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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 15 March 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs and islands. I ask any member who wishes to pose a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Short-term Let Licensing (Impact on Rural Economy)

1. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding an assessment of the impact of short-term let licensing on the rural economy. (S6O-01996)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I regularly engage with colleagues on a variety of issues that affect our respective portfolios. In relation to short-term lets, the Scottish Government published seven impact assessments to accompany the licensing legislation, including a business and regulatory impact assessment and an island communities impact assessment.

The licensing scheme offers considerable flexibility to local authorities on how it is implemented. We recognise the challenges that businesses face at this time, which is why we have extended by six months—from 1 April to 1 October this year—the deadline for existing hosts to apply for a licence. We remain committed to monitoring the implementation of the scheme, and we will undertake a review in 2024.

Graham Simpson: The Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development has found that 77 per cent of operators feel that their business is threatened by the new licensing scheme. Rural businesses are struggling to keep afloat, and the regulations are making things worse. How is the cabinet secretary supporting owners of rural businesses who fear that they will have to close their business as a result of the legislation?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank the member for raising that important point. Obviously, this work is being

led by my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government. I will be happy to pick up those issues with her and get back to the member with a response.

We need to try to get the balance right. We should ensure that the scheme is flexible because it is, ultimately, for local authorities to implement the scheme in their own way. Monitoring of the scheme's implementation is vital, and the review that will take place next year will be critical in that regard.

I am more than happy to raise those issues with my colleague.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members would like to ask a supplementary question. I would be grateful if the questions could be as brief as possible.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Short-term lets have contributed positively to our tourism industry, but high numbers of them can make it harder for people to find homes to live in. Data indicates that house prices in the Western Isles have risen by 135 per cent over the past 18 years. Given that such increases are likely to price young islanders out of areas that retain large numbers of second homes, does the cabinet secretary share my view that it is crucial to address those concerns?

Mairi Gougeon: I do, and I thank the member for raising that issue, which is raised with me whenever I am out and about visiting rural parts of Scotland and our islands. Local areas need to have the tools and powers to take action to address imbalances between tourism, second homes and residential housing that are causing problems for local communities and economies and affecting the sustainability of public services.

In addition to providing more than £43 million over the current parliamentary session to support the delivery of affordable housing in the Western Isles, we agree that action needs to be taken on second homes. That is why, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we are exploring proposals to give local authorities powers to increase council tax on second homes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, is this a supplementary question?

Rachael Hamilton: No. I am sorry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In that case, I call Willie Rennie. I will come back to Rachael Hamilton shortly.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I would welcome seeing the details of the plans on second homes.

I have been critical of the licensing scheme, which has been particularly burdensome, but I am a strong supporter of short-term let control areas. My frustration is that Fife Council says that it has to wait until the licensing scheme is in place, but it wants the local development plan to be developed in tandem with the implementation of control areas. Will the cabinet secretary and her colleagues have a discussion with Fife Council to encourage it to move a little bit faster?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes. I am more than happy to raise that issue with colleagues.

Food Security

2. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is, regarding the implications for the food and drink supply chain in Scotland, to the National Farmers Union's petition on improving food security. (S6O-01997)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I fully agree with the National Farmers Union on the importance that it places on our food security and the need for the United Kingdom Government to have plans in place to deal with the UK's security of food supply. I have raised repeatedly with the UK Government the critical issues that are impacting on the sector and the need for it to intervene to provide more support to the food and drink sector. I have also set up a food security unit in the Scottish Government to monitor supply chain vulnerabilities and strengthen food security and supply in Scotland.

Rachael Hamilton: Given the critical importance of food security in the current climate, will the cabinet secretary use the opportunity to revisit the benefits of genetic technology, which will enable Scotland's farmers to sustainably grow food, lower their emissions, reduce the risks of a poor harvest and improve the health of the nation?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sure that Rachael Hamilton is aware of our position on that. I have talked about the immediate concerns and some of the immediate issues that we face, which are really important, and the action that we have taken in setting up the food security unit in the Scottish Government, which will monitor the on-going supply chain vulnerabilities that exist to ensure that we are not caught out again should there be further challenges. We have already been through the pandemic, Brexit and war in Ukraine, and we have seen the impact that they have had on our food supply. Therefore, we want to ensure that we have resilience.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of brief supplementary questions.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Martin Kennedy said:

"we have a UK Government that wants to blame everyone except themselves for the current and impending food shortages."

In a speech at the NFU conference, Minette Batters highlighted three areas that threaten to jeopardise the industry: labour shortages, the uncertainty that is posed by the phasing out of direct payments, and soaring energy prices. All those issues sit outside the Scottish Parliament's remit. Does the cabinet secretary share my view that, if the Tories want to discuss food security, a good place to start would be to get the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs secretary in front of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee?

Mairi Gougeon: Who the committee invites to give evidence will ultimately be a decision for it to take. Obviously, it is not for me to account for the actions of the secretary of state, but I absolutely agree that the food and drink sector has been beset by a wide range of issues arising from some of the things that I have mentioned—the pandemic, Brexit and the conflict in Ukraine, which is now having further impacts.

It is important to focus on the action that we have taken in Scotland to mitigate some of the impacts. Together with industry, I established a short-life food security and supply task force in March last year. The outcome of that work was a report that we published in June, in which we recognised that the UK Government ultimately holds many of the levers to address the cumulative issues that are impacting the sector, which Jim Fairlie has mentioned. Labour and skills shortages, rising costs and energy costs are among the most significant issues.

I have written repeatedly to the UK Government to highlight the need for it to intervene and provide vital support for the industry. I received a response only this week. We are still waiting for meaningful engagement and action to be taken.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Other than writing to the UK Government, given that the responsibility is largely down to the cabinet secretary, what has the short-term task force delivered, or what is it expected to deliver?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be brief, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: I do not think that Finlay Carson could disagree with me about the fact that the issues that I have talked about are ultimately up to the UK Government. Ultimately, some of the biggest risks that the sector currently faces, such

as energy costs and labour shortages, are the responsibility of the UK Government.

We recognise that we need to take action in Scotland. That is why I set up a task force. If Finlay Carson had listened to my response to the previous question, he would have heard me say that a direct outcome of that work has been the establishment of a food security unit in the Scottish Government.

All the recommendations in the task force's report, which was published in June last year, have been completed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Kenny Gibson should be brief.

Kenneth Gibson: Can the cabinet secretary advise what impact Brexit has had on the food and drink supply chain, most recently with the shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be as brief as possible, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: We know, of course, that there have been weather challenges in other parts of the world that have affected fruit and vegetables and the supply chain during the winter period in the UK. However, those have, of course, been exacerbated by the UK Government's approach to Brexit. Scotland's food and drink sector lost many of the benefits that we once had when we were trading with the European Union and were part of the single market.

The impact is clear and evident when we look at the figures. Many Scottish food industries continue to suffer from lower exports to the EU. We saw a 49 per cent fall in fruit and vegetable exports and a 15 per cent fall in dairy and egg exports in the first nine months of last year compared with the same period in 2019.

Proposed Agriculture Bill (Consultation)

3. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when its response to the agriculture bill consultation will be published. (S6O-01998)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government is committed to introducing a new agriculture bill to Parliament this year. A public consultation on the proposed bill, which sought views on proposals to assist with delivering our vision for agriculture and the legislative framework that will be required to replace the current common agricultural policy from 2025-26 onwards, closed on 5 December. We are carefully considering the diverse range of views provided, and we aim to publish responses in the spring.

Pam Gosal: We will undoubtedly hear more about the plans for agricultural reform during this afternoon's debate. Without pre-empting what the cabinet secretary might have to say about that in a few moments' time, is she able to say whether the Scottish Government has made any assessment of the potential for existing proposals in the agricultural support package to reduce food production on productive land in favour of carbon sequestration measures? If the Government has not done so, does she accept that its failure to do so could jeopardise our nation's food security?

Mairi Gougeon: We are not jeopardising our nation's food security. We need to be clear about the fact that, when it comes to what we introduce in our future framework, it is not a choice between food production and taking action for nature and the climate. Ultimately, it is a case of making our food production systems and our businesses more resilient to some of the changes that we know are coming down the line.

In this job, I am really fortunate in that I get to travel the length and breadth of Scotland to meet our farmers and producers and to see the action that they are taking on the ground in producing food in a way that works with nature and for the climate, and which, ultimately, will help to make businesses more sustainable, resilient and profitable. *[Interruption.]* We are keen to ensure that we enable that and that we enhance our activity in that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Carson, please desist from chucking comments across the front benches.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The industry has repeatedly told us how important it is that we get the new agricultural support system right, given the importance of the proposed bill and the Scottish Government's commitment to listening to the sector.

Co-development, co-design and discussions with farmers and crofters are fundamental to that approach, which is in contrast to the shambles that the environmental land management schemes have caused south of the border. Does the cabinet secretary share my view that it is right that we take our time and that we need no lessons from the Tories when it comes to safeguarding the interests of farmers, crofters and growers in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Be as brief as possible, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: I will try to be as brief as possible. It is important to remember how vital it was that we committed to a period of stability and simplicity, and that we delivered on that commitment, to ensure that our farmers, crofters and land managers would continue to receive direct payments.

The work that the member touched on is vital. As we look to develop our future policy, we want to make sure that we do it right, in a way that works for the industry and for our farmers and crofters, so that we bring them along with us. It is critical that they help us to develop future policy. That takes a bit more time, but it is vital to ensure that we get the process right.

Agricultural Support

4. **Joe FitzPatrick:** To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the United Kingdom Government regarding support available through future budgets to support agriculture in Scotland, including the replacement of European Union agricultural funding. (S6O-01999)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): EU exit means that we no longer have long-term certainty of funding. HM Treasury has provided yearly allocations for the current UK parliamentary session, but there is no funding commitment from 2025 onwards.

The UK Government promised full EU replacement funding and collective engagement on future funding, which was reaffirmed by previous secretaries of state.

The Scottish ministers raised the issue of replacement funding for the rural affairs and islands portfolio at prior meetings of the interministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs, as well as directly, and we continue to make representations to the UK Government that it should fulfil its commitments.

Joe FitzPatrick: Last Wednesday, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee heard from members of the ARIOB—the agriculture reform implementation oversight board. The evidence that was given to the committee highlighted the long-term nature of the agriculture sector and the concerns that exist regarding the inability of businesses, following Brexit, to plan ahead.

Does the cabinet secretary share my view that the Tory UK Government is completely failing our farmers, crofters and growers? Will she continue to advocate active farming and food production? Will she commit to having continued engagement with the UK Government, with a view to securing some clarity for the industry?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, I will. I know how important future funding certainty is. One of the biggest issues that I hear about directly from farmers, crofters and other businesses is the ability to plan for the future and know what funding will be in place. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to provide that certainty, for the reasons that I outlined in my initial response.

We share the frustration that our stakeholders have expressed about the lack of clarity, the lack of collective engagement on future funding and the impact that that has on the development of future policy. That is before we even look at the impact of trade and migration policies and the threats that are posed by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

I remain committed to supporting active farming and food production in Scotland with direct payments, because that provides certainty to the industry, and we will deliver on our commitments.

Agricultural Support (Ayrshire)

5. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports agriculture in Ayrshire. (S6O-02000)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government provides access to agricultural support from a number of payment schemes that are open to eligible farmers, crofters and land managers. We have committed to support active farming and food production with direct payments to provide certainty to the industry, and we brought forward the 2022 common agricultural policy payment date to provide support to businesses with immediate cash-flow challenges.

Willie Coffey: The cabinet secretary will be aware that Ayrshire plays a prominent role in farming in Scotland and that the quality of our beef, sheep and dairy sectors is among the best in the world, with produce of the highest standard. With significantly rising costs affecting production, our farmers are facing an extremely challenging task simply to keep pace. Will the cabinet secretary outline the Government's plans to help them to meet that challenge, to increase local food production in Scotland and, of course, to encourage everyone to buy Scottish farming produce in support of our local farmers?

Mairi Gougeon: I could not agree more with the member's point about the fantastic produce that comes from his region. I had the pleasure of visiting a dairy farm with him a wee while ago now. The Ayrshire agriculture sector is hugely important to Scotland and, over the past year, we have provided around £31 million in support payments for the various schemes that I talked about.

The member raises important points about something that we could all do more to encourage: buying local produce and supporting local production. We have set out a local food strategy and, last year, I took the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 through the Parliament. That is about Scotland being that good food nation, ensuring that people in Scotland have access to

the food that we produce in this country and strengthening local food supply chains. We are of course looking to do all that we can to encourage that and encourage people to buy local produce and support local production.

Decarbonisation of Transport (Rural Economy)

6. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how it will ensure that the needs of the rural economy are considered in its plans for the decarbonisation of transport. (S6O-02001)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I regularly engage with my ministerial colleagues, including the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, on transport matters. For example, I do that through the islands strategic group, which met last week. The Government's ambitions for future transport investment priorities for the whole of Scotland are included in the second strategic transport projects review, which was published in December last year. They have the potential to decarbonise transport and transform the way that we travel in rural areas. The recommendations focused on active travel, bus priority and the safety and resilience of the transport network, all of which will support the rural economy.

Brian Whittle: The minister will know that our rural areas are being left behind when it comes to the decarbonisation of transport. We have a huge opportunity here and I wonder whether the cabinet secretary recognises it. We have an opportunity to connect main arterial routes such as the A75, the A77 and the A9 in an electric and hydrogen superhighway that will bring up our rural economy to the standards that we are looking at in urban areas. Does the minister accept that that investment is required?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise the sentiment of Mr Whittle's question. It is worth saying that a lot of cross-Government work is on-going on this matter. For example, only last week, as I alluded to in my first response, the islands strategic group met and, as a result of a request from me, transport will now be a standing agenda item for that group. It is important that we have a cross-Government approach to transport, particularly where there is a connection across portfolio areas.

I would also point to the fact that the convention of the Highlands and Islands will be in the Western Isles next week and, again, transport will feature on the agenda. There are undoubtedly challenges in rural Scotland that do not exist in other parts of the country.

The member makes a fair point in relation to electric vehicles. It is worth pointing out that, in

Scotland, we have the most comprehensive public charging network in the United Kingdom outside of London. However, there is more that we need to do, working with our local authority partners and particularly in rural areas.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a brief supplementary from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Although ferries are integral to the transport of livestock, fish and aquaculture produce throughout Shetland and for export, our interisland ferries also contribute significantly to Shetland's carbon emissions. How will the Scottish Government assist island communities in decarbonising ferry transport while meeting their economic needs?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: The member might be aware that the Deputy First Minister and I met Shetland Islands Council yesterday to discuss this very matter of the sustainability of Shetland's interisland ferries. That work is on-going with the local authority. We absolutely need to focus on the decarbonisation of the fleet, which at the current time is, of course, the local authority's responsibility.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Gibson for a brief supplementary.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The carbon neutral islands project demonstrates that Scottish islands and their economies are at the vanguard of innovation and are leading the way in the journey to net zero. Can the minister advise how the experience of delivering the carbon neutral islands objective, specifically in relation to transport, can be applied to other parts of Scotland, both rural and urban?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: The carbon neutral islands project is intended to benefit all of Scotland, not only those islands that have been directly included in it, but of course that will happen through knowledge exchange and the sharing of good practice. The project is very soon to release the community climate change action plans that have been developed by island communities; those plans will be hugely important and we look forward to analysing their content and working closely with our delivery partners.

Windsor Framework (Impact on Food and Drink)

7. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its initial assessment is of the potential impact of the

Windsor framework on the food and drink supply chain in Scotland. (S6O-02002)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): First of all, we need to be clear that the dispute over the Northern Ireland protocol was of the United Kingdom Government's own making, threatening what would have been a catastrophic trade war with the European Union in the middle of a cost crisis. Therefore, although the Scottish Government broadly welcomes the Windsor framework agreement, Scotland did not vote for Brexit, which has brought nothing but harm to people, communities and businesses in Scotland. The UK Government must also clarify policy on Northern Ireland to Great Britain trade and the impact on devolved responsibilities, including physical checks on food safety and animal and plant health and on associated infrastructure, such as a border control post at Cairnryan.

Clare Adamson: Indeed, Scotland is the only constituent nation of the UK to have had its vote on Brexit comprehensively ignored, threatening our food security in the process.

Given NFU Scotland president Martin Kennedy's description of what has been

"significant and costly disruption to long-established trading arrangements between Scotland and Northern Ireland",

does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland must be given dispensation similar to that given to Northern Ireland in the Windsor framework so that our food and drink sector has the economic security of access to the EU single market?

Mairi Gougeon: We have repeatedly called for the UK Government to find a negotiated solution to this entirely avoidable dispute with the EU. The Scottish Government unequivocally supports the Good Friday agreement, and we welcome the new agreement that has been announced on the Northern Ireland protocol, but the fact is that Scotland did not vote for Brexit and yet we continue to suffer from its consequences, including the exacerbation of the current cost of living crisis.

The member is quite right. Northern Ireland has now been given preferential access to the huge European single market, while Scotland, which voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, has been ignored by the UK Government and subjected to the full damage of a disastrous hard Brexit. Brexit has brought nothing but harm to people, communities and businesses in Scotland, and the Scottish Government remains committed to realising Scotland's potential as an independent nation within the European Union.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a brief supplementary from Alexander Burnett.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I am glad that the Windsor framework will enable the resumption of trade in seed potatoes between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, something that the NFUS has called a "significant breakthrough". What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of that on Scottish farming?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: We broadly welcome that element of the framework, because that was trade that was switched off overnight and which we have not been able to access since. Again, though, all of this could have been avoided in the first place. Although we broadly welcome the move, the fact is that we did not need to be in this position.

Rural Economy (Sustainability)

8. **Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding supporting sustainability of the rural economy in areas such as Argyll and Bute. (S6O-02003)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I am in regular contact with my ministerial colleagues with regard to supporting the sustainability of our rural and island communities and economies. We actively work together to support the rural economy, including through different fora such as the islands strategic group, the convention of the Highlands and Islands and the convention of the south of Scotland.

Jenni Minto: Over the past few weeks, I have been meeting farmers and fishers in my Argyll and Bute constituency, and both groups have raised the importance of investing in local infrastructure. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that local knowledge and good practice in rural and island communities are fully harnessed?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises an important point. If we want to deliver on our ambition for a fairer Scotland, we have to start at the local community level. Our infrastructure investment plan and islands programme set place-based investments that reflect the needs of our communities and the delivery of this Government's priorities of a net zero, place-based, wellbeing economy.

Our planned investments for Argyll and Bute's transport infrastructure, for example, include solutions to address the landslip risks on the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful. I know that the transport minister continues to engage with local stakeholders via the A83 task force meetings, the most recent of which was chaired by my colleague

on 25 January this year. Again, it is vital to get that local engagement and listen to our local communities.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as I am a member of a farming partnership.

Farmers often play an important part in keeping rural businesses open and trading by opening up the roads during bad weather. Will the cabinet secretary speak to local councils about the importance of them providing equipment such as snowploughs to help farmers to do that?

Mairi Gougeon: I am more than happy to raise that with local government colleagues or the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs and the islands. There will be a brief pause while the ministers change over and we move on to the next portfolio.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is health and social care. As ever, if a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, I invite them to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Question 1 has been withdrawn.

NHS Tayside (Recruitment of Oncologists)

2. **Willie Rennie:** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the recruitment of breast cancer oncologists in NHS Tayside. (S6O-02005)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): NHS Tayside cancer services are currently operating at a stable level with mutual aid from other health boards for systemic anti-cancer therapies for breast cancer. The health board is actively recruiting and has recently seen positive developments that will be shared with the public if and when confirmed.

Willie Rennie: It is frustrating that we do not have any more detail. I have heard positive reports about recruitment, but the problem has been going on for some time. The indications are that hundreds of people have had to go outside NHS Tayside for treatment, and we are still way short of the number of consultants that we need. Some posts have been advertised and vacant for 900 days. When can we expect some real positive news for the people of NHS Tayside and Fife? This has been going on for far too long.

Maree Todd: As I said, we will share the positive news with the public as soon as we possibly can. I reassure patients in Tayside that

the oncology service is now able to offer the majority of breast cancer treatments to patients wholly in Tayside, and only a small number of people—in single figures every week—require to travel to other specialist centres.

We well understand the impact of that. Mr Rennie is talking to a rural member of the Scottish Parliament, and from my constituency inbox and from my friends and family, I understand the challenging situation faced by patients who have to travel for care.

There are hopeful signs of recovery in international interest in the recruitment of senior clinicians. Dialogue is on-going on that. We are also fairly certain that we have managed to develop a pipeline of clinical oncologists to take up posts as soon as their training is completed.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The reality is that a large part of the oncology department in Tayside has gone and, as we have heard, vacancies have proved to be impossible to fill. Does the minister think that it is acceptable that women in Tayside must travel miles from home for breast cancer treatment? Can she tell us what the threshold is for these arrangements to come to an end?

Maree Todd: As I said, I understand how difficult it is for individual women to have to travel for treatment for breast cancer. I know how difficult that situation is because I represent and live in a rural constituency, where many of the women have to travel long distances to seek specialist cancer treatment.

I am absolutely certain that we are seeing green shoots of recovery in relation to that historical situation in Tayside, which has been so difficult for all the people who live in Tayside, and certainly for all the people who work in that department. I am very certain that the situation is going to improve. I very much look forward to the day that I, or my replacement, can update the Parliament on that good news.

Hospital Waiting Lists

3. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that over 600,000 people are on a hospital waiting list. (S6O-02006)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): We have already seen a huge effort by our national health service to clear the backlog caused by the pandemic. The total number of patients waiting more than two years for an out-patient appointment was reduced by 60 per cent in six months, and the majority of in-patient day-case specialities now have fewer than 10 patients waiting more than two years.

We have also progressed significant immediate and long-term solutions to support boards to clear the significant backlog that remains. In addition to the targets that were introduced last year, the centre for sustainable delivery is supporting boards to maximise their capacity and increase theatre efficiencies. Of course, four new treatment centres will also open later this year.

Russell Findlay: Patients across Scotland agree with Kate Forbes on Humza Yousaf's disastrous handling of Scotland's NHS. Evidence of his incompetence was laid bare in a recent BBC "Disclosure" investigation, but medics say that they were banned from speaking to the BBC and that every mainland health board refused the BBC access to hospitals, despite that being routine elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Will Mr Yousaf reveal whether his Government had any involvement in blocking media access to the NHS? If it did not, in his final days as health secretary, will he put an end to this secrecy culture?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not sure whether that question relates to hospital waiting lists, but I will invite the cabinet secretary to respond.

Humza Yousaf: No, it does not—it is, of course, politicising the health service. I urge Russell Findlay to take off that tinfoil hat that he wears so often in the chamber. There is no conspiracy. Nobody in the Government is trying to silence anybody in the health service—in fact, quite the opposite is the case. I have had a number of conversations with whistleblowing champions, and I encouraged them to raise staff concerns directly with management.

As for incompetence, maybe I should listen to Russell Findlay, because he is certainly an expert in it.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary advise how waiting times in Scotland compare with those in England—where Mr Findlay's party is in power—and, indeed, with those in Wales? [*Interruption.*] Does the cabinet secretary agree that the shortage of health professionals is due to the rapid rise in demand since the pandemic, which the Tories' Brexit, now enthusiastically backed by Labour, has only exacerbated?

Humza Yousaf: I can hear the Conservatives shouting, "Give him a job!" I will tell them one thing: none of them will be getting a job, because they will be sitting in Opposition for a long, long time to come.

Kenny Gibson is absolutely right. The Tory Brexit, backed by the Labour Party, has had a detrimental effect not only on health services but on social care services up and down the country. It makes health workers and social care workers

sick to the stomach to listen to a Prime Minister extolling the virtues of the Northern Ireland protocol while denying that very same right to the people of Scotland, who, of course, voted against Brexit.

On the question about comparisons, some direct comparisons cannot be made because of the way that data is recorded. Nonetheless, it is worth saying that data to December 2022 shows that, in Scotland, 114 patients per 1,000 of the population were waiting for treatment time guarantee and new out-patient appointments. That is fewer than in England, where 127 patients per 1,000 of the population are on the referral to treatment waiting list, and it is fewer than in Wales, where the figure is 237 patients per 1,000 of the population.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

NHS Boards (Cost of Capital Projects)

5. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact increases in prices and energy costs have had on the ability of national health service boards to deliver capital projects. (S6O-02008)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government has been notified of significant increases in the cost of capital projects by NHS boards due to inflation. Increases in energy costs have an effect at all points in the construction supply chain and are contributing to the overall increases in construction costs. We are, of course, reviewing the projects that are under way.

Colin Beattie: It is clear that increases in prices and energy costs have had an impact on all budgets. Has the Scottish Government undertaken any assessment of the risks of delayed implementation of future capital projects?

Humza Yousaf: Colin Beattie is right that inflation and high energy costs have had an impact on capital projects across the entire Scottish Government, including our health capital projects. In the United Kingdom Government's budget announcement, it could have taken action to drastically reduce energy bills, but it has chosen not to do so. That will have an impact on capital projects right across the UK, including health projects.

We continuously review capital projects because of those inflationary pressures. If Colin Beattie is concerned about a specific project, I am more than happy to hear directly from him.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members want to ask a supplementary question.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Last week, it was announced that Aberdeen's new Baird family hospital and the ANCHOR—Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy—project would be delayed yet again. As they are now three years late and the costs are now more than double the original budget, can the cabinet secretary give an update on when those two hospitals will be open?

Humza Yousaf: The member asks a question without any self-awareness of the inflationary pressures that have been caused by his Government. His party's economic vandalism has caused high energy costs and high inflation. He also knows that Covid had an impact on a number of our capital projects.

The Baird family hospital and ANCHOR projects are very important, and I am pleased that John Swinney confirmed funding for them. I will write to the member with the latest information on the timescales for opening.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Shetland needs a modern hospital that is fit for the 21st century. The last time that I asked the health secretary about Shetland's hospital, he said that he would update me on the situation when the Scottish Government was able to make further progress on the site. That was in November. I recognise that other things have cropped up in the health secretary's diary, but how is the Scottish Government assisting NHS Shetland in developing a new facility, as well as supporting the service with rising energy and construction costs?

Humza Yousaf: I work closely with health boards. If the member did not get a response, I will make sure that she does. I hope that she will forgive me if a response was not forthcoming.

I have made the point already that our budget—particularly our capital budget—is extraordinarily stretched because of high inflationary costs, including higher energy costs. Under our current capital programme, we have committed to a number of projects right across the country. The member knows that a replacement hospital for Shetland is not one of the projects on which I am able to give absolute certainty and confirmation. However, having visited Shetland not too long ago, I recognise the strong case for a replacement hospital there.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that I have been campaigning for a new Port Glasgow health centre, because the current facility is ageing and is very much in need of replacement. I have engaged with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and with the cabinet secretary on the issue. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on

potential proposals to deliver a new Port Glasgow health centre?

Humza Yousaf: Again, I will write to the member with the detail. Members are rightly asking questions about their constituencies and regions, but such questions demonstrate the pressure that we are under. There is significant pressure on our health capital budget, which is used to deliver a number of projects right across the country. We will take each project on a case-by-case basis. I will give an update in writing to the member on the business case for the Port Glasgow health centre.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The national treatment centre that is scheduled to be built at St John's hospital in Livingston has doubled in price to £184 million, while the cost for the replacement for the Edinburgh eye pavilion has increased from £112.5 million to £123 million. That additional capacity is essential to tackle the waiting lists for treatment across the Lothian region. Both sites have a projected operational date of 2027. What reassurance can the cabinet secretary offer to those who are suffering while waiting for treatment that they are a priority of his? Is he waiting until 2027, too?

Humza Yousaf: I would say to them that we are very sorry that the UK Government's economic vandalism has meant that the prices of those projects have risen so much due to inflationary pressures. Sue Webber might want to think about saying the same to the constituents whom she represents.

I support the national treatment centre programme and the delivery of the new eye pavilion. However, we need to review the investment programme so that it remains affordable, particularly given the high levels of inflation. The very large inflationary increases might mean that some NHS projects have to be delayed. I am urgently reviewing the plans for a new national treatment centre in Livingston, and when we have gone further through the process of a full business case review, I will ensure that the member is updated.

NHS Golden Jubilee (Additional Capacity)

6. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any on-going work with the NHS Golden Jubilee to make additional capacity available for elective operations in order to minimise pressure on waiting times. (S6O-02009)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The national eye centre at the Golden Jubilee hospital ran 18 months of weekend cataract sessions, over and above standard provision, to December last year,

supporting the treatment of 1,251 patients in 2022. The facility is on target to deliver more than 11,000 cataract operations through core activity in the year to March 2023. The board's endoscopy plan will also provide capacity for more than 7,500 patients in 2023-24.

Kaukab Stewart: I pay tribute to the staff at the Golden Jubilee hospital for their valued work in providing the highest-quality treatment and care for NHS Scotland patients. As elected members, we are all aware of cases where referral for treatment at the Golden Jubilee for cataract surgery has reduced the prospect of potentially lengthy waiting times by a significant number of weeks or months. Does the cabinet secretary agree that redirection to the Golden Jubilee eye centre is having a significant positive effect on local health board cataract waiting lists?

Humza Yousaf: I agree and, for the life of me, I cannot understand why there are mumbles and groans from Conservative members when Kaukab Stewart is rightly raising concerns and praising the staff at NHS Golden Jubilee for their phenomenal work in ensuring that people get cataract operations on time. I am really grateful to those NHS staff. I applaud all our NHS staff, particularly those in the Golden Jubilee, who managed to phenomenally increase the volume of cataract procedures that are undertaken per session, supported by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. That will provide sustainable improvements.

That is the value of our national treatment centres—they are national. The clue is, of course, in the name and the four that will open later this year will support people right across Scotland.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The only grumbles that the cabinet secretary heard were from Kate Forbes yesterday. Increasing capacity requires staff to do the operations, so does the cabinet secretary welcome the UK Government's removal of the lifetime limit for pensions and a 50 per cent increase to the annual limit, because that will allow senior consultants to come back to work to do extra? Will the cabinet secretary now do his bit for NHS pensions?

Humza Yousaf: Let me remind Dr Sandesh Gulhane that the only nation in the entire UK not to have lost a single day to NHS workers' strikes is Scotland, under my leadership, of course—not under that of the Conservatives, who have ignored, stonewalled and treated our NHS workers with complete and utter contempt. This Government, of course, has ensured that they remain the best-paid staff in the entire UK, and that is a record that I am very proud of.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a further supplementary question, but I again remind

members to keep the supplementary questions relevant to the initial question.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I wonder what the cabinet secretary would like me to tell my constituent who was told in November that she would be able to join the cataract waiting list in July this year. Does he think that that is acceptable?

Humza Yousaf: Again, I am happy for Mr Mountain to raise that case with me directly. He will know that, because of the impact of the Covid pandemic, there has undoubtedly been an increase in backlogs. However, I go back to Kaukab Stewart's original question. We have a fantastic facility in NHS Golden Jubilee, which has increased capacity. The centre for sustainable delivery is working right across health board areas to see what more we can do to increase capacity, and I am looking forward to the opening of the treatment centre in NHS Highland, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

8. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to prevent fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. (S6O-02011)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government is committed to preventing the harm that is caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy and to supporting those who are impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The clear message from the chief medical officer on alcohol during pregnancy remains "no alcohol, no risk". That message features in the booklet "Ready Steady Baby!" and on NHS inform, where there is information on why women should avoid alcohol when pregnant or trying to conceive.

All pregnant women in Scotland are asked about their drinking habits as part of their booking appointment with maternity services. If required, they are also provided with an alcohol brief intervention—a short conversation that aims to get them to think about their alcohol consumption and how they might cut down.

Gillian Martin: I thank the minister for his answer and for the reply that he sent to my office in response to my constituents' concerns about the issue. It is estimated that between 3 and 5 per cent of people may be undiagnosed with FASD. It is the most overlooked neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland. What is being done to ensure that health providers have the tools to diagnose cases of FASD and to provide support for people who have complex needs as a result of the condition?

Kevin Stewart: The Government has provided more than £1 million in funding during the past four years to the fetal alcohol advisory support and training team—FAAST—which is based at the University of Edinburgh. The funding supports the delivery of training to improve knowledge of and attitudes towards FASD as well as confidence among professionals who are working with individuals who have it. That includes training on diagnosing the condition.

FAAST has devised a tiered approach to training. In November and December 2022, the team delivered its training on the fundamentals of FASD for health and social care practitioners to more than 300 health and social care workers, and more dates have been organised for 2023. That training will increase the knowledge and skills of practitioners so that they are able to better support people who have FASD. Training on diagnosing FASD for professionals commenced in December, with 34 participants from across the country. The course will enable those professionals, who include clinical psychologists, paediatricians, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists to have the knowledge and skills to be able to support and diagnose FASD. The course also includes information about how to translate assessment findings into meaningful indications of what post-diagnostic support will be required.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): In his answer to the first question, the minister referred to something called, “Ready Steady Baby!”, and I would be grateful if he could tell me what that is.

Kevin Stewart: I will ensure that all members get information about that publication, and I will also send copies of it to Mr Findlay and others so that they can peruse it for themselves.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders have a devastating impact on the lives of children who have been impacted by alcohol in the womb. What further action will the Scottish Government take to raise awareness of FASD among prospective parents in order to reduce the number of children who are born with this debilitating syndrome?

Kevin Stewart: We all have a part to play in highlighting FASD. It is one of those areas that the public are not completely aware of. I pay tribute to Siobhian Brown for recently holding a members’ business debate on this important subject. Mr Gibson has raised the issue on many occasions, too.

We will look to see what we can do with our marketing budget to promote more awareness of FASD and highlight the difficulties that drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause to babies while they are in the womb.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time.

Agriculture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08212, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on delivering the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture through the agricultural reform route map. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now, or as soon as possible.

14:48

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): It was a little over a year ago that I set out the Government's vision for the future of agriculture in Scotland. Our vision is positive and puts farmers, crofters and land managers at its core and values their efforts to help feed the nation and steward our countryside. It also recognises their essential role in delivering climate adaptation and mitigation and in biodiversity recovery and nature restoration. Our vision makes clear that our nation has a duty to support our producers and ensure that our world-leading climate and nature targets are realised.

Farmers, crofters and land managers are vital to our ambition to make Scotland fairer and greener. That journey will be challenging and will carry risks, but it also presents opportunities and can be transformative. I and the Government remain committed to working with and listening to our industry and all who have the interests of a vibrant and successful rural Scotland at heart, so that we can achieve our ambition.

We want Scotland to be a leader in sustainable and regenerative farming. Many are already leading the way, and they deserve praise for farming to produce food sustainably in ways that actively benefit nature and the climate. They need to know that we remain committed to supporting them to produce high quality food while also delivering for climate and nature restoration.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Would the cabinet secretary agree that one of the best things that we could do is ensure that our farming produce is procured locally, especially in public procurement, and that a lot of work still has to be done in that area to support our farming communities?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises an important point. We have so much power through public procurement, and a lot of improvement can be made in that area. A lot of that will also tie into what we intend to bring forward through the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament last year and what we can produce through our good food

nation plans. I look forward to working with the member as we develop that.

The approach that I talked about will sit at the heart of what we legislate for, and how, in the future. It is my intention to introduce a new Scottish agriculture bill this year to provide a replacement for the common agricultural policy and to provide the required powers and framework to deliver our vision for agriculture.

The proposals for the bill will seek to provide an adaptive framework to respond to future social, economic and environmental changes, challenges and opportunities. I will continue to actively work with and alongside the agriculture industry to develop those proposals. I accept that not everyone will agree with our approach, but I hope that we arrive at a policy and support framework, underpinned in statute, that will deliver outcomes that will help us meet our goals to benefit all of Scotland as well as farmers, crofters and land managers.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): During the past few days, Shepherd and Wedderburn said that farmers will have short notice of the conditions and payment details to comply with ahead of implementation. What would the cabinet secretary say to the Climate Change Committee, which has also said that the route map is too slow to meet emission target goals?

Mairi Gougeon: I have not seen the comments that the member referenced, but I would be happy to look at that matter in more detail. It is important that we can set out in our route map when we can implement those changes—as I will discuss later—because showing when the transition will happen is critical to give the industry more clarity and certainty as we move forward. There is only so much that we can do at each stage, but the phasing of that, and informing people of what we look to implement as we make those changes, are critical as we deliver a just transition.

What I have mentioned will involve change, but change and adaptation has long been at the heart of the Scottish agriculture sector, and many have already embarked on this transformational journey. We will incorporate what we learn—including new and best practice, improvements in technology and evidence on climate impacts—and we will evaluate delivery to monitor how well we are doing and where we need to act more urgently or change our approach.

Last year, we undertook a consultation on the bill. We are carefully considering the diverse range of views provided, and I intend to publish responses later this spring.

However, we are not waiting for legislation to act. In the meantime, we will progress our

agriculture reform programme. On 10 February, I published the agriculture reform route map, which sets out the timescales for information and interaction with the agricultural industry. The route map provides Scotland's farming and food production industry with clarity and confidence on key dates, expectations, the various measures being proposed and the support that will be available to prepare for implementing change.

There are still questions to be answered, which can only be answered in the bill and the measures flowing from it, but the route map provides a clear set of steps and dates to explain when current schemes will transition or end and when more guidance, support and information will become available.

The route map fulfils one of my key pledges: that there will be no cliff edges for the farmers and crofters of Scotland. It is worth saying again that no matter what Westminster does the Government in Scotland will maintain direct payments and support our nation's producers.

However, there will also be changes. A proposed future support framework will provide conditional payments under four tiers: base, enhanced, elective, and complementary. The existing framework of support will continue in 2023 and 2024 to provide stability to farmers and crofters.

From 2025, new conditionality will be delivered under existing powers for the 2025 single application form calendar year. That will include the foundations of a whole farm plan, which is a tool that we will co-design with the industry to help our farmers and crofters to plan their businesses in a more sustainable way.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Mairi Gougeon: I have already taken a couple of interventions so I would like to make progress unless it is a brief point.

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, it is really important. The route map is not much comfort to farmers because it is not structured enough to allow them to take seasonality into account. They need to plan ahead five or 10 years, particularly for breeding patterns and crop rotations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I can give you back the time for the interventions.

Mairi Gougeon: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I say to Rachael Hamilton that that is where our work in co-developing the system with the industry is important. I would like to think that, in the meantime, the route map provides stability and clarity as to how long the schemes that are in

place at the moment will continue and when we expect them to transition. I come back to the point that there will be no cliff edges in the support that we are providing for our farmers and crofters. We will ensure that there is a transition. We do not have all the answers and details on the route map, but it points out when that information will become available.

New conditions will be applied to some existing schemes to deliver on our commitment to shift from unconditional to conditional support on half of all funding by 2025. The current region model will remain in place in the early stages of the transition. However, it will be reviewed to ensure that tier 1, base, is fit for purpose for the future.

From 2026, with the approval of the Parliament, new powers from the proposed agriculture bill will be used to launch the new enhanced payment. The enhanced payment will be the key mechanism to incentivise farmers and crofters to undertake actions to deliver positive outcomes for the climate and for nature. Co-development of that element is being prioritised through the preparing for sustainable farming programme under the national test programme, which launched in spring 2022. Central to that track is the provision of funding for conducting carbon audits and soil testing. Over three years until 2025, the national test programme will invest up to £51 million to help farmers and crofters undertake those essential first steps towards more sustainable farming.

On 10 February, I also published a list of potential future support framework measures. The list sets out the sort of actions that we will expect farmers and crofters to undertake under the new framework. It is based on the actions that have been identified by academic research and the farmer-led groups as being essential to meeting Scotland's climate and biodiversity targets. The measures are focused on their suitability for the enhanced tier. There is likely to be a range of additional measures to help to achieve Scotland's nature and climate targets in other tiers of the future support framework.

Underpinning all those measures is the principle that farmers and crofters should choose measures that are right for their business and based on their farm plans, audits and expert advice. The final list of actions in a future support framework will be not prescriptive but elective to encourage choice, flexibility and adaptability. It will not seek to penalise those who already achieve a certain level or threshold. Therefore, farmers and crofters do not need to wait before taking action that has been built into the preparing for sustainable farming programme and the national test programme.

Producing more of our own food more sustainably is at the heart of our vision for the future of Scottish agriculture because it will enable

us to be more food secure. As a result of Brexit and the continuing Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are now more aware of, and alert to, food supply vulnerabilities and price shocks.

Last year, I established, together with industry, a short-life food security and supply task force, which reported in June. I am pleased to report that the immediate recommendations from the task force are now complete or substantially complete. For example, I have also now established and resourced a dedicated food security unit within the Scottish Government. That unit will allow us to continue to monitor and respond to issues in food supply and production to bolster confidence and address risks and issues as they arise.

However, all our work and planning is compromised by financial uncertainty. Brexit means that we no longer have long-term certainty of funding. HM Treasury has provided yearly allocations for the current United Kingdom parliamentary session and there is no funding commitment from 2025. That has direct implications for the management of the current CAP, including the Scottish rural development programme, and the work that is under way on the agriculture reform programme. That is unacceptable and far from the sunlit uplands that the Brexiteers promised. Scotland needs long-term funding certainty to enable farmers and crofters to plan, invest and deliver, just as we had through CAP.

That funding uncertainty is one reason why we would have preferred to remain in the European Union and will stay aligned to the new CAP approach that our European neighbours are now implementing. However, I reiterate that we expect full replacement of EU funds to ensure no detriment to Scotland's finances. I will continue to press for that from Westminster at every opportunity, no matter who is in government there.

Westminster has not only short-changed Scotland; it has systematically undermined and diminished devolution through its approach to international trade deals and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. The Scottish Government—and indeed the Scottish Parliament—remains fundamentally opposed to the 2020 act, which is an assault on devolution that has been imposed on us without our consent and should be repealed. The act has allowed UK Government ministers to introduce the Subsidy Control Act 2022, which has agricultural support within its scope. Therefore, we now find ourselves in the egregious position of being one of the few countries in the world to treat support for growing and producing food in this way, and that might prevent us from tailoring agriculture payments to the specific needs of Scottish farmers, crofters and land managers in future.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Mairi Gougeon: I have already taken a few interventions so I need to make progress.

All that matters because of the marginal nature of our land, the relative size of our holdings and businesses, and our on-going commitment to support farmers and crofters directly. The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill that is currently going through Westminster only adds to our concerns—not least because of the existential threat that it poses to our high animal welfare, plant health, food safety, water quality and environmental standards.

Westminster might not care about its environment and countryside, but we do. That is why Scotland needs the right to choose its own future. Independence would give us the opportunity to use new powers to pursue priorities that are tailored to our needs. The UK economy is on the wrong path, with no real alternative on offer in the current system. Not being independent means that Scotland is being dragged down the wrong path, too—one that people in Scotland did not vote for. Only through having the full powers that independence brings will Scotland have the full range of economic and other policy tools to take decisions based on our own needs, which would allow us the chance to replicate the success of the many neighbouring countries that are more prosperous, productive and fairer than the UK. That is why the Scottish Government is committed to giving the people of Scotland a choice about the future that they want: a greener, wealthier and fairer economy within the European Union or a sluggish, stagnating economy outside it.

We have embarked on a journey of transformational change, working with the industry to farm more sustainably in the future, for the benefit of climate and nature and, ultimately, for the benefit of us all. It will not be an easy journey—nothing worth doing ever is. What I see and hear from all the farmers and crofters I meet are a willingness to do things differently, an appetite for change and often an impatience for us to get on with it. However, we must also ensure that the transition is a just one that takes everyone who wants to stay in or move into farming and food production with us. That is my goal. We have the ambition, the optimism, the enthusiasm, and the talent and skills that we need to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture, which outlines its aim to transform how it supports farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture, commits to supporting farmers

and crofters to produce more of Scotland's food more sustainably to contribute to food security, and acknowledges the need for change to make sure that farming plays its part in cutting emissions, mitigating climate change and restoring and enhancing nature and biodiversity; agrees that there is no contradiction between high-quality food production and producing it in a way that delivers for climate and nature restoration; welcomes the recently-published Agricultural Reform Route Map, which sets out the phased implementation of the four-tier Future Support Framework in order to deliver the Vision and avoid any cliff edges; further welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to co-development, demonstrated through its consultation on a Scottish Agriculture Bill and its commitment to working with all partners committed to a vibrant and successful rural Scotland; recognises the uncertainty and limitations on planning, caused by Brexit, and calls upon the UK Government to fulfil its outstanding commitments to fully replace EU funds, and to engage collectively and meaningfully on future agriculture funding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I invite members who wish to speak in the debate but who have not yet pressed their button to do so as soon as possible. I call Rachael Hamilton to speak to and move amendment S6M-08212.1, for a generous nine minutes.

15:02

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I welcome the chance to debate how we can deliver a positive vision for the future of Scotland's agriculture. The importance of food security has never been greater. Agriculture remains at the forefront of efforts to reach our net zero targets, and Scottish farmers need support at this critical juncture to enable them to keep providing the high-quality affordable food that they are famous for.

The Scottish Government has a crucial role in providing the platform on which farmers can thrive. It must allow agriculture to have the means to innovate, advance and build a positive future. That is essential not only for our farmers but for everyone in Scotland. Only by fully committing to farming can we be sure that supermarkets will be stocked with the best meat, fruit and vegetables.

However, for too long agriculture in Scotland has been succeeding despite SNP Government policies rather than because of them. The same is true for rural Scotland. In its motion, the SNP-Green Government talks of delivering, but delivering anything for anyone in rural Scotland has repeatedly been proved to be beyond its capability.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): In the spirit of co-operation that will be needed in the debate, will the member please try to keep some of the politics out of her speech so that we can get a solution to the problems that we face?

Rachael Hamilton: I thank Jim Fairlie for that intervention, but it is almost a case of the pot calling the kettle black, given the last few paragraphs of the cabinet secretary's speech—unless, of course, that was written by one of her civil servants.

The Government has failed to deliver promised upgrades to rural roads, failed to deliver ferries for our islanders and failed to give farmers the support and the tools that they need to progress. In every corner of rural Scotland, we find evidence of an SNP-Green Government that simply does not understand the needs of Scotland's rural population and the land that rural people manage. The Government is out of touch with rural Scotland. Worse than that, it has ignored rural Scotland completely.

To the detriment of our farmers, the coalition Government has been led by ideology rather than evidence. It puts a higher priority on politics than it does on doing the right thing. It chooses to oppose gene editing, ignoring the potential benefits of more food coming from our land, so that it can stoke its age-old constitutional grievances. The Government chooses to let the best land for farming become land for planting trees—the wrong tree in the wrong place—ignoring the fact that that ultimately could harm the environment, as we might be forced to import more food, and more costly food, from abroad rather than grow it here. The Government chooses to make superficial changes that look green on the surface but, underneath, if one looks beyond the political spin, do more damage to the climate, which it claims to care about.

In recent sittings of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, we have heard scathing comments that the SNP, hamstrung by the radical Green Party, has left Scottish farmers playing catch-up to others across the world with similar resources, including those just south of the border. Our farmers are at the forefront of the climate and biodiversity crises. Few people are more invested in dealing with the issues than they are and, without agriculture on side, net zero is just a pipe dream. Scotland's ambitious targets can be met only if farmers are given the necessary opportunity, incentives and helping hand to make a difference.

As well as hearing the evidence in committee, I am fortunate to represent a constituency with dozens of amazing farmers, whom I meet regularly. They are all saying the same thing: "We're working flat out to boost biodiversity and farm for the future. Give us the support we need, and we will do the rest." They understand that that is in the interest of the future of their industry. Sustainability has always been part of farming in Scotland, and without it there would be no future.

However, the Government's attempt to support farmers in that endeavour is falling woefully short of the mark. Examples of that were heard in a recent committee evidence session at which experts discussed carbon audits, slurry storage, green nitrogen, upland management and carbon neutral beef farming. On carbon audits, the committee heard that farmers are already spending thousands of pounds on soil testing and that the scheme that forms part of the current proposals accounts for just 10 per cent of that figure, which was described as "embarrassing". The Government's carbon audit scheme sits idle as farmers choose to get on with the work themselves. The data that the Government wants to collect through its scheme already exists but, instead of collating it, the Government is trying to spend public money on collecting what is already collected.

In the same committee session, we heard that Scotland's pig sector is in a generational meltdown. It is clear that solving the slurry storage issue should be a priority, yet we heard that the Government's scheme for that, which is worth £5 million, will barely touch the sides, given that storage solutions can cost upwards of £250,000.

Former NFU Scotland president Jim Walker called out the Scottish Government for its "infantile" discussions on the route map. Farmers in countries such as Australia and Ireland have been enabled to rear carbon neutral beef herds. Here, the Government is yet to get its head round the grass on which such herds graze. The distinct lack of understanding of that issue was laid bare by those giving evidence in that committee meeting.

That was just one committee session, and there are many more to come. In a recent meeting with representatives from NFUS, a similar critical picture was painted of the proposals. Those representatives encapsulated the situation perfectly when they accused the Scottish Government of trying to have its cake and eat it.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Does the member agree that she is cherry picking what has been said in the committee and that she is not explaining in a well-rounded way what was said? NFU Scotland president and agricultural reform implementation oversight board chair Martin Kennedy told the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee that, in relation to coming out of the EU and no longer having long-term certainty of funding,

"we need to be able to look five or six years ahead ... We got used to"

the framework

"that was delivered by Europe, which covered a seven-year period, so people knew what was going to be available. We

do not have such a framework at present, which is really concerning."—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 8 March 2023; c 20.]

I thought that I would intervene just to give balance to the argument.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you that time back, Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: I went to the protest that was held outside the Parliament a few months ago and listened to all the farmers, and not one of them was complimentary about the SNP-Green Government.

The importance of food security came to the fore after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which led to global supply shortages. Clearly, farming plays an integral role in ensuring Scotland's food security; after all, the more top-quality and affordable food we grow locally, the less food we need to bring into this country at great cost to our environment. However, much of the concern around the proposals that we are debating today stems from the impression that the Scottish Government is asking farmers to place carbon sequestration and environmental concerns above food production.

Mairi Gougeon: I made this point in response to an earlier question, but I really do not think that it is fair to pit food production against nature and climate concerns. Does the member not agree that those are not conflicting priorities and that all three things can be done? Indeed, that is why they are the three pillars of our vision.

The member has just talked about the environmental damage that imports can do—why, then, did the UK Government sell us down the river when it came to trade deals?

Rachael Hamilton: In summary, the solution to this is to ensure that, as the cabinet secretary has said, food security is aligned with biodiversity gain. Time and again, we have heard that that is not happening; the Scottish Government has put food security at the bottom of the pile. Why are farmers talking about food security? Why are they concerned about clarity and concerned about their future? Is the cabinet secretary listening to farmers? We on these benches are doing so, and that is exactly what they are saying.

The Government is reaping what it has sown. It is sowing the seeds of decline in Scottish agriculture, and our food stocks as well as our environment will pay the price for that. Food that is produced, sold and consumed in Scotland is less harmful to our environment than food that is imported from the other side of the world, and a policy that rewards tree planting over crop planting or livestock grazing on productive land serves only to harm our environment and not, as the Government would claim, to heal it.

Farmers must be supported to do their job, and they deserve to be recognised for the vital role that they play in producing the first-class ingredients that we enjoy every day in our breakfast, our lunch and our dinner. They should, as they so often do, strive to do that work sustainably, but their role in providing food security for our nation must not be forgotten. I will never apologise for making that point time and again in the chamber.

I have already highlighted the frustration at the heart of last year's "food needs a farmer" protest outside the Parliament. It was a point that the farmers who descended on the Parliament in their hundreds made to the SNP and Green parties, but today's statement from the cabinet secretary is just confirmation that those parties have completely failed to listen.

However, as we continue our pre-legislative scrutiny of the proposed agriculture bill, there is still time to change tack, listen to farmers and get this right for them. From the evidence that we have heard so far, we should be in no doubt that Scotland's farmers know an awful lot more about managing their land than those writing policies at St Andrew's house do. We have an opportunity to utilise the abundance of knowledge that we have in the agricultural industry, and I urge the cabinet secretary to take full advantage of that and commit to ensuring greater transparency of how those views are listened to and how individuals will bear the brunt of the proposals in the bill when it is introduced to Parliament.

We need a plan to help farmers produce more top-quality food here in Scotland, a plan to reduce our reliance on other foods coming in and a plan to create more jobs in the wider food industry. What we need is a plan that puts farmers first, not the one-track, short-sighted and ideology-driven proposal that is before us today. The question for our next First Minister is this: will they ditch the hated Bute house agreement—hated by so much of rural Scotland—or will they plough on for the sake of the dying dreams of independence to the peril of our rural communities?

I move amendment S6M-08212.1, to leave out from "to become" to end and insert:

“; welcomes the ongoing commitment from Scotland's agricultural sector to meet net zero by 2045; notes the sector's contribution of £2.9 billion to Scotland's economy, with one in 10 jobs being dependent on agriculture; further notes that the Climate Change Committee has highlighted that, as things stand, the Scottish Government will miss its targets to reduce agricultural emissions; recognises that agricultural businesses plan years in advance and that the Scottish Government has failed to provide these businesses with funding certainty, including clarity on whether farmers will be able to apply for all tiers of funding in the new proposed payment system; congratulates farmers and crofters for putting high-quality food on people's plates; urges the Scottish Government to put food security at the heart of its new vision, with a pragmatic land

use strategy; calls for farmers in Scotland to be allowed to use gene editing technology to help drive innovation and keep costs low for the agricultural sector, and welcomes the Scottish Government's engagement with farmers and crofters from across Scotland to shape a viable and successful future for generations to come.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart. You may have a generous six minutes, Ms Wishart.

15:14

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): In reforming and transforming our agriculture sector, everything that we do will need to be in the context of adhering to our net zero targets, facing the climate and nature emergencies, and recognising the impact of Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine on UK food security.

The war in Ukraine has driven up the cost of products that are essential to food production and the supply chain, including fuel, fertiliser, feed and energy, thus jeopardising global and domestic food security. The war and its impacts will not last for ever, but there might be some long-lasting impacts that we can address now.

As you will not need reminding, Presiding Officer, just this week, farmers on the island of Westray in Orkney have written to the Scottish Government outlining the stark reality of soaring inflation, rising input costs and piecemeal support. As a result of that reality, farmers in Westray are anticipating the largest-ever drop in cattle numbers in a single year. Without a change in course, critical mass could be lost entirely by 2025. This is a crisis that demands urgent and targeted intervention.

Both the UK and Scottish Governments have been slow to respond on the multiple threats that agriculture faces. The lack of certainty around the future of the post-CAP schemes is deterring investment, and that will be detrimental to the future of the industry. Farming is on a journey, but the destination is not clear, as we heard at last night's meeting.

Last autumn, Scottish Liberal Democrats passed a conference motion on growing Scottish agriculture. We want an agriculture sector that is as ambitious as our crofters and farmers. Future financial support in agriculture should be built on the principles that it will encourage active farming, promote environmental sustainability and restore biodiversity, in order to manage change in farming and crofting to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. It must support employment and turnover, while maintaining a critical mass in the supply chain and associated industries to enhance the processing of food in Scotland, reduce food miles and fully support the vibrancy and viability of rural and island communities.

The UK Government's approach to trade deals risks undermining Scottish and UK agriculture by undercutting the goods that we produce to high environmental and animal welfare standards. Post-Brexit trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand have been described by NFU Scotland as

“one sided, with little to no advantage for Scottish farmers”

and as posing

“a long-term threat to key Scottish agricultural sectors, such as beef, lamb and dairy”.

Scottish Liberal Democrats want to reaffirm that all trade deals should meet UK standards on environmental protection and animal welfare.

We also want to see the UK Government commission an independent review of the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013, to establish how it could be further strengthened. The strength of the big supermarkets is being used to drive down prices at the farm gate. Although the major supermarkets have consistently reported large profits, most farms rely on grants and subsidies to make any revenue.

Critically, the UK Government needs to provide relief in the face of rising costs. In recent weeks, exacerbated by poor weather in Europe and North Africa, we have seen how a lack of support for UK glasshouse farming energy bills resulted in shortages on supermarket shelves. We cannot allow food shortages to become commonplace, nor food prices to rise too high for consumers.

Scottish Liberal Democrats secured additional agriculture transition funding in 2021. We call on the Scottish Government to build on that by rewarding environmental stewardship and helping agricultural businesses make investments that will rapidly reduce emissions.

We also call for a fresh food campaign to improve consumer awareness of the benefits of cutting food miles and using local produce, alongside the reform of procurement processes, to better value seasonal Scottish produce and help producers and processors navigate tendering.

We need to get farming practices right for our rural and island communities, and to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. The UK Climate Change Committee's report “Is Scotland climate ready?” warns that

“There is currently no strategy in place to ensure the agricultural sector in Scotland remains productive as the climate changes”,

despite forecasts of more floods and periods of water scarcity.

NFU Scotland also warns that wholesale land-use change to support climate change mitigation,

if it takes agricultural land out of sustainable food production, would lead to

“rapid socio-economic decline across Scotland”.

We advocate robust food security assessments. Is productive agricultural land well suited to supporting food production and sustainability? That needs to be assessed prior to land being used for non-agricultural purposes, such as forestry. That would ensure that carbon offsetting projects do not jeopardise the ability of food-producing land to feed families across Scotland.

A new system of croft proofing needs to be introduced in future agricultural support and other relevant regulations. Not all growers operate in the same way and we should protect the crofts that have served us well for generations.

We will look closely at the Government's proposals and will support means to keep farming profitable and sustainable with a focus on the need to ensure that the food that we want to put on the dining table is affordable and, importantly, available.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I call Alasdair Allan. You have a generous six minutes, Dr Allan.

15:20

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Scottish Government's vision for agriculture sets out the Government's long-term view on how best to support farming and food production across Scotland. I hope that we are all agreed on at least the fact that farmers and crofters must be able to live and work sustainably on their land to meet our nation's food needs and strengthen food supply chains in Scotland while adapting practices to better protect our natural resources.

The Scottish Government has committed to reducing agricultural emissions by 31 per cent by 2032. As well as continuing to reduce the sector's overall carbon footprint, we must turn attention to how best to reduce the damaging impact of nitrification caused, in part, by agricultural by-products. That said, it is also vital that farmers and crofters be supported to produce more of our own food here in Scotland, thereby strengthening Scotland's food security and avoiding the real risk of Scotland offshoring its carbon emissions, to which other members alluded.

Everyone acknowledges that there is a long way to go. However, the publication of the agricultural reform route map gives the industry a clearer sense of what support mechanisms will or might be implemented from 2025 onwards, such as the basic payment scheme, voluntary coupled support and the less favoured area support scheme.

The challenges that Scotland's farmers and crofters face are multifaceted and include the continued impact of Brexit, climate change and huge rises in feed, fuel and energy costs, as well as labour shortages. The UK Government must fulfil its promise to fully replace EU funds. It is the very least that Scotland's farmers and crofters deserve. It is also vital that the UK Government engages collaboratively with the Scottish Government on future agriculture funding.

The four-tiered future support framework that is set out in the Scottish Government's agricultural reform route map aims to ensure that farmers and crofters can access the support that they need to continue producing high-quality local produce while simultaneously working towards even greater sustainability by reducing emissions and engaging in regenerative agricultural practices.

Of course, one of the most sustainable forms of agriculture is already an inherent part of Scotland's cultural life and of the local economy in my constituency and across the north and west of Scotland. For centuries, the traditional low-intensity management practices that are associated with crofting, along with the mixture of activities that are commonly carried out, have been instrumental in supporting a range of species and habitats while cultivating produce to be used locally.

It remains difficult to make much, if any, profit from crofting. It is certainly hard for a crofter to access high levels of financial support.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As the member knows, I am a great supporter of crofting and all the benefits that it brings. Does he agree that crofting law reform would be of great help in making crofting sustainable into the future? It was promised in the previous session of the Parliament but has not been delivered yet.

Alasdair Allan: I certainly agree that crofting law reform is required. It has been promised in this session of the Parliament, and I urge the Government to bring it forward. I am sure that that will happen.

My point about crofting is that the levels of support for an individual crofter are modest, to put it mildly. Half of crofters receive less than £1,400 in annual support, according to the Scottish Crofting Federation.

Crofting has a marked potential to deliver on key aims in relation to sustainability, biodiversity and the strengthening of rural communities. Often located in areas of high-nature-value farming, livestock are able to graze in a well-managed way that encourages environmental regeneration and sustains the area's biodiversity.

However, crofters often face challenges that are unique to their environment. For example, greylag geese continue to cause significant damage to crofts and common grazings throughout the Western Isles. Their rapidly increasing numbers make it very difficult to mitigate their impact, and the financial losses experienced by crofters as a result can be extreme. The Scottish Government and NatureScot have been supporting control schemes, which go some way to assisting local efforts to contain the local goose population's growth. However, the geese themselves are challenging to control effectively. I have heard more than one crofter make the dry remark that the resident geese can now recognise the registration plates of the marksman's car and make themselves scarce at the appropriate time.

All that said, it is essential that crofters and other small-scale producers have their needs prioritised, so they must be able to readily access comprehensive support. Their potential contribution to sustainable best practice for the agricultural industry is clearly significant, but it is also important to point out that, whether it is due to the effects of climate change or anything else, they need support to make change.

The route map's publication has been widely welcomed across the agricultural industry, as it gives more certainty to farmers and crofters about the road ahead. By ensuring that future support mechanisms complement each other and are accessible to those who need the support the most, we can continue to best support Scotland's agricultural sector in moving towards the more sustainable farming and high-quality food production that we all seek to achieve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that we have a fair bit of time in hand, so members who take an intervention will get that time back, and possibly more.

15:27

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): That is very generous—thank you, Presiding Officer.

Scotland's farmers are the beating heart of not just our rural economy but our way of life. They are central to food security and provide the one energy source that we cannot live without. They are the champions of our natural landscape and the true custodians of our environment.

The good news is that Scotland's farmers are up for the challenge. The question that today's debate poses is whether the Scottish Government is really behind them. Be in no doubt: our farmers will find a way to survive—to manage and overcome the challenges that they face—but that should not be enough for us. In a country with as many opportunities as, and the agricultural potential of,

Scotland, we should be looking for our farmers to thrive.

Although the route map is a starting point, we cannot ignore the fact that the SNP Government has been really slow in getting the journey started, leaving farmers to second-guess which direction they should set off in.

Karen Adam: Do you think that Brexit has helped the agricultural sector in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ask questions through the chair, please.

Oliver Mundell: What I can say to the member is that farmers in my constituency are pleased that their LFASS payments have been maintained and restored to previous levels. To those members on the Government benches who pretend that being in the EU is a panacea for farmers, I say that they need to look again at what the EU is doing to find support elsewhere.

Sixteen years of neglect of our rural communities has been followed, in recent years, by a sustained attack on rural life. That has undermined our farmers and rural communities, and it makes many farmers feel that they are not the integral part of Scotland that they are.

Farmers should be the SNP's first partners when it comes to driving forward change and aspiration for rural Scotland. Sadly, that has not been the case. In their place sit the so-called Scottish Greens, whose answer to protecting the countryside is to ban it. In the Scottish Greens' utopia, in place of the evils of farming and food production, we would instead see a small but merry band of volunteers tending rank vegetation, and we would have to cross our fingers that reintroducing a few predators would do the rest.

Mairi Gougeon: Obviously, we do not have the Greens in the chamber today to respond to that, but I would like to know which part of the Bute house agreement relating to agriculture Oliver Mundell takes issue with or disagrees with.

Oliver Mundell: The cabinet secretary should start by speaking to hill farmers in my constituency, who are under huge pressure as a result of forestry—which I will come on to—and who have seen deals with the Greens push the Scottish Government further than it should have gone when it comes to things such as predator management. There are plenty of examples of the Greens pushing the Scottish Government about.

However, the Greens are not to blame for everything. The First Minister's time in office coincides almost exactly with the seven years of stalling, delays and disinterest that have led us to today. We can only hope—and, maybe for some, pray—that the new First Minister is ready to work

with rural Scotland instead of serving Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater.

The delay and dither have been costly and unnecessary. All the while, the job of our farmers has continued to get harder. No longer is it only the elements that they battle; they now fight for the space simply to exist. In my Dumfriesshire constituency, viable and good-quality agricultural land and units have been carpeted in Sitka spruce, with a blind eye turned to bad environmental practice.

Although, in the past, I might have been able to say that everyone in the Scottish Government understood that people cannot eat trees, after the Bute house agreement, I cannot quite be so sure. It is laughable that the people who tell us that traditional upland farming is bad for the environment are the same people who say that trees should take its place. It is those same people who advocate moving away from red meat and tell us that we would be better eating avocados jetted in from the other side of the globe.

Alasdair Allan: I wonder whether, at some point in his speech, Oliver Mundell might stop dealing in stereotypes, given that I do not like avocados but do eat red meat. Is he going to talk about agriculture policy at any point in his contribution?

Oliver Mundell: I am talking about agriculture policy. If Alasdair Allan does not speak to farmers, I do, and that is what they say. They are frustrated. Those issues affect them. They are concerned that people in this Parliament do not take food security and domestic produce seriously, and are happy to rubbish red meat and blame it for all the environmental ills.

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): In what world—perhaps it is the one that the Tories dwell in—does the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands setting up a novel food security task force not constitute taking that issue seriously?

Oliver Mundell: Setting up a food security task force means looking at the issues superficially and obsessing about things that are outwith the Scottish Government's control rather than focusing closer to home, where good-quality agricultural land is being planted up with trees every day, and rather than promoting Scottish goods when it comes to procurement within the Scottish public sector, as my colleague Brian Whittle suggested earlier.

The cabinet secretary thinks that we need a plan when we have had years—16 years, in fact—in which the Scottish Government could have been doing far more to stand up for Scottish farmers and for the Scottish supply chain. It could have been doing something about the lack of

abattoirs in parts of rural Scotland, doing something about our shortage of butchers or doing something to make farmers feel valued. It is simply not good enough.

Jim Fairlie: Where in this grand vision of agriculture does Oliver Mundell see the free trade agreements with New Zealand and Australia fitting in? I also have to say that it must have been one of your staff who wrote your speech.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I remind members to speak through the chair.

Oliver Mundell: I have not made a great deal of progress through my speech; most of what I have said has been in response to SNP members who, instead of channelling their energies into challenging the cabinet secretary on what she is going to do for farmers, seem to be more excited about what I have to say.

There are big opportunities for Scotland's farmers around the world, but it seems that the SNP is the only party in the UK to rubbish the opportunities that trade brings and to talk Scotland down. There were some advantages for Scottish farmers in the trade deals—for example, a reduction in tariffs on whisky, which supports a lot of jobs in farming and agriculture.

As the Scottish Government sets out its future plans, my plea is that ministers think more carefully about the priorities and ensure that farmers are not forced off their land to make way for wind turbines and trees as a result of imbalances in financial support and incentives. We need a level playing field—one that recognises the importance of food security. We must also remember that farming needs people, and that means ensuring that our rural communities are well-served and vibrant places.

I do not have time to cover all of what I could say during today's debate, but the SNP Government has gutted rural health services, rural schools and rural policing, and it has failed to offer any solutions to rural depopulation, so to hear members tell us that all of the labour shortage problems and all of the challenges that farmers have in finding a workforce come from Brexit is, quite frankly, unacceptable.

The tone of today's debate has been worrying. The proposed route map, rather than leading to fewer barriers in the future, means that our farmers will be asked to jump through more hoops. I worry that, in order to access support, farmers will be asked to spend huge sums of money on consultants and will spend less time looking after their land and doing the things that they already know work when it comes to protecting the environment. They have been short changed, and this debate shows it.

15:36

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I must say that I am quite disappointed by the tone of the debate—but that is not coming from those on the SNP benches. All we hear are descriptions of problems, but being descriptive does not offer any solutions. We are willing to work cross-party to come up with solutions to a lot of the issues.

Brian Whittle: I am very grateful to the member for taking my intervention. For nearly seven years, I have talked in the Parliament about the importance of public procurement for our farmers, but we still do not have a system in which the central Scotland Excel contract is accessible by our farmers. That is something that you could change right here, right now, but seven years later, we are still waiting.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to speak through the chair.

Karen Adam: I say through the chair that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill was passed a few months ago.

The farmers in our constituencies—and the whole agriculture sector—talk to us, bend our ears and tell us about the issues and the problems that they are having, and they expect us to come up with solutions and to help them; they do not expect us to use their problems as ammunition in a one-sided debate.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Adam: Not at the moment, but I will in a second.

We cannot just throw in problems, such as a blunderous Brexit, and then stand by mocking the people who are trying to clean up that mess.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Adam: Not just now, but in a second.

We have to be solution focused and go forward working together and doing our best for our agriculture industry. That is what our farmers deserve, and nothing less. They might not have kept the receipts of Brexit, but we have because we are picking up the tab.

Sustainable and regenerative farming is at the heart of the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture, and rightly so. The twin biodiversity and climate crises are existential, and they will present challenges and opportunities for Scotland's farmers and crofters. If we are to ensure that there are fewer of the former and more of the latter in the years and decades to come, it is

vital that we act with our climate change targets and net zero ambitions in mind.

In my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, we have already seen the alarming impacts of those crises. We have been hit hard by storms, rising tides and coastal erosion. Acres of forestry has been lost across the constituency as a result of never-seen-before gales. The migration of cod and urban gulls has had a notable impact on the lives and livelihoods of those in my constituency.

While many recognise that we have a climate emergency, not all of us know that we also face a nature emergency. Professor Des Thompson, principal adviser on biodiversity and science at NatureScot told us this morning at the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee that, although there is growing realisation of the nature emergency, we have a long way to go. He said that what has happened with gulls is a catastrophe but it is because of what has happened at sea that the food base for gulls has declined. Gulls are therefore moving inland into towns and cities that are not adapted to breeding, and they are very good at tracking schoolchildren, unfortunately, so that they know where to find food.

What we are seeing with the gulls is just a symptom of climate change. The broader realisation that climate change is contributing to the nature crisis and therefore to the problems that we have right on our doorstep cannot be overstated and our farmers get it more than anyone else. They are witnessing those changes in real time and they understand the challenges that they are facing.

I welcome the Scottish Government's emphasis on our vision for agriculture and the agricultural reform route map. The emphasis on our net zero ambitions and emissions reductions are in line with our climate targets. We all need to do better at expressing and mitigating the gravity of the twin climate and nature crises, and I praise the minister for her commitment to encouraging co-operative approaches on these issues, and to optimising collaboration with knowledge exchange.

Food security is an area of vital importance. In recent years, we have witnessed many disruptions to the global food supply chains, most recently through Russia's abhorrent war in Ukraine. The Covid-19 pandemic also posed some difficult challenges to the global food system. Although its impacts are not unique to Scotland, those caused and imposed on Scotland by the hard Brexit were entirely avoidable. The UK Government has done immense and irreversible damage to our world-class food and drink industry and to rural and coastal communities such as the one that I represent, and I commend the minister for her continuing and tireless engagement in combating post-Brexit skills shortages in agriculture and for

calling on the UK Government to fulfil its outstanding commitment to fully replacing EU funds.

Oliver Mundell: Does the member not think that, after 16 years of her party being in government in Scotland, we might have had a hope of growing some of our own talent that could fill skills shortages in rural communities instead of seeing people flocking to the cities?

Karen Adam: I thank the member for bringing that issue up because it is a real problem and we are facing a lot of complex problems like that. If we are to look into those problems, we must remember that Scotland 16 years ago is not reflective of the society that we are in right now and that Brexit did not help because it damaged it even more.

We must ask ourselves what the future of food farming looks like. Scottish enterprises such as Intelligent Growth Solutions are taking innovations such as vertical farming to new heights. Home-grown enterprises such as IGS are redefining the future landscape of farming and food. Year-round, reliable, high-quality crops that are scalable and produced in controlled environments without pesticides and with a shorter transit from farm to plate will play a vital role in reducing the carbon footprint of our agriculture industry.

As we heard today, there is also a place for our livestock. The words that were used today were "sweet spot". It is vital to get the balance right for a sustainable food and drink industry, for the future of our planet and for a health and wellbeing economy.

15:43

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I am gonnae try to be as honest and productive as I can in this debate, but gotcha questions just arenae gonnae work for today's deliberations.

Brexit has, as yet, delivered absolutely nothing good for the farming community, the wider Scottish economy, or the social mobility of our people or that of our European neighbours who wish to come here to work and contribute. That is the view of Roz McCall, who said it on "Debate Night" the other week. If I was trying to be charitable, I would say that if there was the possibility of a glimmer of anything positive, it would be the ability of this Parliament to agree a new agricultural reform bill that is tailored to the needs of our farmers and crofters, our food security, our ambition and the need to hit the targets that we have set for net zero and nature restoration.

I appreciate the importance of getting the vision for our agricultural future absolutely on point, and my dealings with the Scottish Government so far suggest to me that it gets that—it understands it.

Finlay Carson: The member says that the Government gets it. Will he join me in condemning the plans that civil servants put before the Scottish Government that would have resulted in active measures to reduce Scotland's beef herd?

Jim Fairlie: I do not recognise the position that the member has taken, so I will move on.

There is a huge and exciting challenge to embrace as the Government seeks to balance our status as a top-quality food-producing nation while addressing the political priorities—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Fairlie. There is chat going on between the two front benches, which is not acceptable or courteous.

Please continue, Mr Fairlie.

Jim Fairlie: I never even noticed, Presiding Officer, but thank you very much.

The Government seeks to balance our status as a top-quality food-producing nation while addressing the political priorities, both current and future, such as fulfilling our climate and biodiversity responsibilities, as Scotland moves towards net zero by 2045.

The added complexity is, of course, that we are in essence starting from scratch as we look to replace European Union directives. That will determine what our future farming and agricultural policy will look like. I fear that we might be trying to do too much in one bill, but we shall see how that develops as we scrutinise the bill as it goes through the committee stage.

From my perspective, food security and feeding our nation must be front and centre of our plans. As Martin Kennedy reminded us last week, it is an agriculture bill. We have a justified world-leading reputation for the quality of our food and production practices, and our critical mass in producing that food must be maintained—for our present food resilience and for the next generation of young farmers to follow.

The Scottish Government is working hard to ensure that there is resilience, sustainability and profit in the sector, and to give it the tools to support our farmers, who are already making meaningful changes on climate and nature issues. It should be noted that many of our farmers have been taking such actions for years.

Brian Whittle: Does the member recognise that our farmers are the custodians of the countryside and they are making significant changes in relation to climate change, but we must support them on

that journey rather than just demand that they make changes? They need support to make those changes.

Jim Fairlie: Of course I do.

I have said before and I will say again that, if we want a definition of “regenerative farming”, perhaps we should say that it is old-fashioned farming. Unfortunately, although we may have the sliver of hope that Brexit has given us in the opportunity to realign our agriculture policy, the negative Brexit effect is particularly profound, as we no longer have long-term certainty or multiyear funding, which is critical.

The hard-of-thinking Brexiteers who are running the UK Government and the Treasury right now are imposing unilateral choices that provide an insufficient replacement for EU funding. The result is a shortfall of £93 million, because pledges from the UK Government have not been honoured. Added to that, there is no certainty of funding from the Treasury from 2025 onwards. All our planning and deliberations could be for absolutely nothing if that funding is not at the very least maintained—although, as we have heard in committee, we know that it needs to be enhanced.

That is before we even mention the extreme shortages of labour, which mean that vegetables and fruit are rotting in the fields; the berry farmers who are pulling out bushes in my constituency in Perthshire; or the anxiety for the pig sector because of a lack of border controls. However, let us not talk about Brexit.

Oliver Mundell: Does the member accept that, when that funding arrives, every penny of it should be ring fenced for farmers? Alternatively, does he agree with the Scottish Government that it should be spread out to cover all sorts of other purposes?

Jim Fairlie: The tone that Mr Mundell has taken today is really unfortunate, because it is not conducive to trying to find solutions.

I genuinely have a deal of sympathy for the Tories in the Scottish Parliament. I understand that it is difficult for them when the Westminster Government that they champion has brokered harmful free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand. Incidentally, those agreements were celebrated like a lottery win in those countries, while former minister George Eustice declared that the UK

“gave away far too much”.

A UK Government minister recently declared that New Zealand lamb is actually better for the environment than home-produced lamb. The UK Government put Ben Goldsmith on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs advisory committee—that was the old boys network doing its thing, with Michael Gove putting

on that committee a man who today on Twitter told us that sheep have no place in our agriculture system. Sheep farming friends beware: Ben Goldsmith is coming for you, again.

Having said that, I am confident that our colleagues on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee will work together, collegiately and with a common purpose, to find the right solutions for our agricultural community, our climate and our nature obligations. It is too important not to.

We will face up to the difficulties of competing demands on an ever-growing list of requirements for a fixed pot of money. I welcome the Government's intention to strategically align Scotland in the direction of the EU's CAP, because it is a durable framework that is designed to be flexible enough to adapt to changing social, economic and environmental challenges.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: I will in a second.

However, that will not copy and paste what has been set out in Brussels. I encourage the Government to ensure that that is the case, as we must make our own vision that fits Scotland's unique needs.

Finlay Carson: You took the words out of my mouth. We have the opportunity to put forward a scheme that suits Scotland, so why would we align ourselves with CAP in Europe, which will see agricultural payments being cut in the future? Do you think that if Europe cuts agricultural payments, the Scottish Government should do the same?

Jim Fairlie: That is a ludicrous question. If we were going to align with the EU, we would do so in order that when Scotland becomes an independent country and we make an application to rejoin the EU, we would have that opportunity.

That said, the Government has a challenging puzzle to solve. However, I have every confidence that our conversations are leading us on a clear and correct path. I trust the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, our Parliament and our Government to set a prosperous vision for Scotland's agricultural future, which would send a clear message to our farmers, land managers and our people that farming is truly valued in Scotland.

15:51

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Presiding Officer, can I clarify whether I have been given a generous six minutes so that I can take interventions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a very generous six minutes, Mr Mountain.

Edward Mountain: That is very generous of you, Presiding Officer.

I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I want to be clear that I farm as part of a family farming partnership, I farm on land that I own, I am a tenant farmer on other bits of land and I am in receipt of agricultural subsidies. Without those subsidies, there is no way that my farming business could survive. That is the fact of the matter, and I am very open about it.

I come to the Parliament having proved that I have dirt under my fingernails from being involved in a family farming business for more than 40 years. Indeed, I think that that means that I was farming before either of the ministers was on the planet. That does not make me any better than them, but I believe that it allows me to come here with a certain amount of knowledge.

During that time, I have seen Governments and policies come and go, but one constant that has remained is the farmers who have managed to deliver some of the best managed land in the world. Our land is a key driver, because we need to remember that they are not making any more of it—we have a finite resource that delivers our food and will help us to protect our climate. As Oliver Mundell said, the problem is that, if we take more of the good, food-growing land out of production for things such as forestry, there will be even less land that can be used to grow food. That is important. As Oliver Mundell also said—I did not write his speech—we cannot eat trees, and we need to be careful about exporting our carbon footprint by importing more food from other countries.

Jim Fairlie: The member talks about productive land being turned over to trees. As it stands, is it not up to the seller to sell their land to whoever they want?

Edward Mountain: Of course, the seller has those rights. However, I do not need to remind Mr Fairlie that the structure of agricultural subsidies in about 2005 meant that planting on good agricultural land in Aberdeenshire—no deer fencing was required and no work was required on the land—paid more than producing a crop. That was not a good or clever use of the subsidies. We need to be really careful about those things.

Growing more trees so that we cannot use that land for food production means that we are purposefully, or perhaps unwittingly, saying that we approve of the Amazon rain forest being chopped down in order to plant soya. I do not think that we should tolerate that. The future of Scottish farming should be about using the resources that we have a lot more wisely than is being suggested.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): We are on the cross-party group on rural policy together. It is quite enjoyable when we get to hear evidence on what is out there. You mentioned the 2005 subsidies and said that that system was not right. Does that not mean that, when future support schemes are developed, we can learn lessons from the past and make things better?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Allow me to remind members to speak through the chair at all times.

Edward Mountain: I absolutely agree. You must have guessed the next subject in my speech, which is the new farming policy.

We need to build a wider policy to make it fit for the future, and the Government needs to ask itself these questions as it does that and to trust farmers to deliver food, conservation, biodiversity, employment and local investment, with farmers often being the centre of local communities. If the Government does that and bears that in mind, farming will continue.

If the Government does not believe that farmers can do that, one has to ask whether it believes that focus groups and large multinational companies—some of which, in order to get subsidies, want to burn the very food that we need to feed ourselves and our animals—will deliver it. I am talking about groups that want to rewild, forestry companies that look for hedge funding to make maximum use of carbon credits without knowing fully what that means and—God forbid—politicians. They do not do what farmers do, which is produce the food that we need to eat.

The minister has been clear about producing timescales, but Chris Stark of the Climate Change Committee has told the Government to get on with it because it is taking too long. At NFU Scotland's annual general meeting dinner, which the cabinet secretary attended, farmers also said that the Government needs to get on with it. Surprisingly enough, even non-governmental organisations are telling the Government to get on with it.

Although the Government has come up with a timescale, it has not come up with a policy. The policy that the Government will develop will come into place only in 2026, which means that we will have less than six years to meet the climate targets that we are being asked to meet. I wish that those climate targets were earlier, and they would have been had the Conservatives had their way. I do not need to remind anyone that, in the previous parliamentary session, it was the Liberal Democrats who voted with the Government to decide that the new agriculture policy did not have to be unveiled until 2024. That is deeply unhelpful, and it leaves farmers in the lurch.

When the Government does not reach its targets, it will blame farmers, which will also be deeply unhelpful. The timescale does not allow you to model the effects of the changes that you will put in place in 2026. That will repeat the error that Richard Lochhead made when he introduced his revised scheme in 2015. It is deeply unhelpful. I suggest that you probably have not left yourself enough time to commission a new software programme, because it takes a long time to do that, and the previous one cost you more than £200 million.

There are some key questions that the agriculture policy will need to address. Will you protect the budget? Will you support less favoured areas? I think that you need to. Will all farmers be able to apply for all payments in all tiers? Will you make conditionality progressive, not regressive? Will you allow all farmers to apply for conditionality payments? Will you make food security a cornerstone of your policy? If the answer to any of those questions is no, you will fail.

I am deeply concerned that we still do not know the full extent of the Government's farming policy. Since 2016, we have had debate after debate, report after report and task force after task force. The one thing that we have not come up with is a full and detailed policy. Farmers are resilient, but how does the Government expect farmers to improve our food security and meet climate change targets if they do not even know what they will be doing in two years' time?

Sadly, it appears that, when the cabinet secretary inherited the portfolio from Fergus Ewing, she also inherited his amazing ability to dither and delay. My message—which is repeated by farmers across the country, whom I meet and talk to regularly—is that we need to get on with it if we are going to deliver our net zero targets. Unfortunately, cabinet secretary, until you get on with it, farmers cannot get on with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members that references to “you” in a debate are references to me, and I do not think that I am responsible for half of what is being said this afternoon—at least, I sincerely hope that I am not.

16:00

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Last week, as part of its pre-legislative scrutiny for the agriculture bill, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee took evidence from members of the agriculture reform implementation oversight board. I will start by quoting Kate Rowell, who is a farmer. She shows that farmers and crofters across Scotland are willing and committed to playing their part in cutting emissions, mitigating climate

change and restoring and enhancing nature and biodiversity. She said:

“I am here as a member of the ARIOB, representing Quality Meat Scotland, but I am also a farmer and it is really important to get across that every single farmer I know wants to improve their farm for future generations. I am a fifth-generation farmer. We are all in this for the long term—and by that, I mean centuries. We absolutely do not want to be making things worse. After my family, my farm is the thing that I love most in the entire world, and it is really important to me that it is left in a really good way for my children, if farming is what they want to do.”

She went on to say:

“Most farmers feel the same way, and we need to support them in doing that.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 8 March 2023; c 14.]

Ms Rowell’s sentiments are voiced across Scotland, and very much so by the farmers and crofters of Argyll and Bute. Ten days ago, I was invited to a meeting with them along with Donald Cameron, whom I spotted coming into the chamber a wee while ago. I use this as an example of cross-party working together. We met farmers and crofters from Argyll and Bute and NFUS representatives for Argyll and the islands to hear their concerns about agriculture. I should let the cabinet secretary know that, as a result of that meeting, she will receive a letter in the next day or so with some questions and suggestions as to how some of their concerns could be mitigated.

When I speak to farmers and crofters, it is clear that they recognise the importance of the sustainability of farms, food production and communities. Work has begun, supported by the Scottish Government. The Nature Friendly Farming Network has successfully held a number of meetings in Argyll and Bute. It told me of the success of meetings held on Islay as part of supporting biodiversity through island-based farming and crofting. Participants included crofters, tenant farmers, owner farmers and estates. The group allows our farmers to share ideas, celebrate what they have achieved and upskill through peer-to-peer experience.

I am pleased to say that Islay is the home of one of the nine monitor farms in Scotland. Those are farmer-led and farmer-driven initiatives that aim to improve the profitability, productivity and sustainability of farms through practical demonstrations, the sharing of best practice and the discussion of up-to-date issues.

Craigens farm, which is run by Craig Archibald and his family, has 220 suckler cows, 200 store cattle, 1,000 ewes and about 1,100 lambs. The farm has 20 hectares producing barley for one of the local distilleries and 10 hectares of forage rape. The business has also diversified into oyster farming, and an on-farm cafe has just opened. For Mr Archibald, the monitor farm programme is not

about only him and his business; it is for the farming community on the island. He said:

“By the end of the programme, I’d like to be better informed, and the farm more profitable. As for the island, I hope it’ll attract interest from other farmers and inspire some of the younger generations”.

I know that other farms are already linking in with Craigens farm as part of the monitor farm project. Farms sustain people, but they also sustain communities. Schools, shops, medical practices, tourism and quality produce all rely on our successful farmers and crofters, and I know that all Argyll and Bute farmers feel very strongly about that.

In response to a question from me during the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee’s evidence session two weeks ago, Chris Stark from the Climate Change Committee said:

“farmers know their land better than anyone else. That is key in what we are trying to achieve by giving farmers the incentive to use their knowledge in new ways.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 1 March; c 37.]

On that note, I will summarise some of the comments that I have heard from Argyll and Bute farmers and crofters. They feel that it is essential that the agriculture bill recognises farmers as both food producers and custodians of nature, and they stress that the bill should note the importance of agriculture in maintaining rural populations.

There is also a strong view that LFASS payments, which Edward Mountain and others have mentioned, should be rebased to reflect the current situation on farms, which would particularly help new entrants. They also emphasise that those payments cannot be conditional, because they are as important, if not more important, to some farmers as the tier 1 payments.

Rachael Hamilton: A few weeks ago, the committee heard from crofters who were opposed to having the whole-farm plan within tier 1, because of the bureaucracy. Does she have sympathy with that sentiment?

Jenni Minto: That is an interesting question to ask. I have both farmers and crofters in my constituency, so I know that it is really important that the Scottish Government listens to both farmers and crofters—I know that it is doing that—to ensure that the right solution is provided for them. It is also clear that crofters have maintained for centuries a way of working that has involved being custodians of the land as well as producers of food, and that is the kind of farming and crofting that we are looking to uphold.

I will continue summarising the comments that I have heard. There is concern about slurry storage, with regard to planning permission, the viability and price of units and the timeframe to claim

grants for them. I know that the cabinet secretary and the minister are aware of that, and I would appreciate further conversations with them on that topic.

Other members have mentioned local infrastructure, and I will also mention it, with a particular focus on abattoirs. That ties in with the important work, which Karen Adam spoke about, that the Scottish Government has undertaken through the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, and it would be another boost in reducing our food miles.

Finlay Carson: Will the member join me in raising concerns about the lack of any progress with the 2022 act? We were given a commitment that the secondary legislation would be drawn up alongside the bill, but I have been made aware that there has been little progress on the national plan. I am concerned that that sets the standard for how secondary legislation will be dealt with in relation to agricultural policy.

Jenni Minto: I do not recognise that, because I represent a constituency that is already looking at how the good food nation—[*Interruption.*] The member is speaking to me from a sedentary position, so I am afraid that I cannot hear what he is saying, but I have great confidence that the 2022 act will become an integral part of our legislative process.

Farmers and crofters welcome the opportunity to co-develop the Scottish agriculture bill, and I support the Scottish Government's calls for the UK Government to fulfil its outstanding commitments to fully replace the funds and to engage meaningfully on future agricultural funding. As the cabinet secretary said, farmers and crofters need long-term investment to allow them to plan into the future.

Farmers and crofters sustain not only the people who eat their produce but an entire network of communities the length and breadth of rural Scotland. Those communities need successful farmers and crofters. In fact, the entire community of Scotland needs successful farmers and crofters.

16:09

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate and the Scottish Government's future vision for agriculture. As always, I welcome the briefings from NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates. It is paramount that we hear the voices of industry in these debates.

Scotland's farmers are the backbone of our nation. Farmers provide and support thousands of jobs across our country, and, as colleagues have said, they produce the food for our dinner tables

and are the custodians of our land. I agree that it is vital that any future agricultural policy recognises the contribution that they make to Scottish society, the health of our nation and our national food security.

With Brexit, the pandemic and now rising inflation, this period has seen some of the most challenging times that the sector has ever faced. There has been a catalogue of failures from the UK Government to protect the interests of Scottish farmers. One example is Brexit, but there is also the UK Government's abject failure to secure trade deals that protect our agrifood sector. Indeed, our food standards across the UK have been put at risk due to recent trade deals. I have raised that issue previously in the chamber.

Despite the challenges, our farmers and crofters must be commended for their resilience. The Scottish Government is determined to support them over the next few years. Part of its vision for agriculture is to support our agricultural sector to reduce emissions and for the sector to help, as it is doing, in Scotland's fight against the global climate emergency. Around 50 per cent of the emissions in the agriculture sector come from livestock. However, it is important that the Government supports farmers to adopt not only the low-carbon technologies that exist currently but those that will become available in the future through technological advances. I will focus on those advances.

Finlay Carson: The member spoke about how important the livestock sector is. Will she give a guarantee that she will lobby to ensure that livestock numbers in Scotland do not decrease and that we do not reach the critical point that would make the sector unreliable? We heard Chris Stark suggest that we need to reduce livestock numbers. Will the member ensure that the Government does not listen to that and that we find methods of retaining the number of cattle and sheep that we have in Scotland?

Emma Harper: Farmers might need to make choices to reduce the livestock, given their own choices, so I would be interested to follow that further and see where we are. We heard in the committee from Chris Stark about some of the challenges of farming in areas such as Alasdair Allan's region, which is peatland. One shoe does not fit every part of Scotland. We have a diverse farming sector across the country and we need to take that into consideration when we look at our future agricultural policy.

I return my focus to technological advances. Many of those can and do support our wider environmental goals. That includes the use of precision farming techniques to reduce the need for polluting fertilisers or pesticides so that we can support biodiversity.

The new biological advances cover a range of areas, including feed additives directed at reducing enteric methane emissions. Remote sensing technology, and associated monitoring, data gathering and analysis, also support our farmers to make the best emissions-reduction decisions. Moreover, technologies sourced from non-agricultural sectors—for example, digital ledgers, which are tools used to track and manage supply chains, business finance and information sharing—are also helpful for agricultural business.

In addition, 3D printing is emerging as a tool to help farmers reduce emissions. On Monday, I was invited to Borders College's Hawick campus, where I heard about the green potential of 3D printing and the other excellent techniques that are being taken forward to develop green skills in the future.

I am particularly interested in the role of bioscience in improving agricultural efficiency and reducing agricultural emissions. Products such as Pro-Soil, Pro-Fortis and Bovaer, as well as Biocell, which is produced by Biocell Agri, work hand in hand to support increasing output while reducing emissions.

I am impressed with some of the products that apply natural methods to enhance cell walls in plants. That improves disease resistance, improves mineral uptake and enhances soil quality.

Edward Mountain: I think that we all agree that increasing production is important but so, too, is ensuring that livestock enter the food chain as quickly as possible. We have a strange system in which a lot of beef animals are now ready at 11 months, but, under the Scottish quality assurance scheme, they cannot leave the farm until they are 12 months old because they cannot be sold as Scottish beef. That is not good for the environment or the farmers. Should ministers change such rules as well?

Emma Harper: I agree that we should definitely look at those issues. The products that I am talking about, which help to improve the weight gain of beef cattle or sheep, for instance, might mean that animals are on the land for less time, so they should at least be considered. As Mr Mountain described, having cattle on farm for a month that might not be necessary is something that we should probably think about.

I want to touch on research by the dairy nexus project at Scotland's Rural College's Barony campus in Dumfries and Galloway. Research conducted by Hugh McClymont shows that improving animal welfare can improve milk yield by up to a litre every 24 hours, which is about 21,000 extra litres of milk a month for an average dairy herd of 700 Holsteins. I would be interested

to hear from the cabinet secretary whether the Scottish Government could explore financially supporting farmers to introduce evidence-based welfare measures such as extra brushes and mats for cattle, because that evidence has shown that output can be increased without necessarily increasing input.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I am right out of time—I am sorry.

I will conclude by saying that the Scottish Government has serious concerns about the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which affects our ability to make decisions in Scotland and is impeding the devolved aspects of agriculture.

I look forward to the cabinet secretary's response.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:16

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Today we have had the opportunity to hear once again how agriculture can and will play a key role in combating climate change and reversing biodiversity loss.

As I come from generations of farmers, and as a former beef and dairy farmer, I am able to say confidently—and, with a couple of notable exceptions, perhaps with more confidence than most members in the chamber—that the industry relishes this challenge. I say that because it is one that farmers and generations of land managers have faced for many years. Provided that the sector is given sufficient, properly targeted funding and meaningful support, I am more than confident that the agricultural industry can deliver for the environment, climate change and biodiversity while ensuring security as regards healthy food and rural communities.

Regrettably, and to the detriment of our farmers and the environment, the SNP Government has been too slow in preparing our future agricultural system. Sadly, its route map fails to provide the certainty that farmers need. Farmers and crofters need to be given greater clarity sooner rather than later. Any further delay will cause more long-term damage to our agricultural sector and risk our nation's ability to reach its ambitious climate change targets. Such views on the snail's pace of progress from the Government are not only mine; they are shared by Chris Stark from the CCC, and farmer Andrew Moir, who, in his evidence to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee only a couple of weeks ago, said:

“The arable sector is in grave danger of leaving the Scottish Government way behind. That is where we are. We are at the top of the curve compared with the Scottish Government, which is down at the bottom. We are leaving the Scottish Government way behind on the things that we are doing. I just want to make that point clear. The Scottish Government is in ... danger of losing ... control of farming”.—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 1 March 2023; c 14.]

If we—rightly—insist that food production must be at the heart of future agricultural policy, it cannot be denied that the sector is absolutely committed to long-term sustainable food production, helping to tackle climate change and enhancing biodiversity. A great amount of work is already under way by many farmers to deliver in those areas despite the Government’s tardy approach.

We hear the Government say that it is important to work with the sector to get things right. I agree with that, but there comes a time when the Government must make its position clear. According to a recent NFU Scotland survey, its members remained worried about the uncertainty surrounding future agricultural policy. Although the route map is welcome, they say that greater urgency is required as regards the provision of more information and on how that will be delivered.

Last night in Parliament, representatives from Farming for 1.5°C set out the recommendations of its 2021 report. I stress that that report was published two years ago, but it was packed full of policies that could have started being delivered then. Its focus was on all the stuff that we already know works and can be delivered—not on the magic stuff that this Government will now need to happen if we are to reach net zero by 2045. We are two years behind, and two years closer to the climate and biodiversity cliff edge that we are all too often reminded of.

There is the national test programme and pilot schemes for soil testing, carbon audit and even £250—wow!—for animal health support. Those Government interventions are welcome, but they have been totally inadequate.

Of the current net zero measures and funding, one chair of the farmer-led group, Jim Walker, said:

“The only word that I can use to describe them is ‘embarrassing’. They include soil sampling with undefined outcomes, a carbon audit for farms that are not really quite sure what they will do with it once they have it and an animal health and welfare plan—which is interesting, because we have been doing them for years.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 1 March 2023; c 9.]

Edward Mountain: I have been one of the people who were employed to draw up such schemes so I know the costs of doing so and of

doing those audits. Does the member share my concern that farmers will lose more money in employing surveyors and such like to draw up their plans than they will get in grants?

Finlay Carson: I agree absolutely. There is concern that future agricultural policy must be clear enough that we do not need a consultant at our kitchen table to work our way through it, to ensure that we are doing the right thing and maximising the benefits to the environment and helping our business.

The Government’s failure to introduce adequate schemes and to promote them sufficiently is, indeed, “embarrassing”, but the one word that is repeatedly stated to be missing from the policy is “outcomes”. The Government has completely failed to let farmers know what the outcomes and expectations of the national test programme are to be. The desired outcomes are so far undefined, which is totally unacceptable this late in the game. It is a sign that the Scottish Government is simply treading water and paying lip service, because it still does not know what it will do.

Martin Kennedy, the president of NFU Scotland, has said:

“if we get our future policy for Scottish agriculture wrong ... and listen to the ideology of those ... who cannot see the wider picture, then we will go in a backward direction”.

Given the challenges that Scottish agriculture faces at this time, someone would think that any politician worth their salt would be champing at the bit to come up with Scottish solutions to tackle the problems that farmers are facing. I can tell members now that we Conservatives are champing at the bit and ready to scrutinise and hold the Government to account. However, like the whole of the agricultural sector, we are being frustrated in our work because we are currently in an information vacuum, with no firm idea of the direction of travel that the policies to deliver a new agricultural support system will take.

Emma Harper: I was at one of the committee’s evidence sessions just a couple of weeks ago, as a substitute member. We heard that data that might help us to figure out better approaches, such as on the uptake of the products that I mentioned, is missing. There is not a lot of data around that. Does the member think that that might need to be worked on as well?

Finlay Carson: Absolutely. I welcome that intervention. That point is absolutely clear. We have soil testing and carbon audits that have been done independently of the Government schemes, but those are not feeding in to give us a fuller picture. Therefore, in some ways, the Scottish Government is working blind in developing those policies despite six years of discussions with the farming sector.

In March 2022, the Scottish Government set out its vision for Scottish agriculture—the basis of the plan that would form the current farm funding model that will end in 2025. In February 2023, we heard the cabinet secretary reveal the agricultural reform route map, covering 39 measures that potentially would be included in the enhanced tier of the new funding model. However, details are still short, and the Government has still not released the details of the consultation that it has held on the proposed agriculture bill. The cabinet secretary said that those results will be available later in the spring, but every month that we wait is another month lost.

The route map is clearly too little, too late, but it did not have to be that way. As well as the hugely helpful and deliverable actions highlighted in the Farming for 1.5°C report, there is a whole list of interventions that we could have been making two years ago.

We have a climate-friendly scheme for suckler beef, which was created in 2021 by the farmer-led groups that were established to develop advice and proposals to the Scottish Government on cutting emissions and tackling climate change. However, those have been sidelined by the Government. What a missed opportunity. Some of those policies are now being used in Ireland to deliver carbon neutral beef, and we see very similar schemes in Australia where such beef is on sale on the shelves right now. What an opportunity. We should have grasped that with both hands.

The farming industry is desperate to invest and to protect not only our food security but our biodiversity and climate goals. However, we need the Government not only to listen to the industry—it says that it does that a lot—but to commit to act with urgency on what it hears from the industry to ensure that we achieve our collective aims and ambitions.

16:25

Mairi Gougeon: There is an awful lot to cover in my closing speech. I want to touch on many important points that have been raised during the debate.

First, I am really grateful to members across the chamber for their contributions. There were a lot of really passionate contributions, which shows just how important we consider all these issues to be. The continued success of our agricultural sector matters to all of us here, and it is clear that we all recognise the essential role that our industry has in driving the rural economy, contributing to our nation's food security and enabling the realisation of our world-leading climate and nature restoration outcomes.

As I set out in my introductory remarks, the Scottish Government has a positive vision for the future. It is one with our producers right at its core, which recognises the duty that our nation owes them, and which supports them to produce high-quality food while delivering for climate and nature restoration.

I will reiterate the clear path that I set out on how we will deliver that future, in partnership with our industry and with all who are committed to a vibrant and thriving rural Scotland. It is my intention to introduce a new Scottish agriculture bill this year—one that will provide the powers in the four-tier framework to deliver our vision for agriculture. Last month, I set out the agriculture reform route map, which shows that we are taking action now and providing the industry with more clarity and confidence on the key steps towards that coherent framework. We need to be clear that it is a coherent framework, which has been co-developed with partners to deliver our vision. It is also one that comes together through the whole farm plan—a tool that we will co-design with the industry to help our farmers and crofters to plan their businesses better and more sustainably.

I want to take a moment to again make a commitment that there will be no cliff edge for farmers and crofters in Scotland and to reiterate that the Scottish Government will maintain direct payments to ensure that we are supporting our nation's producers.

I turn to comments that were made across the chamber. I want to quickly address a couple of points first.

Finlay Carson spoke of delays on the good food nation plans, which Oliver Mundell also criticised in his contribution. I emphasise that there is not a delay, but I would be happy to write to Mr Carson in his role as convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee with information on the timescales to set those out if that would be helpful.

There were a lot of thoughtful contributions from across the chamber, including those from Beatrice Wishart, Alasdair Allan and Jim Fairlie, and even Edward Mountain, to a certain extent—I will give him that. *[Laughter.]*

I welcomed Brian Whittle's interventions. I know that he was not actively taking part in the debate, but he did so through his interventions. I do not disagree with what he is trying to do or the points that he raised. When I talked about the good food nation plans, it was because they will tie together all those vital threads of food policy in one place and show how we will monitor and track progress against what we set out there.

Emma Harper put a really important focus on technology and innovation. I will ensure that I come back to that point in these closing remarks.

In her contribution, Rachael Hamilton touched on the funding element and spoke of enabling farmers to do what they need to do. I emphasise that that is exactly what we are currently trying to do in support. The member talked about the budget for slurry storage and how that had come up in evidence that the committee had heard. I say that I would have loved to have put more funding into the capital budget for the agricultural transformation fund this year, but there is no getting around this point. Since we left the EU, not only do we not have certainty of funding going forward; we are not getting the full replacement of EU funds that we were promised. Not only are we not getting full replacement of funds; we are only getting that replacement in resource funding.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: Before I take the intervention I would first like to finish this point, because it is important. Not only are we not getting the full replacement of funds; we are only getting that replacement in resource funding, instead of the mixture of capital and resource funding that we previously received.

That has meant that I have had to make incredibly difficult choices in relation to the capital budget, such as on what we can offer to assist with slurry storage. Another announcement that we made just last month was about the restricted agri-environment climate scheme—AECS—round. Again, that was a really difficult decision to make, and it is not where I—or, I think, anybody else in the chamber—would want us to be.

Rachael Hamilton: I do not recognise the cabinet secretary's argument. The Scottish Government has had the highest block grant ever. She also has considerable latitude to make devolved decisions within the competence of the Scottish Government. I would like to know what she will do, in her role as cabinet secretary for rural affairs, with the Barnett consequential of £320 million that Jeremy Hunt has announced today. Will she put that towards AECS funding or rural affairs?

Mairi Gougeon: If we were getting full replacement of EU funds, and if it was going to where it needed to go, of course I would spend that within my portfolio. However, the fact is that we have not had the full replacement of EU funds, and our budget has been continually eroded. Those are all points that I covered when I appeared at the committee in relation to the budget.

While we are discussing funding, it is important to touch on a point that Oliver Mundell raised. I welcome the fact that he welcomed and recognised the importance of LFASS. He was very

critical of the decisions taken by the Scottish Government, but it is only because of those decisions that we still have LFASS payments in Scotland and we have been able to maintain them at the current level.

There was a lot of talk around trade and a focus on food security and supporting our producers. I go back to Oliver Mundell's contribution and some of the others that we heard, in which members would have liked just to gloss over Brexit and act as though it did not happen, and gloss over the trade deals and pretend that they have not had an impact on our industry. Although Mr Mundell was keen to talk up the benefits of trade deals for the whisky industry, he was silent on the impact on our farmers and food producers, who will be completely undermined by cheaper imports, with no limits on those a few years down the line.

Finlay Carson: There are fears that some of the policies that our Green colleagues might want to implement in Scotland will see us offshoring much of our food production. Perhaps at that point the cabinet secretary will welcome the trade deals with New Zealand and Australia, because offshoring might then be the only way we can get beef and meat into this country.

Mairi Gougeon: It is only the Tories in Scotland who seem to be welcoming those trade deals. Even members of their own party down south have said how they have pretty much sold our farmers and food producers down the river. Even the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not agree that those deals work for farmers. Of course, he only said that after he left post, when he was quoted as saying that we did not need the "full liberalisation" of beef and sheep, because it is not in our national interests.

Finlay Carson: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Mairi Gougeon: No—I am sorry. I need to make progress.

We have more trade deals coming down the pipeline. We have deals with Mexico, among many other countries. However, we have no guarantees that our producers are going to be protected through any of that. Why would they be? No doubt other countries will be looking for similar concessions to those that have already been given to Australia and New Zealand.

I want to touch on other important areas, and focus for a moment on Alasdair Allan's contribution.

Edward Mountain: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: Again, I am sorry, but I do just need to make some progress.

I want to focus on Alasdair Allan's contribution and the really important focus on crofting that he talked about. Beatrice Wishart touched on that, too, as did Edward Mountain in one of his interventions. Crofting has a unique role in our nation and makes a social contribution to our most remote communities, such as through the examples of high nature value farming that Mr Allan touched on. That is why I will continue to invest in our crofters. Just this week, I announced that I will increase the grant rate for home improvements under the croft house grant from 40 per cent to 60 per cent, with a maximum grant of £38,000. Last year, the Scottish Government awarded more than £850,000 in such funding. Since we launched it in 2007, more than £24.2 million has been awarded to more than 1,100 families and individuals in rural and island communities.

From April 2020 to October 2022, we saw more 1,000 new entrants going into crofting, each of them representing a new or continued member of the local community. Of those, 42 per cent were island crofters, more than 40 per cent were female and more than 25 per cent were under 41 years of age. Those figures give a real sense of optimism for the future.

I come back to the points that Edward Mountain and Alasdair Allan raised about the need for crofting law reform. I do not disagree with them. They are right, and that is why I committed to it—I still am. The crofting bill group has been continuing to work on and develop the proposals for that legislation. I hope that those members will welcome the bill when it is introduced.

I come back to Emma Harper's contribution about technology, and to Jenni Minto's focus on investment in innovation. In her contribution, Ms Minto spoke about the important role of monitor farms and the fact that there will now be one on Islay. We have supported such farms through our knowledge transfer and innovation fund. Last October, I announced seven new projects—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: Could the cabinet secretary could offer some clarity on the way in which crofters can benefit from carbon credits?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): And in conclusion, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: Sorry?

The Presiding Officer: If you could respond and begin to draw your remarks to a close. Thank you.

Mairi Gougeon: I reiterate to the member that we are continuing to develop all our policies in alignment with, and working with, our farmers and crofters to ensure that we get this right in a way that delivers for rural Scotland.

I want to emphasise just how important our networks are. The monitor farm network, the agriculture, biodiversity and climate change network and our integrating trees network are showcasing the best practice that is taking place right across Scotland. I encourage farmers and crofters to engage with those and to look at what is happening.

In conclusion—I am drawing to a close, Presiding Officer—change is a constant in response to which our farmers and crofters have always shown creativity and resilience. All that I have covered today, and all that I have committed towards supporting, should be seen in that context.

Our vision for agriculture is positive. It seeks to enable our producers to continue to thrive and to contribute to our nation's food security, and to support them—as we do already—in ways that allow them to better manage changing market expectations and production realities, and in ways that recognise that agriculture has a crucial part to play in tackling the climate and nature emergencies. Farming and producing food in ways that support climate outcomes and restore nature is not just a future—it is the only future.

Our approach to working with the industry will not change. It ensures that what we build together can be delivered, and I reiterate that I am clear that it ensures that there will be no cliff edges for our producers. Through the delivery of our new framework, and through continuing to work with our farmers and crofters who are the real experts, I am confident that we can deliver what I know all of us across the chamber want to see: a resilient, sustainable and profitable industry that is equipped to deal with the challenges that we face now, as well as those in the future.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. It is now time to move on to the next item of business.

Motion without Notice

16:38

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.38 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:38

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-08212.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08212, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on delivering the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture through the agricultural reform route map, 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.

16:38

Meeting suspended.

16:41

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-08212.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

For

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

White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08212.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, is: For 34, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08212, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on delivering the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture through the agricultural reform route map, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)

Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Camping

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-08212, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on delivering the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture through the agricultural reform route map, is: For 60, Against 30, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture, which outlines its aim to transform how it supports farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture, commits to supporting farmers and crofters to produce more of Scotland's food more sustainably to contribute to food security, and acknowledges the need for change to make sure that farming plays its part in cutting emissions, mitigating climate change and restoring and enhancing nature and biodiversity; agrees that there is no contradiction between high-quality food production and producing it in a way that delivers for climate and nature restoration; welcomes the recently-published Agricultural Reform Route Map, which sets out the phased implementation of the four-tier Future Support Framework in order to deliver the Vision and avoid any cliff edges; further welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to co-development, demonstrated through its consultation on a Scottish Agriculture Bill and its commitment to working with all partners committed to a vibrant and successful rural Scotland; recognises the uncertainty and limitations on planning, caused by Brexit, and calls upon the UK Government to fulfil its outstanding commitments to fully replace EU funds, and to engage collectively and meaningfully on future agriculture funding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07215, in the name of John Mason, on promoting the benefits of camping. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

The Parliament debated S6M-07215 in the name of John Mason—That the Parliament welcomes the *Outjoymnt Report* conducted by Liverpool John Moores University and Sheffield Hallam University; acknowledges that the report, commissioned by The Camping and Caravanning Club, surveyed nearly 11,000 people to assess their attitudes toward the benefits of camping; recognises that the report found that 97% of campers said happiness was their top motivator for going camping, while 48% of campers reported feeling happy almost every day, compared with 35% of non-campers; further recognises that the report found that 93% of people go camping to enjoy being in nature, while 93% of campers value camping for the benefits it has for their health and wellbeing; notes the reported concerns raised by communities around Scotland that short-term lets, such as Airbnb, are changing the make-up of communities and their economies; reflects that, given these considerations, along with what it sees as the need to provide incentives to support local economies following the COVID-19 pandemic, the promotion of camping and its benefits are important; believes that promoting camping is also important in cultivating, especially in children, an appreciation for the environment and a passion to protect it; notes the belief that citizens across Scotland, including in the Glasgow Shettleston constituency, should consider the benefits of camping breaks for both their own health and Scotland's local economy, and thanks Liverpool John Moores University and Sheffield Hallam University for what it considers this insightful report.

16:46

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thank all the MSPs who supported my motion and those who are attending or speaking today.

Personally, I get a better night's sleep in a tent than I do anywhere else. There is something about being outside and sleeping in the fresh air that is just great. Of course, camping—with a tent, at least—means that there are usually fewer distractions, such as television or computers, and fewer chores, such as Hoovering or ironing. I find that my pace of life slows down a lot, so camping really helps me to relax.

Camping can mean slightly different things to different people. Some would prefer a caravan or motorhome, while others are attracted by glamping. At the less luxurious end, wild camping means that people can go almost anywhere and get right away from other people. However, I prefer a campsite with decent toilets and showers.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): That is because you are old.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ignore the intervention from a sedentary position, Mr Mason.

John Mason: When I was younger, I tended just to turn up at a campsite, and there was usually a pitch available, but nowadays I tend to plan ahead and book in advance—for example, through the Camping and Caravanning Club, of which I am a member, or by using a website such as pitchup.com.

Camping need not be expensive. Of course, people can spend a fortune on an all-singing, all-dancing motorhome, but they can also get a pretty decent tent for a reasonable price. Camping is a really enjoyable experience for me and for many others, and, as the summer approaches, I am looking forward to a weekend away in May and perhaps a longer trip to Ireland in the summer.

When Sheffield Hallam University and Liverpool John Moores University came out with “The Outjoymment Report”, I discovered that I had scientific research to back up my subjective feelings. As I said, I am a member of the Camping and Caravanning Club, which commissioned the report. More than 10,000 people took part in the survey, which is a good number of people. The facts and figures in the report include the following: 97 per cent of respondents said that camping makes them happy; 93 per cent said that they enjoy being in nature; 48 per cent of campers reported feeling happy almost every day, compared with 35 per cent of non-campers; 44 per cent of campers said that they have optimal mental health, compared with 31 per cent of non-campers; and campers are less stressed than non-campers.

We should perhaps note at this point that the report’s definition of camping is pretty wide. It includes static caravans and motorhomes as well as tents, whether on a campsite or for wild camping. I do not want to get into all the technical detail of the universities’ study, but it used the Ryff scale of psychological wellbeing, which measures self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.

There are few better things in life than coming back to your tent after a day’s walking, visiting a museum or sightseeing and then sitting down in the sunshine, making a cup of tea, relaxing with a book and maybe, later, cooking a meal and having a beer.

I have stayed at many campsites over the years. Applecross is one of my favourites: it has fabulous views across to Raasay and Skye, great walking nearby and two excellent places to eat—the

Applecross Inn and the Walled Garden. Other sites that I have especially enjoyed include Wick, Ullapool, Laxdale on Lewis, Stranraer, Invergarry, Coll, Roy Bridge—which has the advantages of a railway station and two eating places—Stromness and Lerwick. Outside Scotland, I have enjoyed Keswick in the lake district, Guernsey, St David’s and Galway.

On the issue of connecting with nature, I had long hoped to see a corncrake, although they are incredibly elusive birds, even when they can be heard just a few feet away. I was sitting outside my tent on a gorgeous sunny day on Tiree, near the edge of a field, when along came a corncrake, nonchalantly walking past my tent. That great experience is etched in my memory.

I think that Scotland could improve on having campsites near our cities. Inverness is probably the exception, but Glasgow’s nearest campsite is probably at Strathclyde park, and public transport from there is not easy. I know that the council has considered having a campsite at Pollok park as a possibility, but that has not happened yet. In contrast, Dublin has a campsite on a bus route, which makes it easy for campers to access the city centre by public transport.

Making camping accessible for wheelchair users is also an issue. An article in today’s Independent Living newsletter highlights the challenges and lists 10 wheelchair-friendly camping destinations, one of which is in Scotland, at Loch Ness Shores.

I thank Scottish Land & Estates for its briefing, which makes the valid point that some areas face the problem of dirty camping. I know that Loch Lomond has suffered from that, and I echo SLS’s call for camping to be in line with the Scottish outdoor access code, the principles of which include respecting the interests of other people, caring for the environment and taking responsibility for one’s actions.

I accept that there can be the odd drop of rain, or a midge or two, when camping in Scotland, and I have had my tent almost torn apart around me in a storm, but such experiences do not happen often and have certainly not put me off the huge enjoyment of camping in a tent.

Fellow members whose committee is heading off to visit somewhere exotic, such as Nairn, Islay or Mull, should not automatically decide to stay in a hotel when they could take a tent along and enjoy camping while still eating with colleagues and attending meetings. I did that when I was a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, as Mr Mountain can testify. Sadly, the committees of which I am currently a member—the COVID-19 Recovery Committee and the

Finance and Public Administration Committee—do not seem to visit interesting places to camp.

I thank all those who have listened to my speech, who will have gathered that I am hugely enthusiastic about camping. My especial thanks go to all those who were involved in producing “The Outjoymment Report”.

I look forward to hearing the speeches that are to follow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mason. I look forward to putting your idea to the next meeting of the Conveners Group.

16:53

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I would be happy if the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee came to Islay, because it would mean that I could stay at home. I can vouch for the really good campsite that we have there.

I congratulate John Mason on securing this debate on the benefits and joys of camping, and I welcome “The Outjoymment Report”. I hope that members will give me some latitude to broaden my speech to the joys of caravanning as well as camping. I will approach my contribution from three angles: my memories of being a girl guide, my life as an island dweller, and my experience of enjoying many caravan holidays.

The anticipation of heading off for a week under canvas as part of the 6th St Andrews guides is one of my childhood memories, many of which flooded back as I prepared my speech. We were literally flooded once, when a thunderstorm hit our camp near Montrose, and we were evacuated in the middle of the night into the grand hall of a nearby stately home, which was, of course, haunted.

My memories of those camps include jungle breakfasts, orienteering in the Trossachs, cooking pancakes on the fire, cycling to Forfar, climbing trees, midnight feasts, lots of laughter, some tears, and being driven the wrong way round a roundabout in Stirling.

As well as the fun, there was useful learning about how to get on with people and how to cope with being away from home, as well as learning about nature and Scotland. On a practical level, we learned teamworking, which included ensuring that the tent was properly put up; wood-crafting skills, such as making tripods to balance basins on; and finding suitable welly pegs. We learned outdoor skills including map reading and compass reading. I have already mentioned orienteering—we got lost—and there were also nature skills to learn, such as how to recognise trees, flowers and birds. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the guides, so I can absolutely understand how the happiness

of being in nature and improvements in health and wellbeing are motivations for camping.

I am pleased to see that John Mason’s motion recognises the impact of Airbnbs in communities and the need to incentivise the provision of better infrastructure in areas that attract campers—a “welcome frustration”, as my Westminster colleague Brendan O’Hara has described them. One successful infrastructure model is on Tiree, where the community took action in 2010. Visiting campervans must now book an overnight pitch in advance, which is checked by a ranger on arrival. Tiree’s croft camping scheme allows individual crofters to allocate a piece of land to accommodate a maximum of three vehicles. That means that the machair and sand dune habitats, which host protected rare species as well as providing grazing, are no longer damaged.

If I may, I will make some small requests of campers and caravanners. Please be responsible. Take your litter home. Do not use public toilets to dispose of your chemical and grey water. Find the proper location. Do not pack your vans full of supermarket food—eat local and spread the benefits. If you are causing a queue of traffic, please use lay-bys or passing places to allow others to pass. Finally, please understand that Scotland’s wild camping rules do not apply to motorhomes.

Our close family friends had a campervan and we had a caravan, and at least twice a year we took to the road. Kirkcudbright, the lake district, Dornoch, Alyth and Killin were all destinations, and those trips were real highlights of our school holidays. We built gang huts, dammed rivers, toasted marshmallows, played Scrabble, climbed trees and made Angel Delight. Going to those places helped to make geography lessons come alive, allowing us to see misfit streams, corries and hanging valleys—and history lessons, too, when we visited Scottish castles and ruined cathedrals, or museums when it rained—which all added to our happiness, health, education and wellbeing.

This is where members need to use their imagination. Around 30 years ago, Matt, the cartoonist at *The Daily Telegraph*, did a series of cartoons titled “Matt gets a camper van”. It is framed in our friends’ home—my dad gave it to them as a present. There is one cartoon headed “Swiss Army Camper Van”, which shows all the mod cons that people can get in a campervan—a cooker, a bed, a toilet, a bath, a television and a seat—exploding from the van like the tools in a Swiss army knife. I would suggest a slight twist on that cartoon, with a new Swiss army tent, campervan or caravan. Instead of the mod cons, the tools would be emojis of trees, mountains,

castles, beaches and happy faces, representing all the joys and benefits of caravanning or camping.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Murdo Fraser, who joins us remotely.

16:58

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate John Mason on securing the debate. Like him, I read with interest “The Outjoymnt Report” from the Camping and Caravanning Club, which makes some excellent points. As John Mason and Jenni Minto are, I am a happy camper and have a list of very enjoyable family holidays that we have had in a tent, when our children were a little bit younger, in many parts of Scotland, including some places that have been mentioned, as well as places south of the border.

On one particularly memorable summer holiday we travelled the north coast 500 with a tent, camping along the route, which was great in terms of flexibility. We were blessed with extremely good weather. There are some excellent high-quality campsites along that route, which I thoroughly recommend to anyone. I say gently to Jenni Minto that I think it would be better for the people who live along that route if folk took their tents, rather than tow caravans along some of the roads. It is great to see that camping infrastructure in place.

I have also wild camped on various climbing trips in the west Highlands. It is an entirely different experience, having to carry all one’s kit, often for several miles. In the main, the trips have been enjoyable, although there have been ups and downs. I remember one particular trip to Fisherfield forest in Wester Ross to climb some Munros, when we were plagued with the most abominable midges that I have ever experienced. I still break out in a cold sweat thinking about that particular trip, because of my experience with those midges. John Mason said that one of the joys of camping in the wild is that there are few distractions. Perhaps Mr Mason has not experienced the west Highland midges in the way that I have: they were—believe me—a big distraction, and I remember getting not much sleep at all that night as a result.

I did not sign Mr Mason’s motion, although I agree with most of it. The one part that I object to is the mention of Airbnbs and short-term lets. In many parts of Scotland, provision of short-term let accommodation for visitors is a really important part of the economy. Although there are a few places in Scotland where there is competition between short-term let accommodation and accommodation for local people, there are many other parts—in particular, in more remote areas—where that is not the case, and provision of short-term led accommodation is a significant part of the

local economy that creates employment. We should not see it as an either/or situation.

Another issue, on which John Mason touched, is dirty camping, which is a phenomenon that has grown in the past few years. People dump their rubbish, leave their tents and human refuse behind and cause disturbance to locals. I led a members’ business debate on that issue three or four years ago. It has continued to be a major problem, although some councils have tried to tackle it head-on, including Perth and Kinross Council, with its ranger scheme. Dirty camping continues to be an issue, and I agree with what has been said about the need to tackle it.

We have the Scottish outdoor access code, which is now 20 years old, so it is probably time that we had another look at it. It is time to consider, in particular, whether the level of public education on access to the countryside and on the responsibilities of those who access it needs to be reinforced. Many people think that they can just turn up and do what they like, and do not realise that they are causing harm and damage to the environment and, potentially, disturbance to people in the neighbourhood.

I will mention one more issue briefly before I close. It is great to see new campsites being opened, but we need to look at our planning restrictions and consider whether they are perhaps too restrictive with regard to allowing land to be made available for small campsites. I was very taken with what Jenni Minto had to say about campsites being opened on the islands. Allowing a small campsite is a perfect example of farm diversification, so we need to look at how that can be enabled.

I thank John Mason once again for securing the debate. In the inimitable words of Sid James and Barbara Windsor, I encourage all members to carry on camping.

17:03

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank John Mason for securing the debate on a subject that is close to my heart.

The founder of modern camping was Thomas Hiram Holding. In 1853, Thomas travelled through the Highlands of Scotland with a canoe, and went on to write two books about his adventures. In 1901, he founded the first camping club in the world, which was called the Association of Cycle Campers, but it was not until after world war one, when Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the scout movement—a man whom I have spoken about many times in the chamber—became president of the Camping and Caravanning Club, that the establishment of camping organisations

was fostered in a number of western European countries.

Camping has been my passion from a very young age and has stayed with me into my adulthood. Anyone who knows me well will tell you that I can frequently be heard extolling the benefits of camping to anyone who will listen, while gently trying to persuade those who may be a bit hesitant to try it for themselves. I find that many people who have never been camping have preconceived ideas and, perhaps, misconceptions about what camping is and what to expect from the experience. For many, however, once they take their first steps, they never look back.

Albert Einstein said:

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

I could not agree more with Einstein’s statement. Camping provides a host of benefits for body and mind, including improved relationships, opportunities to learn and develop new skills, connection with nature, reduction of stress, increased physical fitness and—which is important, these days—unplugging and getting away from screens. The list is endless.

I am a lifelong member of the Scout Association who was introduced to the wonders of camping at a young age. These days, as a scout leader, I am privileged to be able to carry on. There is something special about someone’s first camp, and I have been privileged to be able to witness that moment for scores of young people every single year. It gives them the opportunity to try new things, to conquer their fears and to learn skills for life, as well as building their self-confidence and self-esteem. They spend their days being physically active and living together in an environment of co-operation. Respect for others is key in sharing responsibilities and resolving disagreements where they can find out at first hand the importance of communication.

Our annual summer camp in the Ettrick valley is an eye-opener for less experienced scouts. Despite their being told beforehand that there is no cell signal for miles around, it always amuses me when they arrive and the realisation hits home that there actually is no signal. Strangely, my office manager also enjoys it when I am away at Ettrick; I am not sure why. Watching kids take a break from television, phones, social media and the internet, while rediscovering their creative powers and engaging with the real world, real people, real activities, real adventures and real emotion is an absolute joy.

I would like to share an experience that I had at one of the camps that has stayed with me for many years. A young scout, who I will call Johnny, came to his first camp. He was 10 years old and

had a difficult background. He had not had many opportunities in life and was under the protection of social care. On his first afternoon, I looked across and saw Johnny standing at the edge of the field all alone and staring into the distance. I walked across to him and asked whether he was okay. He replied, “Yes—it’s just that I’ve never seen a real cow before.” I have never forgotten the look of happiness and contentment on his face at that moment, and I never will. He spent the rest of the week rolling about in the dirt, playing games with other boys and girls, and getting stuck into any and every task. The boy who returned home from that trip was far more confident and self-assured than the one who left home the week before.

Camping is a way of life that offers a sense of freedom and adventure. We are lucky to live in Scotland, a country that is brimming with natural beauty, with an array of majestic mountains, sweeping coastlines and stunning landscapes all on our doorsteps. For those who have not yet tried, it, why not give it a go? They might just end up loving it, as I do.

17:07

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I was prompted to take part in tonight’s debate when it was discussed at the meeting. I said that I would like to take part, and my good friend and colleague John Mason looked at me in disbelief. He did not say it, but the obvious insinuation was, “You? Camping?”

I put on the record the fact that I have never been glamping and have gone wild camping only infrequently, so I am perhaps a middle-of-the-road campsite camper. As a youngster, I took my dad’s old tent. Members might remember those canvas tents that let in water and weighed a tonne when they were wet. Like many other families, we went camping with friends every year, and I would like to note some of my recollections.

First was the pitching of the tent. I concede that I am the type of person who does not like to ask for directions, so members can imagine how I would feel about being given help with pitching tents. I was always aware of the silent eyes watching my method, particularly if the tent was as big as ours was. I could hear the tutting and sighing and, “I wouldn’t do it that way.” It is all so much easier now with the colour-coded poles.

On the site, I loved the sense of community. Our children made friends easily and the little gangs formed quickly. There appeared to be an unwritten rule that everyone watched out for everyone else’s children. There was also something about cooking outdoors that made the food taste so much better. The wine did, too, but it always resulted in

someone tripping over a guy rope on their way back from the toilet in the dark.

The simplicity of camping worked for me. All my life, I have been a voracious reader who can take up residence in a book and switch off. Very quickly, I found that so many of the possessions that I had were simply not needed. It is perfectly possible to have one set of crockery and cutlery; it is entirely possible to wear the same clothes for several days running and to go for a walk in your pyjamas. This quick, keenly priced and accessible route to freedom, and the peace and quiet and removal from the daily burdens of work, parenting and worry were always a gift. I have enjoyed Kenmore and various sites in East Lothian. I tend to veer away from the west coast because of the midgies—I think that we all have midgie stories.

Seriously, though, campsites provide accessible routes for tourists, too, and that is such an important sector for Scotland in bringing jobs and capital and, of course, promoting Scotland's international brand. It is estimated that about 14 million people visit Scotland each year, with tourism contributing about 5 per cent to our gross domestic product and employing around 7 per cent of Scotland's workforce. We know that the pandemic increased the number of staycations, but it also provided the opportunity for many Scots to see what a beautiful country they live in. The Scottish accommodation occupancy survey reports compare statistics of caravanners and campers, and show that, although touring pitch occupancy and whole park occupancy in 2022 were down from 2019, caravan pitch occupancy and tent pitch occupancy increased.

Following the pandemic, Brexit and the cost of living crisis, camping can offer a much more economically friendly way to those who are wishing to have a break, and the revenue that is generated stays in Scotland and in local communities.

Lastly, we should give some thought to the small and medium-sized enterprises that are providing camping facilities. The weather is seasonal, but risk management is not. Typical risks that need to be managed include weather events such as floods; infrastructure, such as septic tanks, needs to be maintained; and guests bring risks and their pets do, too. Cash flow and overheads are always a consideration, and that is all after considerable up-front costs. If we value our camping sector, we need to value the SMEs that provide the facilities. I know that I do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain. You have around four minutes, Mr Mountain.

17:12

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I fear that I will not take four minutes, Presiding Officer. I was inspired to stay for the debate in order to listen to John Mason talk about his camping experiences, and I was not disappointed because, of all the lovely places that he talked about waking up in, most were in the Highlands and Islands. What he said was entirely true. Committee business has provided a perfect opportunity to visit the Highlands and Islands, and I can vouch for the fact that, when he was on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, he always came in happy in the morning, even when he was on Mull and it had been pouring with rain. He did not look too bedraggled. I do not know whether he used the facilities that the rest of us used in the hotel, or whether he ate the breakfast. However, he was happy and we did not have to sit upwind of him, so it was all good.

My experience of camping came later in life. I missed out on the experience as a child, but for 12 years the Army gave me great experiences of camping, usually on the back of an armoured vehicle that was oily and smelly, but warm. I was taken all over the world, and I have some happy memories. At one stage, when I was in the deep bush in Uganda, I thought that I might end up sharing my camp bed with a hyena that thought that my bed was the appropriate place to be. I was not quite so keen on that. I have less than happy memories of being in Canada, which makes our midges look positively tame. We spent most of the final hours of daylight collecting cow poo, which we then burned and slept downwind of, because it was the only thing that kept the mosquitoes away. Those were happy times and I did enjoy camping. After that, I have to say that my camping has been limited to taking my children out to places. I tend to go earlier in the year before the midges come out. However, I have had great fun and have many happy memories.

I will pick up on one of the points that have been a theme through the debate. I live in the Highlands and have a farm. I am always glad to see campers out enjoying the countryside, because it is a place that I enjoy, but it is also a place that I and others work in, and where wildlife lives and survives. Therefore, it is important that, when people go camping, which I am delighted for them to do, they respect the animals and the other people who use the area.

It is also important, as Murdo Fraser said, to note that the Scottish outdoor access code, which was published in 2005, is in desperate need of review. I have been working on the minister in that regard, but he is less keen on the idea. I would like it to encourage camping on the understanding that people carry in and carry out, and that they do not

just camp on the edge of the road or in honeypots. It should be very clear that people should take away what they bring in and—not to put too fine a point on it—do not leave it in a bag hanging on a bush, as too many of us see in the countryside.

I would like to encourage camping. I am delighted that John Mason has brought this motion to the chamber for debate. I am annoyed at Murdo Fraser for stealing the punchline that I guess we all wondered whether we could use but doubted whether we would get away with: carry on camping. I will not use it. Instead, I will make one comment. Those people who have spent a night out around a campfire will always know that that is the best pace of life. It is very good around that campfire, and it generates memories that we will treasure for ever.

17:16

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, thank John Mason for securing the debate, although I leave to others the question of whether the statistics stand up to scrutiny.

My speech comes with a health warning. For me, the benefit of camping is to bring back sharp memories of the 90 per cent of my camping experiences that were determined by the elements—I say to John Mason that I am talking about less of a drop than a deluge. I will exemplify by describing two camping experiences, but there were others.

The first comes from when I was a child, when, on warm sunny days—yes, in childhood, there appeared to be some—we would plead with my mother to fetch two blankets, peg them to the washing line and pull them outwards to provide a makeshift tent. We would add a bit of carpet inside and nestle down with comics and juice, and we were in a world of our own.

The second example was when I was the girl guide patrol leader of the daffodils—can you imagine it, Presiding Officer?—and our troop went camping from Edinburgh to faraway North Berwick. We lugged with us sailors' kit bags—mine belonged to my Uncle Dod, who had been in the merchant navy, so it bore the ravages of time. It was heavy and awkward and entirely inappropriate, but it was my pride and joy. At our destination, we had to erect heavy-duty bell tents, which slept a patrol of eight or so, hammering the tent pegs in ourselves and then building from twigs and branches a rack for the centre to lift our kit bags free from the damp ground. Although I had a real groundsheet, I had no sleeping bag—few working folk had them—but, as part of my guide training, I had been taught how to overlap blankets

as a substitute. By the way, the overlapping unscrambled itself in the night, leaving me pretty chilled.

One night, complying with tradition, we had a midnight feast in the tent at 8 pm, as we could not wait for dark, let alone midnight. As we consumed smuggled cold baked beans washed down with Creamola foam—I will provide a glossary—we thought that we were living the high life. Ah, the simplicity of youth. We were allocated tasks in rotation. My patrol started on cooking breakfast, which it vaguely resembled, although the scrambled eggs were somewhat idiosyncratic. Another patrol was sent to dig latrines and so on—I say to Mr Mason that there were no mod cons for us.

However, soon after we completed our wee settlement, the skies opened and, over the next few days, the rain varied only in quality and quantity. Bell tents began to sag, as did our spirits. One touch of the canvas and water poured in. Even groundsheets lost their efficacy.

Finally, our guide leader announced that we had to leave the sinking ship—an appropriate term, given the water surrounding us. A few of us, including me, were handpicked to stay behind and sleep overnight in a local school hall and, the next day, loosen the guy ropes and let the tents blow dry in the predicted wind. That day, like the cavalry over the hill, came a troop of North Berwick boy scouts to rescue us and our equipment.

So it came to pass that I met my very first serious boyfriend, whose name—unluckily for him—is not lost in the mists of time. Where are you now, Colin Campbell? I hope that he is still alive and kicking. I was 14 and he was 18 and, from my perspective, he was a man. We had only one date after that. When we were strolling down Princes Street, my shoe—embarrassingly—fell off. That mortified me. However, that is another story. I got over that, but he was the first boyfriend of a selective few, so he was a big marker in my life and definitely a benefit of camping.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Grahame. There was a creative use of parliamentary privilege there.

17:20

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): I thank John Mason for bringing the motion to Parliament and helping to promote the benefits of camping, which the motion does in its own way.

It is interesting to note that only two parties are taking part in this debate. Three parties have decided that it is not worth their time to take part in a debate on the topic. I do not know whether that

says more about them or more about the two parties that are taking part.

The debate has certainly been hugely entertaining, and some very important and valid points have been made. We have had a tour of Scotland and further afield from Edward Mountain, quotes from “Carry On Camping” from Murdo Fraser, and the reality of “Carry On Camping” from Christine Grahame.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have a unique natural environment that can play a key part in improving the health of everyone in the country. It is important that we continue to encourage and support people to use that amazing resource to be more active and to spend more time outdoors to improve their physical and mental health. It is not just people’s physical and mental health that benefit from outdoor activities such as camping and getting closer to nature. Such activities can help with loneliness and other mental health issues.

In 2021, the Scottish Government launched the communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults. That has provided £36 million over two years to help to tackle social isolation and loneliness and the mental health inequalities that have been made worse by the pandemic and the cost crisis. That has benefited a diverse range of initiatives, including initiatives focused on nature, sport and exercise, social spaces, art and therapeutic approaches, with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

Camping must be done responsibly. Wild camping is part of Scotland’s world-leading rights of responsible access to land, as set out in the Scottish outdoor access code. It is important that we distinguish between true wild camping as defined in the code and the recent increase in what we might term congregational roadside camping in motorhomes or tents. Most people behave responsibly, of course, but we are aware of recent pressures that have been placed on rural communities by irresponsible behaviour from a small minority in respect of littering, human waste disposal, environmental damage, lighting fires and car parking. Jenni Minto highlighted that point very well in her contribution.

A key strand of our visitor management strategy work is marketing and awareness. That work aims to inform visitors and locals of their rights and responsibilities in the code. NatureScot’s radio campaign in August last year reached 1.3 million listeners across Scotland, and increased face-to-face interaction by Scotland’s ranger services makes among the largest differences. We will therefore again provide £3 million of funding in this financial year to take on more than 220 seasonal rangers. I was delighted to see the great work that they do on my visit to rural Perthshire last year.

There are countless educational benefits in encouraging our young people to engage with outdoor activities, nature and camping in a sustainable and responsible manner. David Torrance highlighted that very well in his contribution. For example, NatureScot has worked closely with Young Scot to develop new resources to promote the Scottish outdoor access code. With its help, they have produced a series of 12 short animations to help to engage and educate that target audience as effectively as possible.

On teaching the code in schools in particular, the curriculum for excellence provides teachers and other educators with a flexible framework that can be adapted to meet local needs, and learning for sustainability and outdoor learning are important cross-curricular themes.

The Scottish outdoor access code can therefore support learning and teaching in relevant areas. With support from Education Scotland and teacher groups as well as other outdoor learning providers, NatureScot has redesigned the Scottish outdoor access code education pack to create a more interactive online resource with clear and explicit links to the formal curriculum.

Promoting camping aligns with the Scottish Government’s national strategy for economic transformation and the Scottish tourism sector’s “Scotland Outlook 2030” priorities. That tourism strategy highlights as a priority “Our passionate people”—the sector employs 3,000 people across Scotland. Another priority is “Our thriving places”—camping is a great way for visitors to see at first hand our amazing natural beauty, and the third priority is “Our diverse businesses”, because camping is great for business, too. A 2019 report commissioned by the UK Caravan and Camping Alliance estimated that visitors to holiday parks and camp sites in Scotland spent more than £770 million in 2018. That spending and the supply chain activity and wage spending were estimated to support 14,000 full-time equivalent jobs across Scotland.

The strategy also highlights “Our memorable experiences”. Camping, be it on organised sites or wild camping in the Highlands and Islands, or down to Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders and all points in between, is a great way to see some breathtaking Scottish scenery and have some memorable encounters with our natural habitat, which is a point that Edward Mountain made. That can only be a good thing for Scottish tourism, too—positive word-of-mouth advertising from visitors who have had some great memorable experiences is the best advertising we can get.

The Scottish Government’s rural tourism infrastructure fund has played its part in the promotion of camping through several funding

awards. A number of our awards have included improvements to camping provision or facilities for campers. For example, the fund provided £201,000 for the provision of a campsite adjacent to Gigha ferry terminal for camping pitches as well as car parking with recycling and waste disposal units, along with toilet, shower and laundry facilities.

In addition, to help to relieve on-going visitor pressures, we provided £260,000 for infrastructure improvements at the Point of Ness camping and caravan site.

As minister for tourism, I very much welcome the findings of "The Outjoymment Report". The positive results can only be a good thing for Scotland's tourism economy. Subject to my still being the minister for tourism following the impending reshuffle, I will get the opportunity to see at first hand the benefits of camping when I visit a campsite next month, which has been organised by the trade association the British Holiday & Home Parks Association.

If members have not already been camping, I encourage as many of them as possible to give it a go—responsibly, of course. From the report, we know that 93 per cent of campers value camping for the benefits to their health and wellbeing. Therefore, my message is—I am sorry to say this, Deputy Presiding Officer—carry on camping.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I am sure that you will be welcome at that campsite whether you are the minister or not.

That concludes the debate, and I close this meeting.

Meeting closed at 17:27.

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