularly those working with marginalised communities such as trans people and migrants, are experiencing threats to the safety of their staff, volunteers and service users; understands that the third sector employs over 130,000 paid staff in Scotland, providing employment opportunities for those who find it harder to gain work, including disabled people, and often offering flexible working conditions, which has resulted in women making up 64% of the workforce; notes that Scotland's charitable and voluntary sector contributes significantly to the delivery of government policy objectives,

yet relies heavily on public donations and fundraising; believes that the sustainability of many charities depends on multi-year funding and appropriate government support; considers that any diversification of funding should assist smaller charities that can find it difficult to participate in public funding rounds, and believes that any charity in receipt of public funding must retain the absolute licence to criticise, as well as to shape, public policy and the actions of government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Jo Cox's Death (10th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I ask members leaving the chamber to do so quietly, please.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00180, in the name of Jenny Young, on the 10th anniversary of the death of Jo Cox. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the 10th anniversary of the death of Jo Cox, who was murdered on 16 June 2016; notes that, until her death, Jo served as the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen from May 2015; further notes that she was known as a passionate campaigner, activist and humanitarian; understands that her murder prompted a national conversation about the safety and security of elected representatives and the need for greater civility in politics; acknowledges that Jo has left a lasting legacy, including the Jo Cox Foundation, a charity that calls for more respect in politics, and The Great Get Together, an annual nationwide celebration centred on Jo's message that "we have more in common than that which divides us"; celebrates the work of the Jo Cox Foundation, including the Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme, which aims to support women in developing their skills and participating fully in public life; acknowledges that, in the decade since Jo's murder, further acts of violence against elected representatives have occurred, including the murder of Sir David Amess in 2021, and notes the view that, as a new session of the Scottish Parliament begins, all MSPs should commit to fostering a more respectful political culture and remember that they have more in common than that which divides them.

17:47

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): I thank members from all six parties who added their support to the motion and helped secure tonight's debate.

I want to start by recognising that, first and foremost, Jo Cox was a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother, and my thoughts are very much with her family, for whom I am sure that 16 June will always be a difficult day. Loss does not diminish with the passing of time. In recent weeks, I have been in touch with Jo's sister Kim, and I conveyed my deepest condolences and very best wishes to the family. I hope that this debate will be a fitting tribute from this place in Jo's memory.

Jo Cox's career was defined by her humanitarian work, whether at Oxfam—as head of policy and advocacy in the United Kingdom, which included working on the make poverty history campaign, and later as head of Oxfam International's humanitarian campaigns in New

York—or in the UK Parliament, where she established the friends of Syria all-party parliamentary group and advocated for the Syrian people and an end to the civil war. Fittingly, her final questions in Parliament focused on protecting children in conflict.

On 16 June 2016, Jo was shot and stabbed outside a library in her Batley and Spen constituency, where she was due to hold a surgery. Her death shocked the nation, and tributes to her poured in. In the aftermath of her death, changes were made to better ensure the safety of MPs and their staff, with enhanced security measures for MPs and changes to how surgeries were advertised and conducted.

Then, in 2021, Sir David Amess MP was tragically killed while conducting a constituency surgery. My thoughts are with Sir David's family today, too. There is certainly more to be done to protect elected representatives and their staff, while also recognising the risks inherent in aspects of the job that we all do and in many of the public-facing jobs in our society.

The Jo Cox Foundation was established by Jo's friends and family after her death, to champion the ideals that Jo spent her working life fighting for. Through the Jo Cox civility commission, the foundation works to create a safe and respectful democracy by challenging the abuse and intimidation of elected representatives. In February, the commission published the report "A Renewed Call to Action for the Devolved Nations", and I encourage members across the chamber to read its findings.

The foundation also advocates for building stronger communities through the great get together, an annual celebration that sees communities across the UK coming together for a range of events, from park runs and litter picking to picnics. I will be hosting a great get together event next Tuesday lunchtime here in the Parliament, and I hope to see many members there.

Jo was also a powerful advocate for women's involvement in our labour movement, serving as chair of the Labour Women's Network from 2011 to 2015. The Jo Cox women in leadership programme is a mentoring and training programme for women in the Labour Party that was established in memory of Jo to continue that important work alongside the Labour Women's Network, and I am pleased to say that graduates of the programme include my Scottish Labour colleagues Katherine Sangster and Carol Mochan. As a result of the programme, hundreds of Labour women have stood for election, led in their communities and campaigned for change. I cannot think of a more fitting legacy than that for a woman such as Jo.

In the days leading up to this debate, many people have asked whether our political discourse has improved in the decade since Jo's death. I believe that, if anything, our politics has become more divided, and more entrenched as us versus them. In his book, "Why We're Polarized", the American commentator and journalist Ezra Klein explains how political affiliation in America has become one of many signifiers of identity or belonging that are stacked on top of so many others that to cross sides from one party to the other becomes virtually impossible.

Although our political context might be quite different from that of the United States, it strikes me that the growing prominence of identity politics in our country—of tribes, teams and groups—has hardened those dividing lines. People become not just politically opposed, but "enemies", "traitors" and "threats to society". The growing influence of social media—and of the bad actors who control and manipulate those platforms—has certainly fuelled the culture of outrage and conflict that dominates public discourse and media today.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the member for giving way—she is giving a very fine speech and tribute to Jo Cox.

Has she been struck, in recent days, by what has been revealed by the BBC about the firebomb attacks that were made on the UK Prime Minister by another state? The purpose of those attacks was to divide people in Britain, and exploit the existing divisions, including through social media accounts online. That is a prime example of how the weakness in our political discourse can result in direct harm to our country.

Jenny Young: I thank the member for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. We all need to be wise to the fact that there are outside influences, and indeed other nations, who intend us harm and are seeking to disrupt and influence our discourse. The point is certainly well made.

At the start of this session of Parliament, there have been warm words from many members across the chamber about the need to work together to cross political divides in the national interest, and so show people who are disaffected and disillusioned with politics that this place can be a force for good and can deliver tangible change in their lives. I whole-heartedly agree with those sentiments, but I wonder how long any of those lofty intentions will last before they are swallowed up in the day-to-day cut and thrust of political intrigue and partisan conflict.

Too often, this place has failed in its duties to deliver genuine, principled scrutiny of

Government—something on which our very democracy depends. The Government deserves to get a hard time from me and all other back-bench members, but we need to find a way of interacting and working in this place that does not extinguish the humanity of the individual whom we are questioning or, in the case of members of the Government, the individual whose question they are answering.

That means saying what we mean and meaning what we say, letting our yes be a yes and our no be a no. It means that we need to have the humility—not something that politicians are often blessed with—to admit when we have gone too far, and to extend grace to others when they do the same. Not every one of us will manage that, and certainly not every day.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Jenny Young for taking my intervention, and I want to echo Michael Marra's comments—it is an exceptional speech. She has drawn attention to how difficult this anniversary is for Jo Cox's family.

I had the privilege of working very closely with Jo's sister, Kim Leadbeater, in the previous session of Parliament, and I found her to be someone who exemplified precisely what Jenny Young has been talking about. I not only put on record my thoughts for Kim and the family at this time, but highlight her as an example of how we can tackle difficult issues in a way that does not cut across our need to be humane in how we conduct our politics.

Jenny Young: I thank Liam McArthur for that intervention and pay tribute to him for the way in which, in the previous session, he led the debate on assisted dying. That was another fine example of what we are talking about.

As I have said, not all of us will manage to take the approach that I set out, and certainly not every day. It requires making a choice to be respectful and honour the other. I know that I will need help to keep doing that over the next five years, especially on the hard days, when I feel cynical and when opposing forces are pressing in. However, if we genuinely want things to be better, we each have to try.

Before I entered politics, I was a secondary school French teacher in West Lothian. My former pupils will tell you that I had high standards for behaviour—they might describe it a little more colourfully than that. Respect was the watchword of my classroom: respect for ourselves and respect for each other.

Let that be the mantra of this place, of this session and of our national discourse. Let us honour the memory of Jo Cox by remembering that, as she said,

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I inform the chamber that, understandably, very many members wish to speak in tonight's debate. I intend to let everyone in, given the number of friends and colleagues of Jo who are in the chamber this evening.

17:56

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I start by paying tribute to Jenny Young and thanking her for securing this debate. Members' business motions often talk about celebrating something, but the topic of this debate is clearly not something that we want to celebrate; rather, it is something that we want to mark, and we want to do so with a degree of solemnity, for the sake of Jo's family.

I served in Westminster from 2017 onwards, so I was not in the same intake as Jo, who entered Parliament in 2015. However, she entered Parliament alongside my other half, who is an English Labour MP—which, by the way, has really taken cross-party working to a new level, and is not something that would recommend to everybody—and I have also had the pleasure and privilege of serving alongside Jo's sister, Kim, who was referred to by Mr McArthur earlier. She epitomised what was clearly a family value of being kind and compassionate.

When I arrived at Westminster in 2017, I made quite a deliberate decision. As somebody who had joined a political party at the age of 11 and was incredibly tribal, I made a very deliberate decision to spend time with other parliamentarians. This is the first time that I have spoken about it, but I used to play tennis on a Wednesday morning with Kim Leadbeater—Jo's sister—David Mundell and Sir Desmond Swayne. It would be fair to say that, other than our terrible lack of ability when it came to tennis, there was very little that united us in our politics. However, we could put that to one side, and that is something that we need to learn to do an awful lot more.

Ms Young is absolutely right to touch on Jo's legacy. The things that she espoused in terms of tackling loneliness and isolation are incredibly important, and in that respect, I want to touch on what I refer to as my gap years between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament, which were important for me in reflecting on how I behaved as a legislator and as a politician. During that two-year period, I worked for the Good Faith Partnership, as I have noted in my register of interests. One of the things that I was involved in was the warm welcome campaign, which was set

up to deal with loneliness and isolation in our communities. On one of the first visits that I undertook as an MSP, I had the privilege of visiting my own parish church, St Paul the Apostle, which has a warm welcome hub. I encourage all members to seek out and visit its local warm welcome space to see how loneliness and isolation, the very issues that Jo Cox campaigned on, are being tackled.

Recently, I saw a documentary that dealt with the Dunblane massacre that took place 30 years ago. I was struck by the fact that Lord Robertson and Michael Forsyth appeared together in the documentary. They sat and reflected on how they, as Secretary of State for Scotland and shadow secretary of state, handled the situation back in 1996. I thought that it was very unusual to see a Labour and a Conservative politician sitting alongside each other talking about something that united them. However, it was a sad moment, because the thing that united them was grief: George Robertson lived in Dunblane and his kids went to that school, and Michael Forsyth was the local MP. It struck me that we have probably lost something in terms of how we conduct our politics.

I mentioned earlier the two years that I spent away from politics. The electorate are never wrong, and that two-year period gave me the ability to think about how, if I were to go back into politics, I would want to contribute to Parliament and legislate. I reflected that, in the seven years that I was at Westminster, there were occasions on which I would go for the jugular; indeed, I would sometimes make a two-footed tackle against Stephen Kerr. However, in coming to this place, I have made a conscious decision that I want to contribute a bit more thoughtfully—although there will be occasions when I will get it wrong.

I want to end on this point, because I picked up on the slight biblical reference that Ms Young made earlier. For me, a lot of what we are talking about comes back to the language that we use. In the first few weeks of this session, I have been slightly concerned about some of the language that I have heard in the chamber. I am not going to name individuals, because that will not help, but my plea to all members is to be slightly mindful of the language that is used in here. As I seek to do that, I will certainly take with me the verses in James, chapter 3, on taming the tongue.

18:00

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): I thank Jenny Young for securing the debate.

I remember hearing the news about Jo's death as I was driving home from work. At that point, I was not involved in politics. It seemed an unspeakably shocking thing to have happened here, in a democratic country. She was killed while doing her job, meeting constituents who needed her help on the streets of the community that she represented. Jo's murder shocked the Labour family and the nation. I never met Jo, but her legacy and the determination of her friends and colleagues to honour her memory helped to propel me here today.

Jo was a passionate feminist who worked tirelessly to maximise women's voices in politics and public life. As Jenny Young mentioned, she was elected chair of the Labour Women's Network, leading the organisation from 2011 until she became an MP in 2015. Following her death, the Jo Cox women in leadership programme was established to continue that work by investing in a generation of Labour women to ensure that they had the skills, the confidence and the network to become leaders and to support others in doing the same. In 2018, I was fortunate to become part of cohort 2 of the programme.

The programme's influence extends far beyond elected office. Jo Cox graduates are encouraged not only to seek leadership roles themselves but to support and mentor other women, which reflects Jo's belief in collective leadership and opening doors for others. The programme gave me practical skills and helped me to think about what kind of feminist I wanted to be. Most importantly, it gave me a group of friends who were determined to hold me up and push me onwards. Nineteen graduates have gone on to become MPs, and two graduates are now MSPs: Carol Mochan and me. Others have taken up leadership roles in trade unions, charities, public services and community organisations.

However, the programme's greatest achievement is not the positions that its graduates hold but the community that it has created: an army of feminists working for equality, supporting one another to succeed and never knowing our place. As graduates, we carry around in our heads the voice of the legendary Nan Sloane, the Labour Women's Network's training lead:

> "Get in the room, take up the space, take politics seriously and never apologise for yourself."

I promise Nan that I am trying.

We are making progress, and this is a legacy that we should all be proud of. However, sadly, a decade after Jo's death, we continue to live in a world that often feels angrier, more divided and more polarised. It is worth stating that that is why remembering Jo really matters.

As I said, I never met Jo, but I believe that the best way to honour her memory is to stand against hatred, to reject those who seek to divide us and to do the hard work of always trying to find what

we have in common. At times, in this place, that may feel hard, but it is a legacy worth carrying forward.

18:03

Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I thank Jenny Young for lodging the motion and for the chance, on the 10th anniversary of Jo Cox's death, to allow ourselves a moment of pause. Grief is a drowning heaviness. It is also, I believe, something that warrants action. Before I get to the rest of tonight's debate, it is worth being specific about what we are marking today.

Jo Cox's record was wider than the one line that we often quote on the anniversary of her death, that

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."

In her maiden speech, in June 2015, she said:

"Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration".—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons,* 3 June 2015; Vol 596, c 675.]

In April 2016, backing Lord Dubs's amendment on child refugees, she said:

"Who can blame desperate parents for wanting to escape the horror"?—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons,* 25 April 2016; Vol 596, c 1235.]

She helped to write a 2015 Labour friends of Palestine report calling for the Gaza blockade to be lifted. In February 2016, she opposed curbs on boycotting Israeli firms over the occupation, saying that

"It is our right to boycott unethical companies."

As other members have noted, she was the chair of the Labour Women's Network and is remembered for saying that she had gone into politics partly because only 23 per cent of the House of Commons was female. On 3 February 2016, she signed an early day motion marking LGBT history month and welcomed the legal gains of the past two decades.

None of that represents the soft, safe version of Jo Cox that we often repeat every June. It was specific. It took sides. Some of it was uncomfortable, even within her own party. Ten years on, the line that we repeat—rightly—about what we have in common should unsettle us as much as it comforts us.

The motion is honest about what has not changed. As has been mentioned, Sir David Amess was murdered in 2021, and the threats against elected representatives have become so routine that we now build entire protocols around something as ordinary as a constituency surgery.

The motion has been signed by members from every party in this chamber, and I do not think we should just wave that away as being a nice gesture, because every member who signed the motion echoes Jo Cox's moral fortitude, her courage and her ability to know that standing with the marginalised is not political performance but decency. It is easy to vote for a sentence about having more in common, but it is far harder to square that with the hate that others people and isolates communities that are begging for love and care.

Jo Cox's family have said this week that what troubles them now is not disagreement but the way that disagreement curdles into language that, as David Linden touched on, stops acknowledging the other side as people, language that corrupts the beauty of the word "local" into a hostile and alien phrase and language that seeks to convince us that some of us are less welcome here, less human than other people. That is the gap between the motion and the vote, and it is the gap that this Parliament will be judged on long after tonight's debate is forgotten. The slide that we are seeing right now is gradual, and I believe that it is reversible, but only if we choose deliberately to reverse it.

Today, therefore, I want to remember Jo Cox with the full beauty of her being. I want to remember that she was Batley and Spen born and bred, and proud of it. I want to remember her relentless campaigning on creating safe civilian havens in Syria and the words that she used in the last two questions that she lodged in Parliament, which echoed her belief that our country could exercise the privileges and powers that we hold to do good for people regardless of borders or race.

I also remember what her killer shamefully yelled when he killed her. After her murder, Jo Cox's husband said in a statement that we must

"fight against the hatred that killed her",

and I do not believe we can fight that hatred unless we know what it is to start with.

I support the motion whole-heartedly, and I hope that every member who signed it means it for more than just tonight, so that, the next time this chamber has a chance to act on what divides us and we speak as if we have more in common with one another than that which divides us, we actually vote like it as well.

18:07

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): I thank Jenny Young for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is an immense privilege to have the opportunity to speak to the motion. I refer to my entry in the register of

members' interests, which notes my roles in the national health service and as a member of Renfrewshire Council.

I have reflected a lot on the issue that we are discussing. I do not want to simply read out a written speech, as there have been many eloquent speakers who are far better at doing the written speeches thing than I am. However, I will say that, yesterday, while I was walking my dog, who does not walk far nowadays, I was thinking about the collaborative working that I have done over my 20 years in the NHS and nine years as a councillor in a minority administration. I had a lot of respect for fellow councillors across the parties. At the count at which I was elected, the first people who came bouncing up to me and gave me a hug were Labour councillors. I have known those people for a long time and have a lot of personal respect for them.

People gift us this opportunity to represent them, and the political make-up of representatives is bound to change as society changes and things influence us. However, the opportunity that we have in that democratic society should never be underestimated. In that regard, I think of my family's personal journey. I am the proud daughter and granddaughter of refugees who had to flee Idi Amin's dictatorship. They came here with one suitcase and one family photograph. Those are the things that genuinely matter and that people take for granted. Being part of a democratic system in which I am able to speak openly and am trusted to represent my communities is something that I will never take for granted. I am lucky in that I have been able to give back to society in a way that enables me to say thank you for those opportunities and for the safety that was granted to me and my family.

However, there is an onus on us all with regard to how we conduct ourselves in this chamber and outside it. The freedom to express ourselves and the right to speak freely come with responsibilities. One of the most impressive moments in the previous parliamentary session was the way in which members conducted themselves in the debates around the right to die. At that time, people in my life who are not that political were, all of a sudden, really engaged in and enthused by politics and talked about their opinions in a really respectful way, and that respect was reciprocal. There was no thrashiness about those conversations, even though people felt very passionately on both sides or were very confused in the middle of it all. That says a lot about the way that discussions were held in the previous session.

When people have disengaged from politics and do not turn out to vote, the question is, how can we bring people back together? This is how we do it—through the way that we conduct ourselves and open up those conversations. It is all very well to have resources like the participation and communities team, who will go out into our communities and actively engage with people, but the way that we conduct ourselves here is the foundation for that effort.

I really want us to reflect on that today. It is not just about being mindful of what we say here; it is also about the overall impact that that will have. Where we have influence, there is also consequence. The issue is to do with how the words that we utter can be interpreted. I ask members to be mindful of that when they are making points in this chamber and outside it. It is important that we foster a culture of integrity, mutual respect and reflection on our own conduct and that we think about how our conduct will be seen by those around us. By showing compassion, gratitude and consideration in our delivery, we can create a culture that enables our society at large to have pride in our national Parliament. That is something that we should all strive for.

18:11

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Jenny Young made an outstanding speech. Undoubtedly, she is a rising talent in the Labour Party—and quite rightly so.

It is a privilege to be able to participate in this debate. Jo Cox was murdered by a far-right extremist, and Sir David Amess, my friend—I should say "our friend", as he was a friend to everybody—was murdered by Islamist extremism. Those ideologies are different, but the result is the same. Both were acts of pure evil. Both were attacks on democracy. Both were attacks on the principle that political differences are settled through debate, persuasion and the ballot box rather than through intimidation, hatred and violence. The deaths of Jo Cox and Sir David Amess remind us that our democracy is precious but also fragile.

Those of us who enter public life do so knowing that we will, rightly, be scrutinised, criticised and challenged. That is part of the job. However, what none of us should ever have to accept is abuse, threats or fear. We are supposed to disagree in this Parliament—and I make my own contribution to that end. If we stop disagreeing, we stop doing our jobs, because robust disagreement is the lifeblood of our democracy. However, there is a world of difference between robust disagreement and hatred.

We would be kidding ourselves if we pretended that the tone of our politics has not deteriorated. Social media can be a powerful force for good, but too often it can become a sewer. I do not pretend to know the solution, but it cannot be healthy that

anonymous individuals—sometimes bad actors from foreign states who do not live anywhere near these shores—can hide themselves behind false identities and spread hatred, misinformation and abuse with little consequence. The effect that that is having on our democracy is undoubtedly discouraging good people from entering public life, and that worries me. It places enormous pressure on those who are already serving, and that pressure falls particularly heavily on women in politics, many of whom are subject to levels of personal abuse that are utterly reprehensible.

What genuinely distresses me is the extent to which some of the most toxic of voices online are indulged, amplified and even sometimes legitimised by people who should know better. We all know the anonymous accounts that I am talking about. They trade in personal abuse, conspiracy theories and outright falsehoods. None of us should be encouraging that culture, and none of us should be giving it oxygen.

When I think of Jo Cox, I think of the words that have been mentioned already, which, I grant, are oft-quoted. She said that

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons*, 3 June 2015; Vol 596, c 675.]

Those words are not just a slogan; they are a challenge to recognise our common humanity and to build stronger communities. That spirit lives on through the Jo Cox Foundation, which has focused on strengthening communities, encouraging respectful politics and tackling loneliness.

I was greatly impressed by the work that was conducted on a joint-party basis by Rachel Reeves and Seema Kennedy, who united in the memory of Jo to ensure that loneliness was finally recognised as a serious challenge that society faces. Theresa May, in fact, had a minister for loneliness, in recognition of the great social harm that loneliness inflicts on us as a community. Jo understood something important. Too many people, particularly older people, live lives of profound isolation. Some go days, weeks or sometimes longer without any meaningful contact with another human being. That is why community matters and why belonging matters.

Jo Cox's message was that we have more in common than that which divides us. Sir David Amess embodied that same belief through his kindness, accessibility and commitment to his constituents. At a time when our politics can feel increasingly fractious and toxic, the lessons from those individuals are worth remembering and taking into our own service as public servants.

18:16

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I am pleased to speak in today's debate and I thank Jenny Young for bringing it to the chamber. It is a privilege to follow on from some fantastic speeches in the Parliament.

It is fitting that we are holding this debate in memory of Jo Cox so early in the parliamentary session. As many people have said, with so many new MSPs, we have a rare opportunity to change the tone of how we do politics, both in this chamber and in Scottish politics as a whole. The anniversary of Jo Cox's tragic death a decade ago provides a sobering reminder of how important it is that each of us holds ourselves to the highest standards and follows her example of service, compassion and unity.

In the days after Jo was killed, as more people learned about who she was and what she stood for, I remember that a friend told me that she had spent a long time looking for a political figure she could look up to and hope to emulate, and that she had finally found one. Her only regret was that she had not had the chance to follow Jo's work when she was alive. However, we can all follow her example. We should also support the work of the Jo Cox Foundation, particularly its efforts to encourage more women to participate in public life.

If you engage in politics solely through social media, you could be forgiven for thinking that public life and politics are defined entirely by toxicity. I am happy to report that, when you get out and meet real people, that is not often the case. When you knock on doors, although people may not agree with you or may not like your political party, and although they may even be a bit—or more than—sceptical of politicians in general, most people engage respectfully. That has certainly been my experience, and I sincerely hope that it has been the experience of members across the chamber.

However, we all know that there are dark corners of social media where the opposite is true: places where hatred and abuse are directed at political representatives, candidates and campaigners, particularly women and those from minority backgrounds. Misogynistic abuse and threats of safety were among the top reasons that female MSPs cited for standing down before May's election. That is deeply damaging to the health of our democracy, and it is easy to see why it has become increasingly difficult to encourage good people to get involved in politics.

I believe passionately in the right of everyone to express their views freely, robustly and with vigour, but that gives nobody the right to be abusive or threatening. Nor do I believe that those same rights extend to enormous social media

companies. Too often, they have failed to tackle deeply toxic content and, in some cases, they seem to reward and amplify exactly the sort of behaviour that poisons public debate and that can lead to violence. In reflecting on Jo Cox's legacy today, we should also consider how those very powerful organisations can be properly held to account.

I applaud the work of the Jo Cox Foundation in tackling loneliness, which remains a great epidemic in our society. Its great get together initiative, as Jenny Young mentioned, recognises the immense power of simply spending time together in healing divisions and helping people to feel less alone. That message feels every bit as relevant today as it did when Jo championed it.

I will do my very best to follow that example in my own work as an MSP and in the communities that I feel privileged to represent. I believe, as others have said, that the best tribute that we can pay to Jo Cox is not simply to remember her words but to reflect them in how we conduct ourselves in the Parliament and in our roles in public life over the years ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Before moving to our next speaker, who will be Patricia Gibson, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Jenny Young to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Jenny Young*]

18:20

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I join others in congratulating Jenny Young on securing this evening's debate to commemorate the political contribution of Jo Cox and to pay tribute to her legacy.

I was a member of the UK Parliament on the day that Jo Cox was killed. I was out visiting a secondary school that I had been working in right up until the election in May 2015. The school was not in my constituency; I was visiting former colleagues who were keen to catch up and pupils with whom I had built good relationships, and they had loads of questions about my life as an MP. It was a happy visit, with laughter, anecdotes and memories of my time with staff and pupils, which had ended on the day that the Scottish National Party swept into Westminster on a wave of support, the scale of which no one had predicted.

That day, I was in the class with my former secondary 2 pupils, and the teacher had been discussing how Westminster operates. He had played a clip, and as the clip ended, the television reverted to live broadcast. The news flashed up that an MP had been seriously injured following an attack, and the children's levity came very abruptly to an end. Everybody was really shocked. For the children, it had been a very interesting visit from a former teacher who now seemed to have quite an exciting job, which then became a visit from a former teacher who now had what they perceived to be a really dangerous job.

Even from the initial reports, it seemed impossible to imagine—despite the deranged attack on Jo Cox and what she suffered—that she would not come through it. We certainly all hoped and prayed that she would. It was a very sombre time in the Commons when we reconvened the following Monday. All we could think about was, how could this happen? What does it say about the political climate in which we live? Inevitably, we wondered which one of us would be next.

Like many in the SNP group, Jo Cox had been elected only the preceding year, and, like many of us, she was still finding her feet and had been taken by surprise at the ferocious hatred that was being spouted out on social media platforms, where good intentions are twisted and misrepresented. It is a digital town square, complete with digital pitchforks, to attack and abuse anyone—especially politicians, but not just politicians—who raises their head even slightly above the parapet. We knew that it was only a matter of time before another such attack took place—and it did subsequently, claiming the life of David Amess, a long-standing MP who was respected and admired across the house.

I recall the five-year anniversary of Jo's death and how her sister, Kim Leadbeater MP, led a debate in the House of Commons to celebrate her sister's life and legacy while continuing to fight for the values that cost Jo Cox her life. Kim's speech on that day, witnessed by her and Jo's parents, was moving, inspiring, powerful and memorable. Ten years on, with two MPs murdered in the line of duty and countless others abused and subjected to intimidating tactics on social media, it is a good time to take stock of where we are, because politics has become increasingly divided by extremism. That is bad enough, but in that particular context we must all be more mindful of the language that we use and how we debate and interact with each other.

People often blame the nastiness that is spouted on the influence of social media. Members have done that today, and I completely understand why. However, I say this: social media does not operate in a vacuum. It gives me no pleasure to say that, sadly, some elements of the media need to have a care about their contribution to the creation in our virtual town squares of digital stocks and pitchforks that are increasingly the norm on social media. We

all know that words—outpourings—can move or motivate others into deadly action. I say that because, when I was in the House of Commons, I did not meet one MP—not one—who had not suffered at least one death threat or a threat of some kind of physical harm. That is a terrible thing to say. When elected representatives in democratic nations are attacked and killed for their beliefs, it is our democratic values that are being attacked. Those values are too precious to lose without challenge from those of us who hold them dear.

The vast majority of elected representatives are in politics to stand up for ideals and better the lives of those we seek to represent. That is it. That is all. However, in some sections of the mainstream media, our motives are constantly questioned, our efforts constantly belittled and our visions constantly undermined through language that is nasty and excoriating, and that is the backdrop against which social media exists. To all politicians in this place and in all our democratic institutions, to everyone involved in the media—whether it be social, print or television—and to all those involved in the political process, I say that we should have a care with regard to how we speak to and about each other.

In this chamber and in wider society, we need to relearn how to disagree respectfully and not assume the worst of someone just because we disagree with their politics. Let us try to heal our politics, so that extremism cannot flourish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You must conclude.

Patricia Gibson: Today, we pay tribute to Jo Cox, who is often quoted as saying that there is more that unites us than divides us. Truly, if we could remember that and live with that in mind, whatever our roles in life are, our more respectful politics will have a strong basis on which to survive and thrive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Earlier, I omitted to put the question on the motion to extend the debate, so I will put it now. Do members agree to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes?

Motion agreed to,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

18:27

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my colleague Jenny Young for bringing this important and thoughtful debate to the chamber.

I did not know Jo Cox, but I was privileged to meet many people who did. I attended the first Jo Cox women in leadership programme just a year after Jo was killed and found out that Jo was a kind, patient person who had spent most of her career working with those in need here in the UK and across the world. I learned that Jo had an ambition for a fairer and more just world, and I think that tonight's debate, at a time when some seek to stoke division and hate, is a reminder that we can always choose to take a kinder and more compassionate path.

As others have noted, in her maiden speech to Parliament, Jo poetically said:

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Last night, I spent a long time thinking about what I should speak about in the debate. I asked myself, what do the words in that quote make me—us—think?

Scotland's story is one of immigration and emigration. Over the centuries, many people from across the world have come to Scotland, shaping our heritage and embracing our traditions. Similarly, Scots have emigrated across the world at times of hardship to find work or to be with family members who have set up new lives and homes in other parts of the world.

As I think of the events of last week, when we witnessed violence and bigotry on our streets and in my region of Ayr, which was a shock, I feel that tonight's debate commemorating the memory of Jo Cox could not have come at a more important time.

Who are we, if we do not care about the people around us? Who are we, if our first thought is not to smile when we hear children chattering in a playground, and see children from many cultures enjoying playing and learning from one another? It should give us great joy to see that.

The attack on Jo was motivated by far-right political thinking and was fuelled by prejudice and hate. On the 10th anniversary of Jo's death, my thoughts go out to her family and friends, and to everyone who has been impacted by that attack. I also pay tribute to Sir David Amess and send my thoughts to his family and friends, some of whom are in the chamber tonight.

I am saddened that Jo's husband, Brendan, feels that the balance is shifting back in the wrong direction. We know that Jo's lasting legacy, including the work of the Jo Cox Foundation, has improved individual experiences in politics, in particular for women, and has helped to create a wider societal debate about how we conduct ourselves in politics and the importance of prioritising kindness and collaboration over hate and hostility. This is a pivotal moment, and it would

be wrong for that shift to reverse and to go in the wrong direction.

Every one of us in the Parliament has a moral responsibility to challenge the behaviour of those who use divisive rhetoric—as other members have said, our words matter. We know that those who use words of division serve only their own political interests; those words in fact damage our communities and public trust in institutions that wish only to serve.

I again thank Jenny Young for bringing the debate to Parliament to commemorate Jo's memory on the 10th anniversary of her death. I also thank members who seek to serve in the way that Jo Cox would have done, had she been given the opportunity. That is how we should honour her legacy.

18:31

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate Jenny Young on bringing the debate to the chamber. I had not originally intended to speak in the debate; I wanted just to sit in and listen. However, I was deeply troubled by the report in *The Herald* at the weekend, about threats to and harassment of parliamentary colleagues, and in particular by the briefings that we have received on the vicious and misogynistic abuse that is aimed at women, especially online.

I was in the chamber on the day when Jo Cox was murdered, and I remember the feeling of collective horror that swept through as we became aware of what had happened. I also remember how we all committed to doing better, and to ensuring the greater respect that the motion calls for and conducting ourselves appropriately.

That is why I want to make two points about debate in the chamber, which build on Jenny Young's excellent contribution. The first concerns how we speak to, and about, one another. Last Wednesday, there was an afternoon debate that I use simply as an example. The subject matter was always going to be difficult and uncomfortable for some in the chamber, which is as it should be. Politics should not be comfortable—we should always debate, and we should confront and speak about difficult topics. However, I sat through that debate and listened to the contributions, and afterwards I pulled up the *Official Report*, just to have a look and ensure that I was not misremembering what I had heard.

Several contributions went far beyond what could be called robust debate. Members know that I like robust debate, but that was not it. Given the very personal, targeted and choreographed nature of some of the contributions, I felt that they were wholly inappropriate. I have researched, and written extensively on, debating, and the abusive, ad hominem attack is widely recognised as presenting a logical fallacy. An argument's truth or validity must stand on its own merits, regardless of who is making it, and it should be debated accordingly.

My point is that, even leaving aside the fact that such personal targeting represents weak debating, what we do and what we say about one another in the chamber matters—as Patricia Gibson reminded us in what I felt was a powerful contribution—because people are watching. If those on social media in particular see and hear us indulging in that sort of targeted personal abuse, I think that emboldens, empowers and encourages them to dish out exactly the sort of personal bile with which we are all too familiar, in particular directed at certain groups, with the consequences that Adam Harley highlighted in his excellent contribution.

My second point is a related one that builds on something raised by David Linden. We are sent here to debate difficult topics. In the previous session of Parliament we rightly confronted difficult and polarising issues, as I predict we will do in this one, too. Many of the propositions and debates will be uncomfortable, as they should be. Again, we must not forget that people out there are watching and that what we say has an impact.

We have a duty to speak not only honestly but accurately. As Michelle Campbell reminded us, the words that we use have meaning. When a topic is already polarised or has real consequences for how people think that it is appropriate to behave or speak, or on what lines to divide, it is more important than ever that we are as careful in our use of language as we are in addressing one another. It is vital that, in such debates—particularly those that are contentious—we ensure that the words that we use are accurate and precise and that they have the meaning that is intended.

I am casting stones, yet I am far from without sin. I have no doubt that there are people out there—perhaps even in this chamber—trolling my social media right now, looking for examples of situations where I have not met my own standards. Maybe they will find something—in which case, sure, I will be seen as a hypocrite, they will win and I will be subjected to derision online. However, as Jenny Young's motion asks of me, I will try to do better. I will try to foster a more respectful political culture to achieve the standards that Jo Cox called for. I hope that all MSPs will join me in that aspiration.

18:36

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank Jenny Young for bringing this important motion to the chamber. There have been

important, heartfelt and moving contributions in the debate so far.

Above all, I pay tribute and my respects to the late Jo Cox. I did not know her personally, but I feel as though I did, having listened to members' remarks today and having read a lot about the great work that she contributed. On the 10th anniversary of her death, I recognise her dedicated work as a campaigner, activist and humanitarian, and her deep commitment to her community, which comes over loud and clear. I echo what everyone has said about her horrific and tragic death in 2016. I pay respect to her family—my deep thoughts are with them—and to the family of Sir David Amess, who, tragically, also suffered a horrific death.

Jo's legacy continues through the Jo Cox Foundation. We have heard lots of really good contributions on that. We know that she wanted to build stronger communities and a safe and respectful democracy, while also tackling loneliness. Her lasting message has been mentioned. Jo said that we

"have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, *House of Commons*, 3 June 2015; c 675.]

We can all learn something especially important from that message and apply it to our politics—not just say that we will do it, but do it. Jo campaigned passionately for promoting a kinder and more compassionate politics, with mutual respect. We can bring that to the Scottish Parliament, as a starting point.

Since I was elected, it has been clear to me that there is work to do to make our politics more respectful, civil and courteous. As elected politicians, we have an absolute duty to lead by example. We often speak about honesty, integrity and respect, but our actions do not always reflect those values. That must change.

Each of us brings different perspectives and ideas to our debates. As we have just heard, if we listen with respect and understanding, we can build stronger relationships, work more constructively together and set a better example to our communities. When we have open and honest discussion, we can learn and grow. We might not always agree, but we can put aside our differences and, as we have said, focus on what unites us and our shared hopes, values and aspirations for communities in our country.

As we know from Jo Cox's death, safety is very important, and it is something that she also spoke about. As we have heard in the debate, words are powerful so we should be mindful of how we use language in order not to jeopardise the safety of others.

Democracy and fairness should always be at the heart of our politics and society. Let us embrace our differences, recognise one another's strengths and work towards stronger communities in which we all belong and everyone can thrive. Let us honour Jo's memory and build better politics for us all—politics in which every voice matters and we can build up our bridges. When we come together, anything is possible.

18:40

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I, too, congratulate Jenny Young on bringing the debate to the Parliament. It is one of the first members' business debates that we have held in this session, and this is a great topic to discuss.

I will say a few words about my reflections on the debate and the tone of politics in Scotland today. What has come through in the debate is that everyone has said that we need to be more respectful. As David Linden said, we need to watch our language. That really matters, and it matters across the Parliament—I am speaking to every member. We all need to watch what we say to and about one another, because it can have an impact on people. If members are in a debate and lobbing grenades at individuals or parties, they should think about the effect that that might have on those individuals or the parties, and also what the effect might be outside the Parliament.

Patricia Gibson said that all the MPs that she knows have had death threats, which is quite a stark point. I have never had a death threat—I have never even been threatened—but I had some nasty things said about me when I switched parties, and I felt under threat, so I needed to take some security measures, which I did not want to do. That is what I mean when I say that we should watch what we say about people, and we all need to do that.

I am aware that some MSPs—not all, but maybe a handful—have had death threats. Where does the motivation for that that come from? I think that it comes from the language that we use, perhaps on social media, which is why we need to be careful. My plea to all of us is this: yes, we should remember Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, but we should also learn from those experiences.

Over the next five years, let us do what was suggested by Liam Kerr and Stephen Kerr—the two Kerrs, who are both good friends of mine. Actually, when I look around the chamber, I see people in all parties whom I get on with and respect. I think that, over the next five years, that number will grow—I hope that it does, because that is the way that we ought to treat one another. Liam Kerr said that we need to be respectful in

debates. It is right to have robust debates, but we should not be abusive, because if we are—if we turn our fire on individual MSPs in that way—it can have an impact and affect them. Therefore, let us not do that. We are all saying that now, and let us keep to that, because it really matters.

I thank Jenny Young once again for bringing this debate to the Parliament.

18:44

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): I begin by doing what all members have done and thank Jenny Young for securing the motion for debate in the Parliament, and I congratulate her on her first members' business debate, on what is clearly an important subject. In the spirit of our discussion, I agree with Stephen Kerr, which I do not do often, that Jenny Young's contribution was outstanding. Indeed, we have had a range of important and well-informed contributions, for which I am grateful.

The debate has provided us with an opportunity to acknowledge the 10th anniversary of Jo Cox's terrible murder and to reflect on what she stood for. We should remember that she and, indeed, David Amess were killed as they undertook and discharged their responsibilities as parliamentarians and constituency representatives. We should also remind ourselves that their deaths were not just individual tragedies in that sense; in effect, they were an attack on democracy—a reminder that democracy can be fragile and is often under threat.

I did not know Jo Cox, as others have said, but it is very clear from all that I have seen and read about her and from what has been said in the debate that she brought clear intelligence, energy and compassion to the pursuit of the type of society that we would all want to see, where our communities and our democracy are strengthened by connection, trust and respect. As we have heard, those themes have become her important legacy and are evident across all that she did during her career, which was dedicated to improving the lives of those in need. I believe that all of us in public life strive for that and that we have all been motivated to enter politics for those reasons. Maybe that is a reminder of the point that David Linden made about the common ground that exists between us all. We have different perspectives on how to achieve those ends, but that is what we are all driven by, although I cannot say that I intend to play tennis with anyone in the chamber at any point—I resist the invitation that I am getting from the sidelines.

Members have noted the important work of the Jo Cox Foundation. My predecessor, Graeme Dey, met representatives of the foundation in October last year as they were developing the recommendations for "A Renewed Call to Action for the Devolved Nations" to address abuse and intimidation in politics, which Jenny Young noted. The call to action was published in February and includes recommendations for individual parties and politicians, as well as the Parliament and the Scottish Government, to consider. It may be useful to provide an update on some of the activity that the Government has undertaken in response and, indeed, some of the work that was already under way in education. We would all recognise that ensuring that our young people are properly informed is an important and critical element of the activity.

Last week, Education Scotland published guidance for schools on responding to far-right extremism and racism in current events, which I think is particularly pertinent and important. It picks up on Carol Mochan's point about responding to the immediate challenges that are before us. There is new time for inclusive education and digital discourse resources to help provide teachers with information and strategies to address the effects of online hate and disinformation, in response to some of the challenges in public life.

I remind colleagues that, in the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025, we—or, I should say, colleagues in the previous parliamentary session—collectively made provisions to bar those found guilty of offences involving intimidation of campaigners, candidates and elected representatives from being able to stand for office as a member of the Scottish Parliament or as a councillor. We also created a new disqualification order that would apply to those who are guilty of offences involving intimidation of electoral workers.

I recognise that there is a particular challenge with the intimidation that women in politics face. We are providing funding for Engender, which has worked with other members of the Equal Representation Coalition to develop the equal representation in politics toolkit. We have also provided funding for Elect Her, which is working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to host workshops to provide female councillors with a space to share resources and advice for women who are considering standing for public office.

I hope that that is helpful by way of updating on some of the activity that the Government is undertaking, but I recognise that there will always be more to be done, and we should work collaboratively in that regard.

We should recognise the challenges that we face, but Adam Harley made an important point: that the general experience of being involved in politics is a good one. Just as he spoke of, I like nothing more than to engage with the constituents I represent in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. By and large, that is a positive experience. I enjoy very much being able to go out and meet the individuals and organisations that I represent. However, we should be aware of, not pretend otherwise and shy away from, the fact that the level of abuse and intimidation of candidates and elected representatives is unacceptably high. I agree with Stephen Kerr that we should consider that, for some people, that acts as a disincentive in the first place from coming forward to stand. That should concern us all, and we should respond. The Government, the parties and the Parliament as an institution have a role to play in that regard.

Jenny Young: I welcome the member's comments about the quality of the debate this evening. I put on record my thanks to all members for their very fine contributions, which were thought provoking, for sure. Jamie Hepburn is the minister for parliamentary business, and this has been a really good debate, so will he consider in future scheduling more debates that raise the tone and substance of our debate in the Parliament?

Jamie Hepburn: I say to Ms Young that I am pretty sure that every debate that I schedule is designed to do that. It is then over to colleagues to deliver on the rest. However, I am always willing to hear what topics members might like to be brought forward.

I will finish on a point that has been made by a number of members, which is about the language that we use. Freedom of speech, the right to free assembly and the right to protest are fundamental to a free society and a liberal democracy. However, all too often, of late, some people out there have articulated their activities as being predicated on those principles but have veered into the type of language that I find reprehensible. Many of us—most of us; all of us, indeed—find it reprehensible. Those people are causing concern. In that regard, Q Manivannan was right about the importance of the choice of language that we deploy. We should all remember that. Michelle Campbell and Patricia Gibson made the point about the manner in which we seek to engage in discourse.

When we see some of the activities that are causing real concern and are motivated by various forms of extremism—right now, the main challenge is far-right extremism, which we have seen on our streets in the past few days—we must show leadership. We must call out any rhetoric of that nature. That is something that I am committed to, and we should commit to it collectively, because that is the type of call that, I think, Jo Cox, her foundation and, indeed, Ms Young, in this members' business debate, have sought to make. We must all aspire to achieve that.

Meeting closed at 18:53.

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