



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 2 May 2023

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 2 May 2023

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Megan Laird, who is a National Deaf Children's Society young changemaker.

**Megan Laird (National Deaf Children's Society Young Changemaker):** It is a great honour to lead time for reflection today, at the start of deaf awareness week. My name is Megan Laird. I am 14 years old and from Kennoway in Fife. I attend Levenmouth academy. I am deaf.

I was diagnosed as deaf at the age of eight and was given my hearing aid not long after. Well before that, my parents felt that there was something off with my hearing, but professionals told them that everything was normal. After all, I had passed my newborn hearing tests. When I was finally diagnosed, I was very lucky to have a fantastic audiologist. I also got the intensive speech therapy that I needed, which has allowed me to address the Scottish Parliament today.

Deaf awareness week is a time of celebration, but it is also a time to reflect on the support that deaf people should be getting by right.

I am one of 4,000 deaf children and young people in Scotland. I have been amazed by what my deaf peers have done despite the barriers that too many of them still face. However, statistics show that because I am deaf I am twice as likely to leave school with no qualifications. There is still a huge attainment gap. We are desperate for change.

People think that every deaf person uses British Sign Language, but because there is little provision to teach BSL in schools it often is not an option for us. Deaf young people like me might miss out on vital language skills because of that.

Through the National Deaf Children's Society, I learned about the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. I talked to my school about including BSL in the curriculum. My headteacher, Ms McFarlane, welcomed the idea. I cannot tell you what a huge turnaround that was. On my first day at high school, only a few teachers knew that I was deaf and how to support me. I now have a great teacher of the deaf. They have made sure that all staff in the school have deaf awareness

training. The equipment that I have the right to access is now available.

There are currently 40 per cent fewer teachers of the deaf in Scotland than there were 10 years ago. I am now getting the help that I need, but all deaf children should be getting that vital support, so let us make this deaf awareness week a catalyst for change.

I stand here as a young deaf Scottish individual. I ask all members of the Scottish Parliament to spend some time this week considering the needs of deaf young people like me. Although I am doing well now, my deafness was not recognised when it should have been. I have had to fight for the support that I need. Let us make rights real for every deaf child and young person.

## Business Motion

14:03

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item is consideration of business motion S6M-08792, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out changes to this week's business.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 2 May 2023—

after

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness

insert

*followed by* Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Standing Order Rule Changes

(b) Thursday 4 May 2023—

delete

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Net Zero and Just Transition

and insert

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Net Zero and Just Transition

delete

5.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.00 pm Decision Time—[George Adam.]

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** Before we move to the next item of business, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Honourable Mark Shelton MP, speaker of the House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania. [Applause.]

## Topical Question Time

14:04

### Grounding of MV Pentalina

1. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in light of the grounding of MV Pentalina and any impact on ferry services to and from Orkney. (S6T-01340)

**The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart):** First, I thank the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the emergency services and the crew for their work on Saturday evening. Ministers were kept informed throughout, and I met Orkney Islands Council on Sunday to discuss the situation further. NorthLink Ferries proactively contacted hauliers at the time of the incident to ensure that essential goods could be delivered to Orkney, and I thank the company for its actions.

We await detail from Pentland Ferries on the length of any outage. Transport Scotland met NorthLink over the weekend to discuss what increases in capacity may be needed on services to Orkney. We also await the outcome of any investigation and actions to prevent any reoccurrence, and we need those answers as soon as possible.

**Liam McArthur:** I echo the minister in paying tribute to the RNLI, the emergency services, the Pentalina captain and crew and the local community in St Margaret's Hope for the part that they played in responding to events on Saturday evening with calm professionalism and generosity. While it will take time for the full facts to emerge about what led the Pentalina to be grounded, it is obviously in the public interest for answers to be provided as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, as we enter the busiest time of the year, Orkney is set to be without ferry provision on a key route for passengers and freight over the coming weeks. Will the minister therefore agree to approve a temporary resumption of four return sailings on the Stromness to Scrabster route, as occurred when MV Alfred was out of service last year?

**Kevin Stewart:** As I said in my original answer, NorthLink Ferries has been proactive in reaching out to hauliers, and it is monitoring the capacity that is available across its routes. As Mr McArthur is well aware, since Monday, there have been three return trips daily from Scrabster to Stromness, and we will continue to engage with NorthLink ferries on other options that may be available. We will also keep in close contact with Orkney Islands Council about the issues.

Mr McArthur rightly pointed out that, during a previous incident, four return journeys were put in place between Scrabster and Stromness. We will continue to monitor the situation and, if necessary, we will consider moving towards a fourth return service to ensure that Orkney islanders are served well.

**Liam McArthur:** MV Pentalina was brought back into service as a result of the Scottish Government's desperation to plug gaps on the west coast by chartering MV Alfred. The situation provides yet another reminder of the lack of resilience in the overall ferry network across Scotland as a result of the Government's lack of investment in new ferries over the past 15 years. What specific action is the minister planning to take to ensure that islanders and island communities in Orkney and elsewhere in Scotland do not continue to pay the price for the Government's calamitous mishandling of ferry provision in this country?

**Kevin Stewart:** The Government is investing heavily in ferry services. As members will be aware, we have an order for six ferries for the network, which is important as we move forward.

I heard Mr McArthur on the radio yesterday talking about the Pentalina being rushed back into service; he suggested that there was pressure put on the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to do so. I put it on record that we are not aware of any pressure being put on the MCA—certainly not by Caledonian MacBrayne or by ministers, who would not be directly involved in such engagement. Given that the MCA's role is—rightly—in strictly enforcing maritime safety, it is doubtful that it would succumb to any pressures.

We need to wait and see what the investigation by the marine accident investigation branch comes up with. As I said previously, we want to get those answers as soon as possible. As members are aware, however, the marine accident investigation branch and the MCA are governed by the United Kingdom Government and reserved powers, and they do not answer to the Scottish ministers.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Will the minister be very clear on this? If MV Alfred cannot return, if the Pentalina is delayed in getting back into service, if there is not the option of a replacement vessel and if capacity cannot be increased adequately via NorthLink, where does that leave residents and businesses on Orkney as we enter the peak season? How will the Scottish Government compensate our islands for the loss of that vital route and its passenger and freight capacity?

**Kevin Stewart:** It is too early to say whether there is an immediate need to consider bringing Alfred back into the Orkney service. As I said on

Sunday to the leader of Orkney Islands Council, Councillor James Stockan, we will monitor what is happening with the three return services that are in place. If there is a requirement, we will look to move to the fourth service, which was previously put in place when there was a difficulty with MV Alfred.

The terms and conditions of the charter of MV Alfred are a commercial matter between CalMac and Pentland Ferries. There is no recall clause in the terms of the contract, which was a commercial decision made by Pentland Ferries as part of its discussions with CalMac. However, as I have said previously, I and the Government will continue to monitor all that as we go forward, to ensure that the Orkney Islands are well served.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** Does the minister regret describing the situation for islanders as “not brilliant”? Would it be more appropriate to say that it is disastrous?

**Kevin Stewart:** The antonym of brilliant is gloomy, and I recognise that for some folks the situation is gloomy, or not brilliant. I have spoken to folks in Orkney, and I recognise the difficulties that there are. That is why I spoke to Orkney Islands Council at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that we get it right for islanders as we move forward. I will continue that engagement with the council and others to ensure that we get it right, and I again pay tribute to NorthLink for its efforts in contacting hauliers very quickly to make sure that capacity was in place. We will monitor the situation and act accordingly.

### Juryless Trials

2. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported comments from the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association that its plans for juryless trials would be an affront to justice and that any proposed pilot could result in boycott action. (S6T-01344)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance):** I am disappointed that some criminal defence lawyers are not in agreement with some of the recommendations that flow from the review that was carried out by Lady Dorrian, Scotland's second most senior judge.

The European Court of Human Rights has explicitly ruled that a jury is not necessary to deliver a fair trial. Trials without juries are not undemocratic or inherently unfair. More than 80 per cent of criminal trials in Scotland are currently conducted without a jury.

There is overwhelming evidence that false beliefs and preconceptions influence jury decision making in cases of rape and attempted rape,

which, coupled with the significant and long-standing disparity on conviction rates in those cases, is a cause for concern. Therefore, a time-limited pilot of single-judge rape trials will enable us to gather objective evidence to inform debate on the issue and is entirely compatible with an accused's right to a fair trial.

We have of course worked closely with stakeholders, including the legal sector, on proposals and will continue to do so.

**Jamie Greene:** It is of course true that everyone wants to improve outcomes for victims of those horrific crimes, but the Government's proposals for juryless trials have resulted in a significant backlash from the judiciary. The cabinet secretary just mentioned the ECHR. She will be aware of the comments made by Lord Uist, a retired senator of the College of Justice. Today, he said that the pilot and its ministerial review are

"constitutionally repugnant and constitute a serious attack upon the independence of the judiciary."

He went on to say:

"A court with a limited life span working under such constraints could not in my view be considered an independent tribunal within the meaning of Article 6 of the ECHR."

The Faculty of Advocates described the proposal as "anti-democratic", and the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association made the very stark claim that

"No other civilised country dispenses with juries in such cases."

It will go as far as balloting its members to potentially boycott those trials. That makes a complete mockery of the pilot.

My fundamental question for the Government is this: what makes those people and organisations so wrong on the matter and the Government so right?

**Angela Constance:** We are at the very start of a parliamentary process in which the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill will be debated in detail and, I hope, scrutinised to the very highest standards. I am absolutely determined to have the highest standard of debate and scrutiny of those matters, in which we are focused on the substance. We need the people of Scotland, victims and complainers to be proud of the debate that we are about to embark on.

Recommendations are being put forward by the Government, but they come, of course, from significant deliberative recommendations of a cross-sector review led by Lady Dorrian, who recommended that we gather evidence to inform this debate so that we can move forward and we can establish whether, in its treatment of rape and serious sexual offences, we have a justice system

that is fair and balanced for all involved. Bearing in mind the evidence that we have on conviction rates and the prevalence of preconceptions, that seems to be a very legitimate inquiry to have.

It might also be of interest to members that there is no single approach to the use of juries in criminal cases in other comparable jurisdictions. For example, New Zealand and France have moved away from jury trials for particular sexual offences cases. There is a wealth of evidence out there that we need to look at and debate to inform our approach to do our best by women when they are at their most vulnerable, but also to ensure the integrity of the system for everybody involved.

**Jamie Greene:** I agree with much of what the cabinet secretary said, and I keep an open mind on the outcomes of the bill. However, we cannot ignore very serious and direct pieces of feedback from senior members of the judiciary.

Over the weekend, the cabinet secretary wrote in the media that the principal rationale for juryless trials is that

"There is overwhelming evidence that jurors are subject to preconceptions about rape."

If that is true, why would the answer to that simply be to remove juries altogether and not to educate them or improve the jury process? The Scottish Government has done very limited research into the issue, which has drawn much criticism. It also ignores other forms of research, including that by the University of London, which quizzed real jurors about the so-called myths and stereotypes around those crimes.

In advance of introducing legislation that would remove the accused person's fundamental right to a jury trial, will the Government commit to immediate and comprehensive research into jury attitudes in Scotland using the real-life testament of jurors who have tried people in rape cases so that any policy change is driven by evidence and not just by assumptions?

**Angela Constance:** It is important that we recognise that the existing evidence and views of victims and parts of the legal establishment do not in any way negate the need for other research and measures. Of course, Lady Dorrian made a number of recommendations that are already being taken forward by the judiciary, but the debate that we are having needs to progress. Some of the issues are long standing—we have debated them for around 40 years—and we now need to make progress for all involved, particularly victims. I think that all members agree that we need to improve the end-to-end justice journey for victims.

On the evidence, I point members to the policy memorandum, which quotes and examines a

range of evidence. We will, of course, have further discussions and debates about that. However, I point to paragraph 552 of the policy memorandum, which states, based on research from 2023:

“Research examining the existence and influence of rape myths is now vast and empirical evidence is reliable enough to conclude that widespread endorsement of rape mythology spans varied societies, cultures and distinct social groups.”

Members are perhaps also aware of work by Professor Fiona Leverick, professor of criminal law and criminal justice at the University of Glasgow, who states that

“there is overwhelming evidence that jurors take into the deliberation room false and prejudicial beliefs about what rape looks like and what genuine rape victims would do and that these beliefs affect attitudes and verdict choices in concrete cases.”

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take some supplementary questions. I will require more concise responses, cabinet secretary.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Lady Dorrian’s review acknowledged several benefits that could be achieved through single-judge trials, including reducing the impact of rape myths. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the review that reducing the impact of rape myths is a very important factor in removing stigma and ensuring a fair trial for survivors?

**Angela Constance:** Removing the impact of rape myths on jury decision making is vital to ensuring that we have a justice system that is fair to both complainer and accused. As I referred to earlier, the evidence shows clearly that that balance is not being achieved at present, due to the impact of cultural misconceptions, and indeed the stigma that Ms Nicoll refers to. Conducting a time-limited pilot therefore provides us all with an opportunity to explore whether single-judge trials can mitigate the impact of jury decision making in cases of rape and attempted rape.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Can I register my concern regarding juryless trials, let alone a pilot in rape cases? For example, in the right to appeal, let alone the appeal itself, a judge-only conviction, compared to conviction by a jury, raises serious issues of parity of right to justice.

**Angela Constance:** Perhaps it would be helpful to the member if I quoted again from Lady Dorrian’s review. She said:

“Consideration should be given to developing a time-limited pilot of single judge rape trials to ascertain their effectiveness and how they are perceived by complainers, accused and lawyers, and to enable the issues to be assessed in a practical rather than a theoretical way.”

I would say to Ms Grahame that, as we proceed with the detailed work that has already commenced, a number of recommendations have already been made about case criteria, objectives and evaluation. However, it was also recommended that we do further work in and around those matters, because we need to ensure the integrity of the system and that, in matters of appeal, and for fairness to both victim and accused, we get the right balance between being bold and protecting the integrity of our system at all times.

## Social Isolation and Loneliness

### The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08758, in the name of Emma Roddick, on tackling social isolation and loneliness.

14:23

**The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick):** I am delighted to open this debate on social isolation and loneliness. I do not want to pre-empt anyone's contribution, but it is safe to say that there is quite a lot of agreement across the chamber on the importance of tackling social isolation and loneliness.

It can be hard to admit to being lonely. Humans are generally social creatures, and it can feel like some kind of failure for someone to admit that they do not have the connections that they would like to have or that they think that others have. It is important to recognise that there is often a difference between what we think others have and what their real experience is. That is particularly the case with the growth of social media and people's ability effectively to present their lives in a way that is very different from reality—showing only the smiles with friends, and not the time that they spend lonely, scrolling, and looking at other people's smiles with friends.

It is so important that we tackle the stigma around social isolation and loneliness, so I welcome this debate.

I want to take a little time to remind members of the context in which our work on social isolation and loneliness has developed. I will then outline what the Scottish Government is doing to tackle this important issue.

In 2018, we were proud to be one of the first countries to introduce a strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and for bringing stronger social connections. As part of the strategy, we set up an advisory group of expert and trusted stakeholder organisations working daily with people who live with the experiences of social isolation and loneliness. The group's remit was to build a cross-sectoral approach, develop a plan to implement the strategy, advise the Scottish Government and share good practice.

The group helped us define what we mean by social isolation. For the purpose of the debate, that definition is worth repeating here today:

"Social isolation refers to when an individual has an objective lack of social relationships (in terms of quality and/or quantity) at individual group, community and societal levels."

As for our definition of loneliness, that is

"a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have."

The strategy also sets out a clear vision for the kind of Scotland that we want to see, where community connections are increased and no one is excluded from participating in society for any reason. Our vision states:

"We want a Scotland where individuals and communities are more connected"

and where everyone can

"develop meaningful relationships regardless of age, status, circumstances or identity."

I will shortly outline how we are implementing that vision, and I look forward to hearing from all parties about work that they are aware of that tackles social isolation and, of course, to listening to how we build on our collective efforts that we have delivered so far.

Before I do that, it is important to recognise the significant impact of the Covid pandemic on social isolation and loneliness. Throughout the pandemic, when Governments round the world imposed physical distancing to save lives, social isolation and loneliness rocketed. People lost casual connections, close support and even loved ones to the virus.

At the height of the pandemic, around half the population reported feeling lonely at some point in the previous week. Loneliness is not just an inconvenience, as research has shown that chronic loneliness—that is, feeling lonely most or all the time—is bad for our mental health and bad for our physical health.

Loneliness and social isolation have been linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, dementia, anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide. Loneliness is a public health issue.

More than that, loneliness is also an issue of inequality. We know that loneliness does not affect everyone equally across Scotland. Data that the Scottish Government and others gathered during the pandemic remind us that some people are more at risk from the damaging effects of loneliness than others. Often, those are the people most at risk of experiencing other disadvantage.

Although loneliness is a significant problem for older people, young people experience high rates of loneliness, despite being almost constantly connected to the world through social media. Disabled people experienced the highest rates of loneliness during the restrictions brought about by the Covid pandemic, and we have heard from them that the feeling of being disconnected from family and friends has persisted well beyond lockdown.

Research from Carers UK suggests that as many as eight out of 10 carers have felt lonely or isolated as a result of looking after a loved one. People who have low incomes have also reported more persistent loneliness. It is not difficult to understand why, and it is not difficult to imagine the impact that the cost crisis is now having.

Research by the British Red Cross last December showed that 81 per cent of Scottish people agreed that the increased cost of living will make people lonelier. Just last week, Carnegie UK published a report “The long shadow of the cost of living emergency”, with the key message that that emergency is hurting our ability to do the things that are important to us, such as visiting friends or family, which is resulting in increased loneliness and social isolation.

As Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees with portfolio responsibility for tackling inequalities and advancing human rights and connected communities, I recognise the challenge that the unwanted experience of loneliness and social isolation presents us with. I mentioned earlier that it is a public health issue. Left unaddressed, it means poorer quality lives for the people affected and greater demand on our health and social care resources. When we think about a preventative approach to public health, it seems to me that tackling social isolation and loneliness is a key part of that jigsaw.

In our 2021 manifesto and our subsequent programme for government, we made a commitment to further develop our work to tackle social isolation and loneliness by setting up a loneliness fund and developing a new delivery plan for our strategy. While that work was under way, we provided £1 million in emergency short-term funding in August 2021 and a further £1 million in January 2023. The short-term funding boosted the work of organisations working to tackle social isolation and loneliness, whose services were facing unprecedented demand, first, because of the Covid pandemic and, latterly, because of the cost crisis over the winter months.

I will give a flavour of what the most recent winter funding package has enabled to happen. The winter funding has helped Age Scotland to support community groups to keep their doors open for older people, it has helped Home-Start Scotland to provide family group activities to help young isolated families, and it has helped faith organisations to provide warm spaces and warm meals over the festive period. All those activities have not only contributed to mitigating the impact of the cost of living crisis but helped people to come together and interact and to make and maintain the vital social connections that we all need.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** The Government also committed to providing £10 million of funding over the five years of this parliamentary session. Having looked at the Government’s announcements, I have been able to find commitments for only about £5 million of funding over this parliamentary session. Is the Government still committed to providing £10 million to address social isolation and loneliness?

**Emma Roddick:** The £10 million as a whole had to be looked at during the spending review. I point out that the £3.8 million to which I referred is to be spread across three years in order to give organisations confidence in their funding over a longer period, which is what the Scottish Government was asked to do. The funding is certainly not small, but other areas of the portfolio had to be reprioritised.

**Miles Briggs:** Is the Scottish Government therefore saying that only £5 million, not £10 million, will be delivered over the course of this parliamentary session?

**Emma Roddick:** I will set out some of the other spends shortly. Of course, it is not just £6 million that will be spent on tackling social isolation and loneliness. I hope to provide clarification later in my contribution, and I can write to Miles Briggs with further detail if that would be helpful.

Following the funding that I mentioned, I am delighted to say that, on 8 March, my predecessor, Christina McKelvie, launched a new delivery plan and a three-year social isolation and loneliness fund, which fulfilled our manifesto promise and programme for government commitment. The delivery plan is called “Recovering our Connections” and builds on our original strategy by outlining how we will take work forward over the next three years.

Our priorities remain the same. We want to empower communities, build a sense of shared ownership, tackle stigma, provide opportunities and support an infrastructure that fosters connections. Those are, of course, shared responsibilities. The Scottish Government cannot tackle social isolation and loneliness in a bubble, so we are committed to building shared ownership across the public, private and third sectors.

Our partners in the social isolation and loneliness advisory group are key to our ambitions to provide collective leadership in the area, so we will continue to work with the advisory group, whose input and advice will be invaluable in ensuring that the plan is implemented over the remaining life of this parliamentary session.

The response to the launch of the social isolation and loneliness fund has been incredible, with more than 1,300 expressions of interest having been received. That highlights the pressing

need for the work and the passion, commitment and creativity of the organisations that work to tackle social isolation and loneliness in our communities every day. Fundamentally, this is all about communities and the links that we make within and between them. As the First Minister outlined in his policy prospectus, the Government's missions are centred around equality, opportunity and community.

Tackling social isolation and loneliness does not start and end with the programme for government commitment that I spoke about a moment ago. A huge range of work is being done across the Scottish Government that will have a positive impact on people's ability to make and maintain connections with one another. From the volunteering action plan and 20-minute neighbourhoods to the child poverty strategy and tackling the digital divide, a wealth of actions will be taken over the next three years.

Our flagship digital inclusion programme, connecting Scotland, ensured that those who were digitally excluded had the means, confidence and support to engage with digital services during the pandemic. The programme, which delivered 60,000 devices and provided an internet connection for two years, could not have been achieved without the support from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and other third sector public organisations.

The evaluation of the connecting Scotland programme validates the programme and shows that it provided a lifeline to the people of Scotland. Recipients told us what it means to be online and to be able to stay in touch with friends and family, and highlighted the access that they then had to vital information and services. All that combined to preserve their mental health and wellbeing when face-to-face services had all but disappeared.

With the current cost of living crisis, getting online and staying connected are just as important as they were during the pandemic. The digital divide is more significant than ever. Those who are online can access services, savings and opportunities that are denied to those who are digitally excluded. I am therefore delighted to tell members that the new connecting Scotland programme will be launched soon with a more sustainable and inclusive approach. More information will be available shortly.

To take another part of my portfolio as an example, Scotland has a long history of welcoming people of all nationalities and faiths, including those seeking refuge and asylum from war and persecution. Our approach to supporting asylum seekers and refugees living in Scotland is set out in "New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-2022", which sets out a vision for a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers can

rebuild their lives from the day they arrive, and where we remain committed to supporting their integration into our communities and providing the safety and security that they need as they begin to rebuild their lives.

Yet another example, this time from health and social care, is the communities mental health and wellbeing fund. Just last week, the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care announced a further £15 million to meet the demand for local grass-roots mental health and wellbeing projects in 2023-24. That is a total investment of £51 million over three years. The communities mental health and wellbeing fund supports grass-roots community groups in building resilience and tackling social isolation, loneliness and mental health inequalities, which have been made worse by the pandemic and most recently, the cost crisis.

In the first two years, approximately 3,300 grants were made to a wide range of grass-roots community projects, including those based around peer support, physical activity, arts and crafts, social interaction and befriending, with a strong emphasis on the key themes of prevention and early intervention. The fund has a particular focus on social isolation and loneliness, with 1,026 projects funded on that topic in year 1. The three-year funding will make a big difference to communities across Scotland, enabling them to build on the examples of good practice that have been supported so far and providing them with further opportunities to reconnect, revitalise and promote good mental health and early intervention for those in distress.

There are plenty more examples that I could give, but I know that members will be keen to provide their own contributions and perspectives, just as I am keen to hear them. I will end by saying that this is an incredibly positive and exciting time for me to become involved in this area of work, and I look forward to chairing my first meeting of the social isolation and loneliness advisory group in June. I know that my predecessor very much enjoyed getting out and about to learn about this area of work and to meet the fantastic organisations that are making life better and more connected for the people of Scotland, and I fully intend to do the same.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any age or stage of life, but that not everyone is affected equally; acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic meant that more people experienced social isolation, and that this was disproportionately felt by disabled people, younger people and single-person households; recognises the action taken by the Scottish Government since its strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness was published in 2018, including working with young families that are facing

adversity, stigma and exclusion, supporting disabled people, carers and grassroots projects to ensure that communities can make a difference on their own terms; believes that preventative action is vital to ensure that the negative mental health consequences are addressed; welcomes the investment that the Scottish Government is making through the three-year, £3.8 million Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund, which will create opportunities for people to connect with one another in Scotland's communities; commends the work of organisations and communities to tackle this issue, and recognises that tackling this public health issue is a collective responsibility and requires a shared commitment across the public, private and third sectors.

17:38

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The problems that are associated with poor mental health have become a regular part of the wider public health debate, and rightly so. The loneliness that the pandemic created in many groups, which today's motion speaks about, is well documented. As such, I welcome the time that has been set aside today to debate the risks of social isolation and loneliness, and how we should best tackle those as we go forward.

As my party's shadow spokesperson for older people, I will begin by speaking about the particular challenges that loneliness poses for that group. Loneliness is an issue that affects the lives and wellbeing of thousands of older people across Scotland. Research by Age Scotland found that nearly 220,000 people aged over 50 in Scotland feel lonely either all or most of the time. Perhaps the most telling statistic is that, in every street, there is one person of pensionable age who feels chronically lonely at all times. That is quite a damning statistic.

We know how much loneliness can damage older people's quality of life. There is clear evidence that loneliness in older people increases their risk of other conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, anxiety and depression. However, there are also links to dementia in the older generation. Research from Harvard has highlighted that lonely people aged between 60 and 79 are three times more likely to develop dementia than those in other situations.

Although loneliness can restrict individuals from improving their health, there is a real need to address it when it comes to physical and mental health. In Scotland, there is a significant gap between healthy life expectancy and total life expectancy—a difference of nearly 20 years for women and 16 for men. As declining physical health makes it more difficult to create and maintain relationships, loneliness can often have consequences for health conditions that people develop. That means that individuals need to access healthcare but, if there are delays in access, that can also cause many issues for them,

as it can play an important role in tackling loneliness and isolation.

There is a clear link between older people living longer lives and living healthier lives. If they do not have connection and there is a break in individuals' support and care, it has an impact on their wellbeing. There is no question but that the record waiting times in the national health service are an issue for everyone in Government. Older people in particular are suffering and do not have the guarantee that their support will be available. We need to ensure that it becomes a reality.

Scotland has a new Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care. I suggest that we need to focus on the NHS recovery part of his remit. We need to talk about the recovery because that approach will support many older people. It is time to scrap the previous NHS recovery plan and put in place a new one that will take control and tackle some of the situations that we find ourselves in.

Community groups also play an important part in the support networks that are available to older people. They are a great way of combating loneliness. I pay tribute to the many organisations that work tirelessly in that sector, are leading it and do much to combat loneliness for many individuals. However, long-term social isolation is becoming a major issue. The work that community groups and the Government are doing identifies needs, but there are still gaps and they require to be filled. In fact, it is estimated that around 200,000 older people in Scotland rely on some form of social group or club for company.

That is why I welcome the additional funding that the minister spoke about and that the Scottish Government is providing. There is no doubt that more needs to be put into that sector because it requires support. The funding will keep the doors open for many organisations. By doing that, it supports many individuals in our communities. We know that many community groups are struggling financially. They have told us time and again that more is required because, as the population ages, they need more and more. Age Scotland has told us that more than 30 community groups are struggling at present. As we have heard, the cost of living crisis has an impact on whether those organisations can maintain and sustain their work and become sustainable for the future.

We have also heard about the gaps that appear within the market. The third sector, our council support services and the Government are working together, but there are areas that still require more support. Therefore, I would welcome assurances from the Scottish Government and the minister that protecting those community groups will be a priority going forward because it is one of the

biggest ways of managing the strategy for tackling loneliness and isolation.

I acknowledge that the Government has given general assurances but, as I said in Christine Grahame's recent members' business debate, when the First Minister set out his priorities for the Scottish Government, he did not make any specific mention of that. It was a gap.

I have heard what the minister has said today, but I still believe that the First Minister should be looking at our ageing population and thinking about what we can do. We have talked about crossovers between portfolios, which does happen, but there should be some real priorities from the Scottish Government with regard to where we see that sitting.

As my amendment points out, it is important that the Scottish Government studies what is happening to our older population, but also that it acknowledges that loneliness and isolation also affect younger people. We have talked about loneliness in all parts of our society and it is important that we do that. For example, research from the Higher Education Policy Institute has found that one in four students are lonely either most or all of the time. That figure should set alarm bells ringing for us that young people who are students are in that situation.

In 2018, £20 million of funding was put in place for around 80 counsellor positions at Scottish colleges. I welcomed that, but the Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee found that the targeted counselling funding was not getting to all the individuals that it should. The removal of that funding means that some colleges are no longer able to fund some of that counselling, which becomes a major issue when they are trying to do that.

It is time that the Scottish Government listened to the calls from Mental Health Foundation Scotland and Colleges Scotland, and from the 21 college principals who I believe wrote to the Government and co-signed a letter about the issue and the problems that they see coming down the track when dealing with younger individuals.

If the funding is necessary, it should be provided. We know that colleges and universities are well placed to address mental health issues among their students, but they need support to ensure that that takes place. The motion talks about tackling loneliness and isolation as a shared responsibility. I believe that we need to share that responsibility because it brings together the whole idea of what we are trying to achieve.

It is no secret that the years of the pandemic were particularly damaging to many individuals, both young and old, but the younger people found it quite phenomenal. Research by the Mental

Health Foundation Scotland has found that 50 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds experienced what is known as "lockdown loneliness". They spent their time at home not doing things. Yes, there was social media, but that does not always support them to move forward.

The pandemic had a massive impact and it should be highlighted that individuals are still struggling with its effects. We talk about 200,000 people in Scotland who are suffering through long Covid, which has had a massive impact on individuals' wellbeing. Many of those individuals are finding themselves cut off from society because of its impact. We have talked about having dedicated, specialist services to help those suffering from long Covid and that needs to be addressed. The social isolation that many of those individuals experience will increase because we do not have that facility, so we must not become complacent.

I have already spoken about the battle to ensure that responsibility is shared and that the Government plays its part, along with the voluntary and third sectors, because all of that will help to ensure that we are all doing the best that we can. Going forward, the job of the Government must be to further raise awareness of the dangers of loneliness and isolation in young people and in older people. My amendment talks about the introduction of a national awareness campaign on the issue. If today's debate should demonstrate anything, it is that that kind of campaign is needed more than ever and needed today.

I know that a lot of good work is going on and I acknowledge that, but there are still gaps in the process and areas that we should take on board. We should use the voluntary sector and the third sector because they are experts in the field. The Government should take that on board as well. I know that the Government supports a number of organisations and that they support the Government, but much more could be done. We can also learn from people in other locations about how they have tackled some of the problems, because we are all suffering in very much the same way.

I look forward to hearing the debate and acknowledge the work that the Scottish Government is doing, but I will still hold it to account with regard to the way that it goes forward and the things that it does.

I move amendment S6M-08758.1, to insert at end:

“, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that its strategy for tackling isolation focusses on increasing awareness of loneliness, particularly among young people and older people, connecting communities, implementing a national awareness campaign on loneliness and isolation, and supporting innovation.”

14:49

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I am pleased to open this important debate on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. The Government motion is right to recognise the impact of the Covid pandemic on social isolation and I agree with much of the minister’s contribution.

It is undoubtedly the case that, by its nature, the pandemic exacerbated social isolation as people practised physical distancing, limiting their social interactions to those within their own household bubbles. It can sometimes be hard to recall those days, which were, of course, only a few years ago and impacted us all in such a profound way.

The Scottish Government took an important step when it published its strategy on social isolation and loneliness in 2018, but it is frustrating that, five years later, we are still debating its implementation rather than examining its impact. I understand that the implementation of the strategy was delayed by the pandemic, but it is needed now more than ever, which is why I welcome the publication of the delivery plan and the minister’s commitment to that in her opening remarks.

Throughout the pandemic, we were acutely aware of the impact of social isolation and loneliness. There was a concerted focus on stopping people feeling disconnected, isolated or lonely. However, at the reopening of our society, the epidemic of loneliness did not end with the end of the restrictions. In the latter days of the pandemic, as we started to think about our Covid recovery, the political discourse was infused with hope and it focused on building back better and how to establish a better new normal. However, the British Red Cross found that, in rebuilding after the pandemic, two in three Scots agreed that tackling loneliness should be a priority for the Government.

The pandemic revealed everyone’s vulnerability to loneliness. New research from the British Red Cross found that 37 per cent of people in Scotland feel lonely always, often or some of the time. As I have said already, for some, the pandemic exacerbated an underlying sense of isolation. For many others, it was people’s first or perhaps most profound experience of a despairing sense of loneliness.

It is concerning that there remains a persistent stigma around feelings of loneliness, with the Mental Health Foundation finding that 39 per cent of adults in Scotland would never admit to feeling lonely. People’s loneliness is being compounded by silence, with too many not able to access the support that they need because they feel too embarrassed or ashamed to speak out. It is therefore right—and I think that there is consensus

around this in Parliament today—that we must treat loneliness as a public health issue.

Loneliness is more than feeling isolated or disconnected. It has a profound impact on our general health and mortality. For example, the National Institute on Aging has estimated that social isolation and loneliness can shorten someone’s life expectancy by up to 15 years, with loneliness increasing the risk of stroke and heart disease by around 30 per cent.

During the Easter recess, I took the opportunity to visit some projects in my region that are seeking to reduce social isolation in the community. I had the great pleasure of visiting a local knit and natter group in Giffnock library. The group has helped local people to reconnect and reintegrate into society as they come out of the pandemic. It is helping a range of people who are still dealing with the effects of long Covid and those who are suffering from residual social anxiety, as well as helping those who have moved to a new area during the pandemic and have struggled to meet new people to integrate into the wider community. The knitting is secondary to the nattering, which was just as well, given my lack of ability with the needles, but the importance of the group is rooted in its ability to bring people together and provide them with their own space to make social connections, and to engage in general chit-chat, which is so important in people’s everyday lives. It was a privilege to listen to the many members of the group explain the profound impact of dealing with their feelings of isolation and doing so in an informal way. Many of them also told me about the improvements that they have seen in their mental health as a result.

That group might be an example in one town, but I know that there are groups like it across Scotland and I am sure that we will hear about many examples of that from across the chamber today. Such groups are helping people to rebuild their confidence, tackle their loneliness and create new friendships. Those are the types of intervention that we need to deal with this endemic loneliness.

Of course we need big bold action to address these issues, but that does not mean that all resources should be targeted towards centralised or national campaigns. We need strong support for local initiatives that are rooted in communities and which reflect the needs of specific communities around the country. Any initiative to tackle social isolation and loneliness must be rooted in removing all the barriers that hinder social interaction, and that must be holistic in its nature. For example, when looking for a location in the community, we must consider whether the venue is accessible, affordable or free, warm and easy to

travel to on foot or by public transport as well as by car.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Paul O’Kane is talking about how we address social isolation. Does he think that there should be specific consideration for rural versus urban areas, which might mean that we do stuff differently?

**Paul O’Kane:** Like me, Emma Harper represents a community with both rural and town settings. Hers is perhaps a little more rural than mine in the west, but I think that we can both see the importance of tailoring our approaches for those communities where isolation manifests itself in different ways. Getting someone into a town or village setting can be quite challenging in itself. We need to look at particular needs and work with partners across the third sector and local government to do that.

In our communities, the role of the voluntary sector is critical in the delivery of services. Organisations are facing immense financial pressure, with the SCVO finding that more than 90 per cent of organisations have reported increased costs since August 2022. In tandem with rising costs, the third sector has experienced a significant increase in demand for services. In that respect, organisations are often operating with one hand tied behind their back: they are being asked to provide more support with less resource.

I think that that is why the SCVO has called for a new fair funding deal from the Scottish Government. Such a deal would mean longer-term funding of three years or more and sustainable funding that includes inflation-based uplifts, and it would allow for staff to be paid at least the real living wage. It would also mean more flexible core funding, which would allow organisations to plan more effectively and with greater security.

Our third sector needs greater stability, rather than being limited by continuous cycles of trying to secure short-term funding. The instability that is caused by short-term funding cycles is bad for the third sector, which is unable to properly plan for the medium to long term, and it is bad for communities, who benefit so much from the vital work of third sector organisations that are the life-blood of communities.

The £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund is, of course, welcome. However, having time-limited funds is not always helpful in addressing longer-term issues and the unsustainability that I have just spoken about. That has been part of the voluntary sector’s experience for a good long while; certainly, when I worked in the voluntary sector after leaving university in the early 2010s, we were discussing such issues. We have not made a huge amount of progress in

dealing with three-year funding cycles and the associated short-termism.

Let me be clear: pressures are being compounded by decisions taken over the past 16 years that have chipped away at funding not only for the third sector but for local government—we have seen local authority budgets reduced and services cut.

I am conscious of time, Presiding Officer, so I will begin to draw my remarks to a conclusion. Scottish Labour supports the Government’s efforts to address social isolation and loneliness, but it is time to deliver on the 2018 pledge and recognise that the scale of the challenge is now larger and more significant, impacting a wider demographic of the population than prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is time to deliver on a commitment of building back better, which means recognising that, in the aftermath of the pandemic, we are facing endemic loneliness. It is a crucial public health issue, and it is time to start approaching it with the resources and urgency that reflect that, in order to give sustainability to the organisations that can make the most difference in our local communities.

I move amendment S6M-08758.2, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“acknowledges the investment that the Scottish Government is making through the three-year, £3.8 million Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund, which will create opportunities for people to connect with one another in Scotland’s communities; commends the work of organisations and communities to tackle this issue; recognises that tackling this public health issue is a collective responsibility and requires a shared commitment across the public, private and third sectors; notes that precarious funding risks the third sector’s contribution and ability to deliver vital services for people and communities across Scotland; further notes that this can lead to disconnects between national policy and the implementation of policy at the local level, and understands that a long-term, flexible, sustainable, and accessible approach to funding is central to a sustainable voluntary sector, which can deliver measurable impacts on loneliness and isolation in Scotland.”

**The Presiding Officer:** Members will wish to know that there is time available, so, if they take interventions, time will be given back.

14:58

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I am quietly hopeful that the new minister has great potential. Her background and the authenticity with which she speaks in the chamber will serve her well as a minister. That does not mean that I will always agree with her, but she has a huge amount of potential, and I look forward to many more of her contributions.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, more than a quarter of us in Scotland felt lonely

over some time during the previous month. We know that there is significant stigma around loneliness, with about half of Scots saying that they would hide feelings of loneliness from other people. Therefore, our first important task is to increase the amount of discussion about loneliness among the public. It is only through discussion that we will manage to shake that stigma. That discussion has already started and this debate is, in part, about that. Loneliness was also the theme of last year's mental health awareness week and I thank all the organisations that were involved in making that such a success, including the Mental Health Foundation, Age UK, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and various others.

I am sure that we will all pick out different groups to highlight this afternoon. The minister and others have done so already and I will do the same. Although I am going to pick out some individual groups, loneliness affects every group in society and can catch anyone at any time, so it is important that we have an all-encompassing strategy to address the needs of all groups.

Public awareness is vital, but we also need action to address the underlying causes that are associated with loneliness. Loneliness is not necessarily about the time that one spends alone but rather occurs when there is a mismatch between what people want and the meaningful connections that are provided for, or available to, them.

Loneliness can affect anyone at any age and, contrary to popular belief, is particularly prevalent in young people. According to the Mental Health Foundation, four in 10 18 to 24-year-olds experienced loneliness during the pandemic, a figure that was higher than for any other age group surveyed. Young people often just do not know who to turn to. Sadly, a quarter of young people chose not to access support during lockdown because they felt that they did not deserve it. We have heard that from older people who do not want to burden others, but we might not imagine that young people would be inflicted with that feeling at such an early age.

**Paul O'Kane:** Willie Rennie makes an excellent point about the spread of ages at which loneliness can affect people. Does he agree that social media often compounds the sense of loneliness for younger people? We might expect social media to be a way of connecting young people, but many young people feel isolated because of what they see on social media or what they are expected to do in that space.

**Willie Rennie:** Social media causes enormous pressure. We have seen that for ourselves. The feeling of inadequacy and of being not quite as good as the other people you see on social media

certainly contributes to the loneliness that many young people feel. The member makes a valid point.

Young people need enriching activities that provide a social network, enjoyment and a sense of purpose. Those opportunities are all too scarce nowadays, which is why I am very excited about a Liberal Democrat policy called the holiday fun fund. It should be available for young people to access all year round and would improve their opportunities. I am all in favour of the holiday fun fund, which will miraculously change the opportunities for young people who feel lonely in their own homes or in their communities. I hope that the minister will embrace that in her new role.

We also know that students, especially those starting off at university, feel particularly lonely because they have not managed to build up networks and make connections with other people. Those who started studying during the pandemic were not given opportunities to go to students unions or to enjoy activities in the university or college environment. I hope that the minister will reach out to her colleagues, particularly the finance secretary, to ensure that the funding for mental health counsellors, particularly in colleges, will continue. I know that there is still a glimmer of hope that the Government might be able to fund that. It is looking to colleges and universities to fund the counsellors just now, but my fear is that some of those counsellors might disappear when funding is really tight. It would be a shame to lose that expertise having built it up, particularly when we are trying to move forward on mental health and loneliness.

At the other end of the spectrum, research that was conducted by Age UK found that more than 200,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely some or all of the time. That can have long-term consequences for health, as has already been referred to, and standard of living, with a recent study linking loneliness to an increased risk of dementia. It is crucial that our elderly people have proper access to consistent care, which is why we should establish national pay bargaining processes to ensure that Scotland has a competitive care sector that can attract our best talent.

Some charities have done some excellent work in this area. Age Scotland runs a free helpline that offers advice, assistance or just a chat. So far, it has fielded more than 28,000 calls, and nine in 10 users have reported feeling happier and less alone after using it. The helpline works, so let us hope that Age Scotland manages to continue that good work. The Government must support indispensable work such as that by increasing the funds that are available to the third sector, as other speakers have said.

Care places a heavy burden on those who provide it, with 65 per cent of carers in Scotland regularly experiencing loneliness, according to the Carers Trust. Carers can find it increasingly difficult to access support and have time for themselves as well as spending time with their loved ones. They desperately need more support, which is why my party is campaigning for an enhanced carers allowance in Scotland, as well as a United Kingdom-wide uplift to finally recognise the value of carers.

For anyone who experiences loneliness, it can have a detrimental impact on mental health, with prolonged periods of loneliness being associated with increased experiences of anxiety and even suicidal thoughts. That is why I am particularly keen on recruiting more mental health staff in communities, hospitals and schools in order to make sure that services are accessible throughout Scotland. Alongside that, we need new diagnosis and treatment centres to clear the backlog in mental health waiting times.

We need to do so much more. I am really hopeful that the minister will embrace this portfolio and achieve so much for those who feel alone in their own homes or communities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** I advise members that we have some time in hand. That is why the front-bench speakers have had a bit more latitude with regard to the length of their speeches. We now move to the open debate.

15:07

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any time in their lives. I strongly agree with the minister that this is a public health issue and that we have a collective responsibility as a society to address it.

I last contributed to a debate on social isolation and loneliness in January 2019. During that debate, I reflected that Scotland was leading the way as one of the first countries to publish a national strategy on tackling social isolation and loneliness. I also spoke to Age UK's call for policy makers to be clear about the difference between loneliness and social isolation.

Loneliness is not the same as social isolation. People can be isolated yet not feel lonely, and people can be surrounded by other people yet still feel lonely. The distinction between the two concepts is often overlooked, which makes it difficult to understand what can help people to reduce their feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness is a subjective feeling that is about the gap between a person's desired level of social

contact and their actual level of social contact. It refers to the perceived quality of a person's relationships. Loneliness is never desired, and lessening those feelings can take a long time.

As the minister mentioned, social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. It is about the quantity and not the quality of relationships. People may choose to have a small number of contacts, and if people feel socially isolated, that can be overcome relatively quickly by increasing the number of people whom they are in touch with.

Loneliness and social isolation are different but related concepts. Social isolation can lead to loneliness, and loneliness can lead to social isolation. They are different, but they can be experienced at the same time. People may feel different levels of social isolation and loneliness over their lifetimes, moving in and out of such states as their personal circumstances change. Loneliness and social isolation also share factors that increase the likelihood of people experiencing them, such as deteriorating health and sensory and mobility impairments.

Quality matters, because bringing people together to increase the number of their social contacts is not an end in itself. Good-quality, rewarding relationships are needed to combat loneliness.

A lot has happened since January 2019. As the Government motion acknowledges, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that more people across society suffered as a result of social isolation and loneliness. As is always the case, the suffering was not spread evenly. Those who, arguably, already had the greatest challenges felt the greatest impact.

The biggest increase in loneliness during the pandemic was seen in older adults—those aged over 60. I am sorry that they are not mentioned in the Government's motion. Their experiences and the impact on their health and quality of life were perhaps most visible to me during the pandemic.

There was no greater illustration of how harmful social isolation and loneliness are than for those who saw the change in their loved ones in care homes who did not receive visitors. Constituents described to me in heart-breaking terms how they felt that their loved one was fading away without the good-quality visits from friends and loved ones that I spoke about earlier. That had a profound impact on me during the pandemic, and I will never forget it.

I know that lessons have been learned from our experiences in that public health emergency. Although "older people" is no longer specifically in the job title, I am sure that the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees will wish to

champion the rights of our older citizens with determination and vigour.

Just as the pandemic impacted disproportionately on some, the Tory cost of living crisis means that the poorest and most vulnerable in our society are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical wellbeing, lower life satisfaction, and feelings of loneliness. Without a doubt, that will have an impact on people's ability to make and maintain connections, to take up opportunities to interact with one another and to stay physically and mentally healthy.

Last week, I had the opportunity and pleasure of meeting the Poverty Alliance, the Scottish Women's Budget Group and some of the women who had contributed to "It's hard work being poor", an important report on the cost of living crisis. All the women reported making significant changes to their daily lives to try to manage rising costs, including taking on additional hours of work and reducing social activities—reducing that social contact. Many women reported having run out of ways in which they could adjust their daily life, and having concerns about managing rising costs.

Stella is a contributor to the report. She is a black lone-parent mother, aged between 35 and 44. She lives with her children and has a long-term illness and disability. She accesses universal credit and is seeking employment due to the cost of living crisis, despite experiencing chronic pain and fatigue. To quote her:

"This cost-of-living crisis has brought untold pain and suffering on women especially single parents and children because of the way it impacts our lives on a daily basis. Not being able to afford the essentials of life can be very stressful and robs women of their dignity and self-worth."

The report contains actions, for all spheres of government, which deserve serious consideration by those who have power and responsibility over policy and resources.

Social isolation and loneliness are public health issues and are closely intertwined with issues of poverty and inequality, which have been exacerbated because of the pandemic and will continue to be affected by the on-going Tory cost crisis. As a society, we have a collective responsibility to address that. I welcome the work that the Scottish Government is doing so far and encourage it to go further but, goodness, how much better Scotland could do if we were free from the need to invest in mitigating Tory harms and if we had all the levers of a normal independent country.

15:13

**Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate about the public health problem of loneliness. To

demonstrate the scale of the issue, 3.6 million adults in the UK live alone, of whom 2 million are aged 75 or older. Moreover, 1.9 million older people have indicated that they feel invisible or ignored.

Although loneliness and social isolation are all too common among our older population, they do not remain relegated to any one age or social group. Although the elderly population experienced the greatest increases in loneliness, various other groups were found to have the highest rates of loneliness. As we have heard, those groups included 16 to 24-year-olds, people who were living on lower incomes, disabled people, and Scots who were living with pre-existing mental health conditions.

Loneliness and social isolation have existed as public health concerns before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The same has applied to the efforts of people and support groups over the same period. In both the pre and post-Covid eras individuals in communities across Scotland came together to support others in whichever ways they could.

In my region, a charity called New Rhythms for Glasgow has provided valuable services that aim to achieve the betterment of people's lives through access to the creative arts. This community-led organisation has done that for more than 20 years in the service of many of our most vulnerable people, including children and people with disabilities. However, due to the Scottish Government's funding cuts, the future of New Rhythms for Glasgow remains uncertain. Should the charity disappear from its community's social fabric, the potential for greater social isolation and loneliness would inevitably increase because of that decision to cut funding.

Unfortunately, that is not the only charity in such a position. The same can be said of Food Train Glasgow, which is a volunteer group that provides vital food and meal delivery services to more than 400 Glaswegian over-65s. Those elderly residents would face difficulty in procuring such essentials otherwise. Following the announcement of possible funding cuts spearheaded by Glasgow City Council, more than 2,000 people have signed a petition to help to save the organisation. I hope that the minister will reflect on that in her closing remarks.

**Christine Grahame rose—**

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask Ms Wells to decide—

**Annie Wells:** I will take Mr Sweeney's intervention.

**Paul Sweeney:** I thank the member for giving way on that important point. Does she agree that it was shocking to discover that in undertaking its assessments of communities fund allocations, Glasgow City Council never asked what would happen if it took that funding away and whether that would cause an existential crisis for those organisations?

**Annie Wells:** I agree with the member. For me, the point that came out was that health and social care partnerships in every other local authority area outwith Glasgow have considered funding the Food Train. That is concerning to me.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** You have to be asking yourself why people are in food poverty. It has nothing to do with the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament; it is because of the cost of living crisis, low wages and everything else that we have no control over. You should be a bit shame faced about the manner in which you are speaking.

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

**Annie Wells:** The member will understand that I am saying that those people require someone to take their money, go shopping for them and drop their shopping off. It is not about a funding issue for them, but the volunteers need vehicles to get the shopping from one place to another. For some people, the Food Train volunteer who visits once per week, to put their shopping away and perhaps have a cup of tea, is the only person they will see; no one else goes into their houses. Therefore, I will not take that remark when I am speaking about that subject.

Continued funding for support organisations is valuable not only due to the tangible benefits that they provide; additional value resides in their ability to connect people within communities. The future backing of support groups remains paramount, and that, in turn, would align with the aims of the Scottish Government's 2018 strategy on loneliness. Not only did I support that strategy, I supported the creation of a minister to address social isolation and loneliness.

That same year, I published a loneliness action plan that included measures aimed at meeting the challenges posed by loneliness across groups and spanning all ages. I believe that the plan's proposals retain relevance to this debate. The Scottish Conservatives' loneliness action plan contains measures to address several aspects of the problem, including: the implementation of a national awareness campaign; improving social prescribing; putting greater focus on youth loneliness; and making greater connections between members of communities.

Furthermore, as a former Scottish Conservative spokesperson on mental health, I understand the weight of the situation that confronts us all when it comes to loneliness. In recent years, I have stated that loneliness is a serious health problem that can profoundly affect one's life, in particular around holidays, which are typically spent in the company of others. During a debate in the Scottish Parliament in 2019 that focused on social isolation and loneliness, I stressed that 79 per cent of adults and 40 per cent of youths experience loneliness.

That alludes to the important role that is played, alongside the work of the Government's strategy and of general practitioners, by individuals and outside groups, such as charities, that provide their own support. That is of the utmost importance, as loneliness has a detrimental relationship on other aspects of the public health, including—but not limited to—higher blood pressure, dementia and depression.

I am delighted to give my support to the Scottish Government's continued efforts to alleviate this far-reaching societal problem. More than 3,300 bodies have received grants, and I look forward to supporting their work, and the work of the Scottish Government and the Parliament, in the years ahead to ensure that we continue to address this public health crisis. I am sure that colleagues on all sides of the chamber will agree with me on that.

15:21

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I want to focus on the experience of older people: the over-60s through to the over-90s. It is tough enough getting older, but the impact of inflation on what is, for many, a fixed income—the state pension, occasionally assisted by an occupational pension—has, for many pensioners, meant staying in to save the pennies for food and heating. Yes, the bus pass is an asset for helping with mobility, social contact and general wellbeing, but it cannot make up for poverty-level living, exacerbated by inflation. Many—some 40 per cent—who are entitled to UK pension credit do not claim it, and that money is kept by the Treasury.

The results of an online opinion poll by YouGov for the British Red Cross, which were released in December 2022, showed that 81 per cent of Scottish people agreed that the increased cost of living will make more people lonely, and 43 per cent said that they would restrict how much they socialise because the cost of living is going up.

There are also the after-effects of the Covid pandemic, during which many—including me, as I was over 75—were confined indoors, with only short spells of exercise. That was tough. The

experience during the years of Covid got me and many others into a way of life that disconnected us from mixing with folk, and for many of my peers, that way of life has continued. I am unusual, and privileged, to be in an occupation that allows me to work long beyond pension age, but even that does not mean that I do not feel lonely at times.

Previous speakers have referred to the World Health Organization's research on the health impacts of isolation and loneliness on older people, so I will not repeat them. I would add, however, that with age, one is more likely to attend funerals than weddings, which can increase feelings of loneliness and isolation.

I welcome the £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund. I understand that the initial applications period has closed and allocations will be made in the summer. However, we do not know which groups have applied in the first instance, and my concern is that small local groups may not have applied or might not fit the criteria for that particular fund.

I am thinking, for example, of the vital role that the men's shed network plays in communities in my constituency, and how hard those groups have to fight for funding. Their membership is usually retired men. The Peebles and District men's shed community, which is located at School Brae in Peebles, has totally refurbished its rooms with work benches and brand-new machinery including lathes, a band saw, pillar drills and so on. Two of the benches have been built at a height suitable for use by wheelchair users, and the shed is also open to women. However, the community is always struggling for funding.

Galashiels men's shed has community-run workshops with a social area. There, people pursue their hobbies, share skills and have a cuppa and a chat. They get out of the house for a while and get practical help with their projects. Interestingly, the Facebook page talks, appropriately, about offering help with isolation and loneliness. There are others—Penicuik and District men's shed, for example, does much the same stuff, and it gives men who are quite often shy, and will not admit that they are lonely and looking for companionship, a place to meet.

We therefore welcome the £75,000 for the Scottish Men's Sheds Association that was announced in January. Would that it were more.

OPAL—older people, active lives—Borders aims to maintain and improve people's social connections, independence and wellbeing. Group members can decide on the activities that they would like to take part in, such as singing and entertainment, talks from speakers, quizzes, walking and so on.

There is also Borders Buddies, which is not only for the elderly. It supports people to return to doing the things that they once enjoyed, but which, due to the pandemic, ill health or other factors, they have stopped doing. That enables them to reconnect with other people in the community, reducing isolation and building individual and community resilience. During the pandemic, Borders Buddies supported local people in Tweeddale to find a buddy to help them rebuild their confidence about getting out and about again. A lot of it is about confidence. Although things have moved on, Borders Buddies still hears from people who have become socially isolated for all sorts of reasons, and it works with people of all ages over 16.

There is a community centre slap bang in the middle of Ladywood, which is owned by the community and provides a huge range of activities for young and old people. I had a go at pensioners table tennis, and believe you me, it is serious, even brutal, stuff—perhaps because people had the chance to tackle a politician. It is great for physical and mental exercise and for companionship.

Those are all grass-roots examples, and everyone in the chamber could give more. I turn back to my question, which at some point I may have an answer to, although perhaps not today. How do those local groups, and others like them, who do so much to combat social isolation and loneliness at the grassroots level, access that £3.8 million of Scottish Government funding, or indeed other funding sources?

Those local groups work, and they deliver. Big organisations have no difficulty in accessing funding. Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, Age Concern and such organisations can access funding, but it is those local groups that matter and deliver.

15:27

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I have heard that we all agree across the chamber that tackling social isolation and loneliness must be a priority for Government and Parliament. It is welcome to see increased funding to directly address those issues, which I know that the minister cares a great deal about.

However, as my colleague Paul O'Kane mentioned, work to tackle social isolation and loneliness must be connected across sectors and must be aimed towards genuine long-term improvement rather than short-term fixes.

Ruth Maguire's contribution on the difference between social isolation and loneliness was very good, and I thank her for that.

It is right that we highlight how loneliness in particular can impact anyone. Age Scotland highlighted that, and the quote is worth repeating:

“more than 100,000 older people in Scotland felt lonely all or most of the time, the equivalent of one older person on every street in Scotland.”

That is the stark reality for many people.

We know from research that feelings of loneliness are also common among young adults, as Willie Rennie told us in his contribution. That confirms that loneliness and social isolation are not unique to one group or age bracket; those feelings are felt widely across society, and it is therefore right that our approach to tackling those issues is broad in its focus.

Although it is important to note that the loneliness and social isolation issues that we face have existed for many years, we know that the pandemic exacerbated feelings of loneliness and social isolation across our country. It is crucial that we recognise that as a public health issue and approach it in that way.

I note with interest that the Government has not included in its motion deprivation as one of the key factors that contribute to loneliness. The Scottish household survey of 2020 highlighted that just more than a quarter of people in the least deprived areas reported feeling lonely some or all of the time; that figure was 44 per cent in the most deprived areas, which is a stark difference.

There is a clear link between loneliness and poverty, which the minister mentioned. I hope that she will consider that and speak about it in her closing remarks. People in our poorest communities feel that there are far fewer welcoming places and opportunities to meet new people and far fewer places in which people can meet up and socialise in those communities. That is simply the reality for many people in Scotland. It is a direct result of relentless cuts from a UK Government that has imposed austerity on towns and villages. However, the Scottish Government also has responsibility, and the cuts to council budgets year on year—and therefore cuts to the hearts of our communities—contribute. I would like some honesty about that.

Inequalities in Scotland hold back communities, limit potential and isolate individuals. The figures that I have read out should anger us, but they should not surprise us. They are the result of decisions taken by Governments, and we need to be honest if we are going to address them.

If we are serious about tackling loneliness and isolation, we need more than £3.8 million; we need a shift in focus and priorities that supports investment in tackling health inequalities and is based on tackling inequality and deprivation more widely. We need funding for local government that

respects the role that local government plays in service delivery, and we need a focus on having the strongest public sector possible that is supported and complemented by other sectors, and not reliant on them.

As members have mentioned, the information in the Mental Health Foundation report that just less than 40 per cent of Scottish adults would not report feelings of loneliness is of significant concern. I think that another member mentioned that. Those figures are heart-breaking. Loneliness is a significant challenge that many Scots face, and we should not forget that some people will not raise the issue.

The importance of a preventative approach cannot be overestimated. Services must be connected, the public and the voluntary sector must work hand in hand, and we must invest in local communities, ensure that local provision exists for social activities, and reduce feelings of loneliness for anyone who needs mental health support.

I pay tribute to organisations that do a lot to support their communities day to day with very precarious funding. I think that the minister is aware that we need to address the sustainability of some of the very small groups that Christine Grahame mentioned.

Loneliness and social isolation are serious challenges that our population faces, and they can have devastating impacts on individuals, families and communities. The funding announced for tackling social isolation and loneliness is absolutely welcome, but we know that, in our most deprived communities in particular, those feelings are widely held because of a serious lack of investment in services due to cuts to councils and the lack of a joined-up approach across sectors to focus on service delivery. We also know that we need to monitor progress as we try to increase funding and develop policy change.

That we have had the chance to debate the topic today is welcome. I hope that the minister will consider the points that I and other members across the chamber have raised. It is important that we stop widespread social isolation and loneliness and tackle their root causes in our communities.

15:33

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I wish the minister every success in her new role. I think that this is the first opportunity that I have had to do so.

Social isolation and loneliness can impact everyone—people of any age at any time. It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government is

taking action to properly tackle isolation and loneliness, which is, as has already been said, a public health issue.

In the first 100 days of this parliamentary session, the Scottish Government invested £1 million for immediate work by organisations that tackle loneliness, including for helplines, befriending and practical support. That funding will help to provide warm spaces, hot meals, group activities and fuel payments to folk who are most at risk of isolation, including older folk, young parents, carers and disabled people.

The funding is a lifeline for a range of organisations that are helping to keep people connected during this challenging time. Organisations that will receive grant funds include Age Scotland, which will continue to deliver its keeping the doors open grants programme, and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, which is recruiting Urdu and Punjabi-speaking volunteers to make kindness calls.

The work that is being funded includes that of Aberdeen Linking Lives, which operates across my constituency of Aberdeen Donside. Aberdeen Linking Lives is a befriending service aimed at adults who find themselves requiring some extra friendship and support, which is provided through weekly home visits or telephone calls. Linking Lives matches volunteers with folk who are referred to it, and all volunteers are carefully selected, trained and vetted. The service does really important work, and I look forward to visiting it in the near future. I would welcome it if the minister came along, too, but I realise that she will have an extremely busy diary.

The fund is just one of the many crucial steps that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle social isolation and loneliness as part of its “A Connected Scotland” strategy. Support for community groups to bring folk and communities together to tackle isolation was launched in March. The £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund is part of a new plan, “Recovering our Connections 2023 to 2026”, which aims to reduce inequality by bringing together folk from communities across Scotland. It will provide vital longer-term support for organisations and projects that are working on the ground to bring folk together and create connections in communities throughout the country. Everyone can play a part in tackling those challenges. The Scottish Government’s new plan reaffirms its commitment to building a connected Scotland for everyone, which I welcome.

We know that social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone, at any age or stage of life. During the pandemic, though, it became obvious that not everyone was affected equally. The pandemic meant that more folk across society suffered as a

result of social isolation and loneliness, but it had a particular impact on disabled people, younger people and those who live alone. The biggest increase in loneliness during the pandemic was seen in older folk aged 60 or over, although the groups identified as experiencing the highest rates of loneliness were 16 to 24-year-olds, disabled people, those on lower incomes and those with a pre-existing mental health condition.

Regular polling data on the societal harms of the pandemic tells us that, during 2020 and 2021, around half the people surveyed reported feeling lonely at least some of the time in the previous week. Around one in seven people reported being lonely most, almost all or all of the time. That is supported by the findings of the Scottish household survey 2020, published in January 2022, which found that 35 per cent of adults reported feeling lonely at least some of the time in the previous week, while 44 per cent rarely or never met others socially. It is clear that the pandemic exacerbated isolation. Again, that highlights why the work that the Scottish Government is doing is so important.

Although the key levers that are required to tackle the root causes of poverty and the associated poor mental health are still held by the UK Government, the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can, with its limited powers, to support people right now. As Carol Mochan said, there is a clear link between isolation and poverty. That is why I am pleased that the Scottish child payment has been further expanded to eligible six to 15-year-olds and increased in value to £25 per child per week. Around 387,000 bairns are now forecast to be eligible in 2023-24. Based on modelling from March 2022, it is estimated that the payment will lift 50,000 bairns out of poverty and reduce relative child poverty by 5 percentage points in 2023-24.

The Scottish Government is offering free school lunches during term time to all pupils in primaries 1 to 5 and in special schools. As part of the most generous free school meal offer in the UK, that is saving families an average of £400 per child per year. Scotland already has the most generous childcare offer anywhere in the UK, but it is only with independence that we can really ensure that that work reaches its full potential.

I welcome the work that the Scottish Government is doing, and I again take the opportunity to thank all the organisations that are working to tackle isolation across Donside and across Scotland.

15:40

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland (Green)):** This afternoon, we have heard a lot of

statistics—for example, we have heard that a quarter of all adults in Scotland feel lonely or isolated and that people aged between 18 and 25 are most likely to feel lonely. Of course those statistics matter, because they tell us about people, but it is important to look below the numbers so that we can understand what loneliness means to those who feel it. Many people are ashamed that they feel that way, and they do not want to talk to family or friends about it. Many would never admit to feeling lonely, and they hide their feelings from others, including loved ones. It is clear that there is still stigma attached to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

We have already heard that loneliness has a significant negative impact on people's physical and mental health. There are clear links between loneliness and anxiety and depression or suicidal thoughts and feelings.

Several colleagues have talked about specific groups in our society who may be at particular risk of loneliness, including older people, students, disabled people, people of colour, immigrants and refugees. Research by the Mental Health Foundation last year highlighted that people with existing mental health conditions, those who were digitally excluded, unemployed people and people who identify as LGBTQIA+ were particularly at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation.

We have also heard much about how the pandemic and the cost crisis have affected and will continue to affect people's ability to be and to feel connected—to be part of something that is bigger than themselves. Knowing all that means that we can focus our activities on seeking to change the structures in society that have led us to this situation.

Feeling connected and part of something that is bigger than ourselves is surely one of the things that make us human. The ability and desire to connect—to be part of a community and to enjoy and delight in what we, as social beings, can experience by interacting with others—is what really matters.

I, too, express my gratitude to all those community groups and organisations that seek to support so many in exactly that human endeavour of connecting, befriending and building social solidarity and community. We have already heard about the work of some of the organisations that do exactly that: offer friendship and the chance for a cuppa over knitting, woodwork or gardening. I would like to mention a couple of groups in the north-east that do that incredibly important work.

The community companions scheme, which is co-ordinated by Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action, supports adults across Dundee who are experiencing or have the potential to experience

social isolation. Community companions are matched with people, taking into account personalities, hobbies and interests, and general living experiences. Befriending might be a shopping trip, a chat in a cafe or just a walk round a local park. It is about human contact and connection, while doing normal, everyday things.

Further north, the Grampian Regional Equality Council specifically supports immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, in Aberdeen and further afield through language cafes. Learning English is an important part of the cafes. Indeed, the ability to communicate with others is fundamental to interacting with and taking part in society.

However, the cafes are so much more than just language classes. They are often the key catalyst—sometimes, they are the only catalyst—in building the relationships with others, on a cross-cultural basis, that can help to prevent social isolation and loneliness. Over the past few weeks, it has been made very clear to us in the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee just how important those connections and relationships are, especially for refugees and asylum seekers.

There are so many other groups that I could mention, and so many more beyond that. Each and every one requires resources and facilities to do what it does to support community connections and human connections. I welcome the minister's enthusiasm for such groups and organisations, and her commitment to supporting them in the variety of ways that she mentioned. Of course, as others have said, many of them are already struggling, so I am sure that the minister will be busy.

However, in so many ways, those groups, through the excellent work that they do, are fighting against a wider systemic issue and trying to usher back the tide of the inevitable. In her opening remarks, the minister talked about the importance of prevention in how we tackle public health issues. I agree. We also need to look deeper when we consider the structural causes of loneliness and social isolation, which have such a detrimental effect on so many people's lives.

Loneliness and social isolation are not accidents. They are the inevitable consequences of the system that we all inhabit—a system that seeks to atomise, to divide, to marginalise and to identify difference and make that a problem. Human connections, enjoying one another's company and finding solidarity in shared endeavours are not easily monetised. They do not lend themselves to commodification or profit, yet, over and over again, that is what we are told matters. It is small wonder, therefore, that those who are most at risk of loneliness are often those who are pushed furthest out of our society. The

structural reality of our society means that the things that are valued most highly are closely linked to the things that also cause loneliness and social isolation.

I welcome the minister's commitment to focusing on prevention and to supporting the things that build social solidarity, but we must see that work as being part of the much bigger challenge of creating a society in which everyone—regardless of background, age, identity or origin—matters, in which everyone has what they need to thrive and in which everyone is valued not because of what they, as individuals, can offer to the economy, but because they are human.

15:47

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** I want to talk about how relatively small amounts of funding at the most local level can have a massive impact in addressing loneliness and social isolation in society. In doing so, I acknowledge that there are varied reasons why people find themselves feeling isolated and alone. Although there are clearly risk factors that make it more likely that a person will feel that they do not have the relationships that we all require to feel resilient, happy, content and loved, we should remember that loneliness and social isolation can impact us all. A range of vulnerabilities—covering relationship breakdown, children leaving the family home, bereavement, advancing years, disabilities, lone parents, low incomes, migrant or marginalised communities and many more—can lead to anyone feeling alone and isolated.

Our approach to tackling such issues must be facilitated by government at all levels, but our approach to tackling loneliness and social isolation should be shaped and led by communities. That is how we will tackle loneliness and social isolation.

I will give some local examples. First, there is the work of local churches in Maryhill. At my local church, the Immaculate Conception church, volunteers offer a warm welcome at a different location each weekday to everyone, irrespective of faith. Those of all faiths and none can pop in to have some food, a cuppa and a warm welcome. The Immaculate Conception church, Maryhill Ruchill church at the Mackintosh halls, the Findlay church, St Gregory's church and Acre tenants hall have all opened their doors to offer a warm welcome, and I give a very sincere thanks to everyone who makes that possible.

**Paul Sweeney:** Bob Doris is making an important point about the role of churches in providing a sense of community and a focus for communities. Does he share my concern that the

potential closure of churches across Glasgow could affect the capacity to provide such services in the future?

**Bob Doris:** I am aware of plans in relation to closures, not least from the Church of Scotland, although not exclusively from it. I have a degree of concern about that and I am keen to explore the issue further.

I have seen at first hand the differences that such volunteering can make. Those same churches together run a Monday morning breakfast club at St Gregory's church hall, and I am a very occasional volunteer at that—I go along now and again. I have to say that I get as much from that volunteering as anyone who attends the breakfast club gets from it. I thank Iona Craig, who co-ordinates the activities, and who recently provided me with a list of comments from those who have attended the breakfast club. I would like to share some of them with members. One person said:

"I'm 77 and live on my own and it's great to come to meet all these lovely people".

Other comments were:

"Food good. Very welcoming. No judging of people. Social thing, meet people."

One person talked about

"A warm breakfast and building new friendships."

My personal favourite was: "nice sausage rolls"—I liked that one.

Some comments related to income and financial need, but many did not. That is crucial because, long after we all stop talking about the cost of living crisis, we must continue to support communities to come together. Loneliness and social isolation will still exist. So far, the funding for those projects has come from the Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector Glasgow communities mental health and wellbeing fund, which provided just shy of £10,000. I understand that the initial bid for a grant was unsuccessful, but that the Scottish Government made more money available because the fund was so oversubscribed and that the projects got the value of the work that has been undertaken through that fund.

I want to make the Parliament aware of a wonderful local organisation called the Milton Rattlers. The organisation, which was set up in 2019, has more than 30 members with ages ranging from 76 to 90. If I remember correctly, the group, which was established by its now chairperson Raymond Hunter and some of his friends, got its name following a conversation with Lord Provost Jacqueline McLaren. The name Milton Rattlers is a reference to all the pills the members take due to the variety of medical conditions that they have. From within a

community flat in Milton, in a relaxed and informal setting, the group offers a Monday morning tea and blether, a Wednesday afternoon cup of tea and a game of bingo, and a Friday morning breakfast club. I visited the breakfast club a few months ago, and I can well see why the Milton Rattlers were awarded the *Evening Times* Glasgow community champions award in December last year.

The Milton Rattlers operates with limited funding. The group got some Covid-19 recovery funds in 2020-21 and, last year, secured £2,250 from the council's area partnership as well as £750 from the Allied Vehicles Charitable Trust. Again, that is small amounts of cash making a really significant difference.

I have mentioned two relatively small projects. I was going to mention a third project, the Good Morning Service, which is a much larger project that offers a friend on a phone across the city of Glasgow for older people who feel socially isolated. I will say no more about that just now, because I do not want to miss out other parts of my speech that I think are important—I hope that I have time, Presiding Officer.

I will just give one comment about the Good Morning Service, from Margaret, who is 82 and who is one of the service's clients. She said of the service:

"I can share a problem, ask advice and they will help if they can. If I worry about something or don't feel too well I have someone who'll listen. That makes a big difference."

I wish that I had time to say more about that project. I could also have mentioned many more projects across Maryhill and Springburn, but I have picked three that secured funds from different funding streams—that is why I picked them. The motion mentions the £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund. That is hugely welcome, but I understand that it was 23 times oversubscribed—I found that out after I had representations from an organisation that unfortunately was not successful in applying to the fund. We have to be open and honest and say that not every good organisation will get funds, which are limited.

Much excellent work is done outwith that £3.8 million, such as the work of the three organisations that I have mentioned. We have a wider social policy responsibility that does not sit within only one funding stream. I ask the minister to ensure that we embed strategies to tackle social isolation and loneliness across all policy areas and service delivery areas. The work needs to be mainstreamed and it needs to be community led. We need to ensure that small local groups get focused support to flourish. From local churches to the Milton Rattlers, the impact that such groups can make needs to be recognised and supported.

I welcome this debate and I welcome the large funds, but very small funds at the heart of our communities sometimes make the biggest difference.

15:54

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank all the organisations that have provided briefings and that work each day to address social isolation and loneliness. I, too, welcome the minister to her role. I am sure that she will be braw.

There is increasing recognition of social isolation and loneliness as major public health issues. Many members across the chamber have discussed that already. We know that social isolation and loneliness can have a significant impact on a person's physical and mental wellbeing. That is why the £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund aims to reduce inequality by bringing together people from communities across Scotland. However, as the minister described, we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, which has been made worse by the Tory Government's economic mismanagement and Brexit.

I will make a further point about that. It is no coincidence that the International Monetary Fund predicts that the UK is set to be the worst-performing economy in the G20. The disastrous UK Government's September mini-budget created unnecessary additional financial hardship for households and businesses across the country. Brexit is forecast to deal a 4 per cent hit to the UK gross domestic product, with UK imports and exports expected to be 15 per cent lower than if the country had remained in the European Union with continued access to the single market and the customs union.

People across Scotland are paying a steep price for that economic incompetence, the forced austerity and Brexit. The current high level of inflation—it is at 10.4 per cent—is hurting the most vulnerable people and heaping more pressure on to our public services. The UK is expected to suffer the biggest fall in living standards since records began in the 1950s, with real household disposable income expected to fall by 5.7 per cent over 2022-23 and 2023-24. The Resolution Foundation found that 15 years of stagnating wages have left UK workers £11,000 worse off per year.

Members might be asking what that has to do with social isolation and loneliness. The evidence is clear: the Tory cost of living crisis means that the poorest and most vulnerable in our society are more likely to experience poorer mental and

physical wellbeing, lower life satisfaction and feelings of loneliness. Without a doubt, that will have an impact on people's ability to make and maintain connections, take up opportunities to interact with one another and stay physically and mentally healthy.

Paul O'Kane mentioned the Red Cross research. Results of an online opinion poll for the British Red Cross that were released in December 2022 show that 81 per cent of Scottish people agreed that the increased cost of living will make more people lonely, while 43 per cent of respondents said that they would restrict how much they socialise because the cost of living is going up.

More than a quarter of adults in Scotland have accessed the NHS due to the impact of the cost of living crisis on their mental and physical health according to new research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Social isolation and loneliness are public health issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and will continue to affect people. Obviously, the cost crisis is the paramount issue that needs to be dealt with.

Support for community groups that bring people and communities together to tackle isolation was launched in March. The £3.8 million social isolation and loneliness fund is part of the "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026" plan, which aims to reduce inequality by bringing together people from communities across Scotland. It will provide vital long-term support for organisations and projects working on the ground to bring people together and build connections in communities throughout the country.

There are a number of organisations working across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders that meet those aims. Change Mental Health—formerly Support in Mind Scotland—has bases in Stranraer, Dumfries and Castle Douglas. I have visited two of them already with former MSP Jim Hume, who is a Change Mental Health director. We witnessed the incredible work that the staff and volunteers do as they bring people together for various activities that tackle isolation.

Eildon Housing Association in Hawick is a social registered landlord and does specific work to tackle social isolation.

Another fantastic organisation is Dumfries and Galloway LGBT Plus on Newall Terrace in the town of Dumfries and in Stranraer. The team, led by Iain Campbell, works together with LGBT+ people of all ages to provide support, to bring people together and to tackle loneliness. It also works to promote LGBT+ acceptance and, specifically, to reduce and tackle stigma across Dumfries and Galloway.

D and G is a rural area and it is a challenge for people at times to address their social needs and their isolation. Dumfries and Galloway LGBT Plus has drop-in sessions, attends the agricultural shows, delivers training and education and has a great online presence. I have met the team on a number of occasions and I have heard how many LGBT+ people, particularly in rural D and G, rarely get the chance to interact with one another due to the rurality and the challenges around acceptance, so its work is vital. I invite the minister to come and meet the team when her diary allows.

I welcome the work that has been done by the Scottish Government. I applaud the fantastic organisations across Scotland, including across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, to tackle isolation, and I welcome a positive outcome for the "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026" plan. Finally, we cannae keep mitigating Tory policies without full fiscal ability. We can do so much better as a normal independent country.

16:01

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To be human is to need community. To be human is to need to interact with others. We all want to see good communities and a positive change in people's lives, and most people want to help those around them. We saw that best during the pandemic, when there was a mass mobilisation of people who wanted to help in their communities.

If we can harness that feeling—that instinct to help those around us—we can see and make real change. The question is: how do we promote that? How do we, as lawmakers, help people into community? I believe that the answer is relatively simple. We need to encourage and support the institutions that have acted as community touch points for the past 100 years: golf clubs, rotaries, bowling clubs, synagogues, churches, mosques and many others.

Those civic institutions have been places that foster community in a way that we in this chamber could never do by passing any law. People who belong to any of those clubs are significantly less likely to report feeling lonely or socially isolated. If we can support those types of institutions and encourage membership, I believe that we can make real strides towards a more connected and a less lonely country.

As with most modern problems in life, disabled people are more acutely affected by social isolation and loneliness. That is due to a number of factors, but one invaluable resource that helps to combat it is day centres. Day centres provide an excellent space for disabled people to receive care, to socialise and to develop relationships with

their peers. They are not just a luxury but an essential part of life, both for the attendees and for the carers who support them there.

Unfortunately, there seem to be plans to close a number of those centres due to budget cuts here in the city of Edinburgh. A lot have not reopened, post Covid, due again to lack of funding and to a push by the council. I warn in the strongest terms against that move. It will not only be catastrophic for the health and wellbeing of disabled people here in the Lothians and across Scotland, but it will work counter to the efforts discussed in the chamber today on loneliness and social isolation. Please do not allow disabled people to be left behind once again. I know that Enable Scotland is producing a report tomorrow around loneliness. Let us see what that has to say before big decisions are taken by local authorities.

Another obstacle facing disabled people in their efforts to combat loneliness is that it seems to be becoming increasingly difficult for them to travel. It is understandable and expected for those with a disability to have more difficulty getting out and about, but I am afraid that it seems to be getting more difficult by the day, certainly in my region of Lothian. Poor public transport links in the more rural areas of Midlothian and the lack of suitable taxis mean that going out to socialise is next to impossible unless there is a good friend or family member who can help out.

**Bob Doris:** I want to rewind slightly to what Mr Balfour said earlier about the day centre in Edinburgh. I will not jump on that with my muddy boots on because I am not an Edinburgh member, but in Glasgow a few years ago, the Labour Party sought to and did close a number of disabled and learning disabled day centres in the city. At that time, the debate was about day centres specifically for those with disabilities and the mainstreaming of provision. What are the thoughts on that in Edinburgh? I am genuinely interested to know where discussion on that is at.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I can give you the time back, Mr Balfour.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Thank you. I understand that a report is coming out at the end of this month that will give greater clarity with regard to that issue. I personally do not think that it has to be an either/or. We all like coming here for lots of different reasons, but we socialise among ourselves. If we take away day centres and other similar activities, we will end up with disabled people being at home and maybe getting the right care but still being isolated and lonely.

Edinburgh's new plans to close off large areas to cars means that they will essentially be closed off to disabled people if there is no space near

shops or restaurants for accessible cars to park or taxis to drop people off.

Even if people can get into the town centre, they have to contend with the mess that our roads and pavements are in. As the minister is well aware, the mobility test is 20 yards, but here in Edinburgh, we are asking people with disabilities to walk much further than that to get to their jobs and socialising areas. I hope that the council will rethink that anti-disabled policy. Disabled people almost need to put off-road tyres on their wheelchairs if they are to navigate the pavements that are so poorly assembled in Edinburgh.

If disabled people are enabled to interact, they will enjoy community in the same way as other people. We must understand that accessibility means more than just lifts and wide doors in buildings. It means that disabled people can get around the city with ease and do what the rest of us take as normal. If we want people to connect, we must ensure that they have access to the infrastructure that they need for community.

I recognise that we must ensure that people have opportunities to go out and meet friends. The pandemic gave us the Zoom culture, where we seemed to default to online meetings and events. We also saw that increase in the workplace, with people working from home. Of course, that has a number of benefits, but it drastically decreases the amount of time that people can use to socialise and develop relationships with their peers. It is therefore important that if organisations have a work-at-home model, they provide time and space for workers to come together and develop those relationships.

I could go on, and I am pleased that members are discussing this important topic. I place on the record my commitment to working on a cross-party basis and with the new minister to address these problems for the benefit of everyone here in Scotland.

16:08

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in today's debate about the important issue of social isolation and loneliness. In doing so, I will welcome the strategy that has been set out by the Scottish Government and highlight the excellent support that is given by a range of groups in my constituency.

The debate is important, not just because of the actions within the "Recovering our Connections" plan, but because it is important to raise awareness of loneliness and get the message out there that support and help are available, that it impacts across our communities, and that there is no stigma or shame in talking about it.

In a recent survey by the Mental Health Foundation, more than one third of Scots said that they would never admit to feeling lonely and more than half of adults said that they hide their feelings of loneliness. We must ensure that people know that they can talk about this issue and that they will not be left without help.

We know that social isolation and loneliness are bad for our physical and mental health. Unfortunately, the public health measures that were needed in response to Covid-19 made matters even worse. It is no surprise that, at that time, the biggest increase in loneliness was among people aged over 60, and the people who experienced the highest rates of loneliness were 16 to 24-year-olds, disabled people, those on lower incomes and those with a pre-existing mental health condition.

The pandemic was a really difficult time for people who were advised to shield due to their health condition. It meant that they did not meet their neighbours, socialise more widely or even see their families. The work that was done at that time by our councils, health and social care partnerships, the third sector, many charities and our local communities was a lifeline. It is clear that that collective endeavour and commitment to one another was one of the few positive things to come out from the pandemic. We must learn lessons from it and let it shape the way forward. That is why I welcome the strategy, because it puts front and centre the fact that dealing with social isolation and loneliness requires a response from everyone if it is to succeed.

The Scottish household survey that was published in January 2022 found that 35 per cent of adults reported feeling lonely at least some of the time in the past week and that 44 per cent of adults rarely or never meet other people socially.

Without the compassion of our local communities in Clydebank and Milngavie, the challenge of Covid-19 would have been even worse. The position is clear: the community groups in my area literally saved lives and continue to be a lifeline to many people. As the MSP for Clydebank and Milngavie, I cannot thank them enough. I will name just a few: the Milngavie Old Peoples Welfare Committee; the Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels; the men's sheds in both Clydebank and Bearsden and Milngavie; the Old Kilpatrick chatty cafe, which is a great name; the Golden Friendships club; Clydebank group holidays; the Big Disability Group; Inspire 2; the Dalmuir Barclay church community pantry and drop-in cafe; and the Faifley food share. They are there all the time giving support, empowering volunteers, helping people to overcome anxiety and competence issues, providing local employment and being a lifeline.

Unfortunately, just as we were emerging from Covid-19, the Westminster cost of living crisis took hold. The scale of it is illustrated by the IMF predicting that the UK is set to be the worst-performing economy in the G20. The Tory-owned Liz Truss budget created unnecessary additional financial hardship for households and businesses all across the country. That incompetence is so bad that the UK is expected to suffer the biggest fall in living standards since records began. It is well documented that it will impact on people's ability to make and maintain connections, to take up opportunities to interact with one another and to stay physically and mentally healthy.

A recent poll that was organised by the British Red Cross showed that 81 per cent of Scottish people agreed that the increased cost of living will make more people lonely; and 43 per cent said that they would restrict how much they socialised because the cost of living is going up. That is why, here in Scotland, we must continue with progressive policies that support our citizens' response to the cost of living crisis.

**Carol Mochan:** I hope that Marie McNair will know and recognise that I very much support a lot of what she has said about local community groups and organisations in relation to the cost of living crisis. Will she show support for local government in Scotland by agreeing that, to connect all that work, we need really strong and well-funded local government?

**Marie McNair:** Absolutely, and we will deal with that through the new deal for local government. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee will be looking at that.

We will definitely ignore the political parties that suggest that we are a something-for-nothing country.

Instead, we will be there to help families stay afloat and will continue with policies such as the Scottish child payment, free prescriptions, generous help with childcare, no tuition fees, free school lunches, a social security system that is generous to those in need, righting Westminster's wrong treatment of carers, lower council tax bills, free bus travel, scrapping peak-time fares for train travel and providing more help for veterans.

Let us get on with recovering our connections. Dealing with the impacts of Covid-19 and Westminster's cost of living crisis make that challenge much harder, but, if the endeavour that we have seen from our communities is adopted and replicated across the piece, we will get there.

16:15

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I am pleased to contribute to this debate. In the age

of social media, it seems to have become a requirement to define oneself as extrovert or introvert and lots of content celebrates introverted people, although that may be just what I see being promoted to me. However, that does not recognise the impact of loneliness and social isolation on even the most solitary people. Social interaction, and a connection with your community and neighbourhood are important for mental wellbeing and community cohesion.

Our idea of the typical person who might experience loneliness is often challenged by the evidence. The Mental Health Foundation Scotland has identified those most at risk of severe or lasting loneliness. That group includes: people aged 16-24; people going through life-changing experiences such as being widowed; and people who can be marginalised, including those from the ethnic minority or LGBTQ+ communities.

That information was gathered prior to the significant impact of the pandemic and there is evidence that the pandemic led to an increase in anxiety and lasting loneliness. Scotland has had a strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation since 2018, but little progress has been made in that time, with the pandemic undoubtedly setting that back. During the coronavirus crisis, there was lots of talk about building back better. We can point to examples of increased community cohesion and a perhaps increased awareness of loneliness, but that was short-lived, as many reverted to the lives that they led before.

A study carried out by the University of Stirling during the pandemic found that 56 per cent of people said that social distancing made them more lonely. A British Red Cross report on the impact of Covid found that 41 per cent of UK adults felt lonelier than before the pandemic and that 37 per cent were concerned that their loneliness would get worse.

The Campaign to End Loneliness explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions on experiences of loneliness across the UK and found that the pandemic had exacerbated loneliness in groups already known to be at risk, particularly young people. However, the organisation also expressed hope that the renewed focus on loneliness in response to the pandemic would lead to a structural shift in the support that is available for people experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

I recognise that I have focused so far on loneliness. Ruth Maguire made some interesting comments about the differences between loneliness and social isolation and I will be interested to hear the minister's response to those comments in her closing remarks.

The publication of "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026" is welcome, although it is a delayed implementation plan and faces greater challenges than before. We must now address the impact of the social isolation that was caused by the pandemic, particularly for children and young people whose formative years were impacted and for people whose lives changed significantly, perhaps due to ill health or bereavement, as a result of the pandemic. For some groups, including young people, the stigma attached to loneliness can be a barrier to accessing support.

It is important that the Government is clear about how it is measuring the impact of policy initiatives and what work it is doing to evaluate the baseline figures. The 2020 Scottish household survey is the basis for that, but it is important to keep data relevant and I recognise the fact that the plan concludes with an indication that new or revised indicators could be added. It can be difficult to determine how we are making progress, but, if we are making investments, it is important to ensure that we are starting to see results.

The social isolation and loneliness fund is welcome, but the minister said that there have been 1,300 applications, which is quite a lot of applications for the money that is on the table. That fund alone cannot provide or support all the services and networks that are needed. I welcome the fact that the fund has a three-year funding model, because funding for the voluntary sector has become even more fragile in recent years.

Prior to being elected, I was a policy manager for SCVO, and I campaigned for multiyear funding settlements for the voluntary sector. While recognising the innovation and responsiveness that comes from project funding, I also argued for the importance of core funding, which provides stability for organisations. It is disappointing that so little progress has been made on that. After some false starts, we are back with SCVO calling for fair funding for the voluntary sector that is long term, flexible, sustainable and accessible. Although the Government has now said that multiyear funding should be the default, we need to see progress and evidence of that.

Loneliness and social isolation can have a significant impact on people's health, and not just on their mental wellbeing. There is increasing evidence that they also impact on physical health. According to the National Institute on Aging, the health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to those of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social isolation and loneliness have even been estimated to shorten a person's life span by as many as 15 years. People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to nursing homes and the emergency room. Loneliness can increase the risk of stroke, heart disease, mental health

disorders and premature mortality, all by more than 25 per cent. This is a serious public health message.

I will close by highlighting a few organisations that are working in my region to tackle social isolation and loneliness. I recently visited Glenrothes Men's Shed and the Wee County Men's Shed. Men's sheds have had a high profile in our debate this afternoon, which shows how much MSPs value them. While each organisation raises funds for its shed, the uncertainty over the future of funds for the central body is disappointing. Men's sheds offer skills and practical training, but they also provide friendship, comradeship, support for mental health and purpose in people's lives, often at a point of change in their lives when they may be more vulnerable to social isolation.

On Friday, I visited Cycling Without Age and the Forth Valley Sensory Centre. Both are in Falkirk, but they provide opportunities for activities and groups to tackle social isolation in my region. Both are addressing social isolation and loneliness by providing opportunities to socialise and participate in society. Cycling Without Age's trishaw rides provide access to the outdoors that can be denied to people due to age and/or disability, and Forth Valley Sensory Centre has recently worked with King Tut's to make music venues more accessible. Those initiatives are focused on addressing inequality as well as social isolation and I very much welcome the work that those organisations do across my region.

16:22

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** As the Scottish Government's motion states,

"social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any age or stage of life".

The motion also mentions work with people who are facing adversity and it states:

"preventative action is vital to ensure that the negative mental health consequences are addressed".

That is why I am going to focus my comments on the experience of one of my constituents, who is campaigning for change so that no child grieves alone. His name is Ben Kane. He is a young person from Gourrock in my constituency who was bereaved during his third year of high school when his sibling passed away.

We talk about bereavement as a majority experience, but I am sure that, if everyone in the chamber was asked to picture a bereaved person, we would typically picture someone who was older. Rarely do we think of children as being bereaved. The reasons for that are obvious, but

according to a recent study by the Children and Young People's Centre of Justice and the University of Strathclyde, more than half of Scottish children have experienced bereavement due to the death of a close family member by the age of eight.

Being bereaved is difficult at any age, but for children and young people, who are at a key stage in their development, it can be particularly hard to navigate growing up while grieving. Ben, motivated by his experiences and with the support of local organisations such as Mind Mosaic Children and Family Therapies and Ardgowan Hospice, has gone on to set up a counselling support group in his school for pupils who are affected by bereavement. It is the first group of its kind locally, and Ben is campaigning to see the initiative rolled out across Inverclyde and Scotland as a whole.

I recently wrote to the new Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise about Ben's campaign—which has led to him receiving several accolades including UK Rotary young citizen of the year—after he met me to ask for my support. I will be honest and say that, although the response that I received heaped lots of praise on Ben for his commitment to this cause, it lacked any detail about what the Scottish Government is doing to support children and young people who are affected by bereavement.

I accept that the Scottish Government is considering how best to implement the seven recommendations from the national childhood bereavement project report, "Growing Up Grieving", which it commissioned and which was published in September 2022, but what Ben is already doing at Clydevue academy in Gourrock, in conjunction with other services, can feed into that work.

For example, the report's recommendation 4 states that

"Every school in Scotland must have a four-point approach to bereavement"

and elaborates that

"Currently, bereavement policies and procedures are set at the discretion of each individual school. This means that some schools are well prepared to respond to the needs of a pupil experiencing bereavement while others are not, creating a disparity in support across the country"

That is exactly why Ben wants the support group that he initiated to be rolled out across the country to provide a safe space for pupils to come together to listen to and support one another and help them on their journey with grief.

No one should be alone and feel isolated. "Growing Up Grieving" talks up the approach of peer-to-peer support:

“People with lived experience of childhood bereavement told the Project stories of how they struggled to find other people their age who could understand what they were going through.”

**Bob Doris:** I put on record the fact that I chair the Parliament’s cross-party group on palliative care. Those who are involved in palliative care are interested in there being a bereavement element to the new palliative care and end of life strategy.

The report that you quote sounds very powerful, Mr McMillan, but there should be a connectivity between strategies, reports, local authorities and schools. Do you agree that it would be good for that new, fresh national strategy to include the types of things that you have said to the Parliament today, for the sake of Ben and others like him?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Speak through the chair, please, Mr Doris. Stuart McMillan, I will give you the time back.

**Stuart McMillan:** I agree with Bob Doris on that suggestion because, fundamentally, as Ben Kane put it to me when I first met him, no matter what the aspects, we need to have that understanding of what young people are going through. Certainly, we in the chamber continually talk about lived experience and engaging with young people, so I absolutely agree with Bob Doris’s comments.

The project engaged with groups that operate in a similar way to Ben’s, and learned that

“Through building a shared community, they have both individually helped to break down the taboo of being a young griever and stopped others from suffering alone. They are a testament to the power of peer-to-peer support, showing the importance of children and young people being able to navigate their life after a bereavement with others on a similar journey.”

By our ability to openly talk about subjects such as death, we adults, too, can influence how children and young people grieve. The project spoke with adults who shared candidly that they avoided talking about death with the children and young people in their lives, in order to protect them from the harsh realities of a world in which the people they love are not alive anymore. That is entirely understandable but, although those adults acted with the best intentions, the project heard first-hand experiences from children and young people about how that avoidance tactic contributed to their inability to process grief at a later stage in their life.

It is therefore important that adults talk to children and young people about death—and, crucially, that we do not soften our language so much that it affects a child’s understanding of the reality of death. By being honest and open, we help to reduce the loneliness and isolation that can follow a bereavement. Instead, we can help to

empower future generations to grieve in a much healthier and understanding way.

During her opening speech, the minister stated that it was all about communities and how we maintain them. Notwithstanding the positive work that has already been delivered by the Scottish Government, I urge it to provide its response to the recommendations of the national childhood bereavement project final report. Schools that offer learning and teaching on bereavement, as per the Scottish Government’s reply, is one thing but, if that were enough, Ben Kane would not have felt the need to establish his own counselling support group for pupils who are affected by bereavement. Tackling isolation and loneliness must also consider Scotland’s young people who deal with bereavement.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to closing speeches. I call Paul Sweeney. You have around seven minutes, Mr Sweeney.

16:29

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** This has been an enlightening and, at times, moving debate about an issue that everyone in Scotland will, unless they are especially lucky, have to contend with at some point. It has emerged that there is no neat solution to any of it. The approach needs to be multifaceted and systemic, and should be woven through every aspect of public policy and of our consideration of how we construct the fabric of our communities. That is very much at the core of what we have discussed today.

We have heard many amazing examples of the great work that is going on, but we have also heard about the challenges and what we need to do better, which has made listening to this afternoon’s debate so worth while.

Stuart McMillan, the member for Inverclyde, has just cited the particularly inspiring example of Ben Kane—a 16-year-old who felt the need to step up and build greater capacity where, in the light of his own tragic experience, he saw that there was need. We should all reflect on the fact that although we assume that young people are resilient and can just get on with things, many of us encounter such problems.

I was feeling really lonely on Sunday, because it was the 10th anniversary of one of my best friends being killed in Afghanistan at the age of 25. To go to his funeral at a time when I should have been attending his wedding and, later, to reflect on what he could have done with his life in those 10 years, was very sad. I could not help but feel a sense of loneliness and a longing to see someone whom I really miss. I think that all members will have encountered that feeling about a relative or a close friend.

How do we help to build resilience? Many members have spoken about how much the solution lies in developing friendship networks and finding the means to do so.

On Sunday, to take my mind off my thoughts, and also to raise funds for a useful cause, I took part in the kilt walk. I had been cajoled into it by others, but ended up doing it on my own. Even though I was with thousands of other people, it was quite a lonely experience to start with. I could see lots of people having friendly conversations while I was just stomping onwards with my headphones on.

However, I later found a friend from primary school whom I had not seen in years, and we ended up striking up a great conversation. It turned out that what had started as a lonely experience ended up being a nice one, because I met quite a few people whom I knew, along the way. That just shows that the solution is as simple as having an opportunity to interact; we do not need to overcomplicate things. What started as quite a reflective experience ended up being a good laugh. There is no substitute for having such opportunities, which many members have hinted at in their contributions.

I welcome the minister to her place on the front bench and hope that she will do the country a great service. She made an important point about bringing issues as close as possible to communities and giving them the capacity to build networks. When we talk about shared ownership we should mean that literally. In so many aspects of our public life, power, control and agency have been centralised and taken away from communities over the years. We need a serious review of that.

Many members spoke about council funding's dependence on central funding, and about its being cut year on year. That is just not sustainable any more. Let us give back to communities the power to decide on their destiny, and the means by which they can design their locality to suit their needs. That has been very much a common theme in the debate.

This is critical; it is high-stakes stuff. Many members talked about the life-limiting impacts of loneliness and social exclusion. My colleague Paul O'Kane, who represents West Scotland, mentioned that in some cases they can result in a gap of 15 years in excess mortality. That is shocking. That is a life sentence—it is probably the average life sentence for murder in Scotland. We are seeing people losing huge parts of their lives as a result of loneliness and social exclusion, so it is critical that we address that as a public health issue.

On Saturday, I was at an event in Springburn that had been set up by the National Theatre of Scotland. One of the features running was a workshop with Karen Dunbar, whom members might remember from “Chewin’ the Fat” and various other television programmes. She ran a school of rap for five elderly women from the north of Glasgow, then there was a screening of a TV show that she did for the BBC. When I first went in, I thought that it might be a bit naff, but it turned out to be really good.

**Bob Doris:** I just wanted to check that, for the sake of Paul Sweeney’s own health and welfare, he did not say to Karen Dunbar or to the ladies who were rapping—some of whom I know—that it was “a bit naff”. It was pretty impressive, was it not?

**Paul Sweeney:** I should clarify that. I meant that I had thought that it would be naff, but I was proved wrong. When I first read about it, I thought, “Who pitched that to the BBC?”, but it actually turned out to be really good.

One thing that struck me—I think that I had something in my eye at one point—was hearing the women talk about the challenges that they had faced in their lives. We might pass someone on the street or have a chat with them at a coffee morning or something like that, and never think twice about the profoundness of their life experience. I listened to what those women had to say about the amazing things that they had had to overcome. They were things that would have broken other people, but those resilient working-class women in the north of Glasgow had managed to overcome them, and they did not think twice about volunteering themselves to do a rap. I thought that that was remarkable.

One thing that they spoke about was how they had made friendships later in life. They had been through bereavement and had lost people whom they thought were their life partners—people whom they might, in their 20s, have assumed would always be there, but suddenly, in their 60s and 70s, they had to completely reconstruct their social lives. Hearing about those massive phases in people’s lives gave me a lot to think about.

At the core of what is being discussed today is how we build greater opportunities to enable our communities to interact better and to become more tightly knit. That is key. How do we help people in their moment of need, when that need is at its most severe? They might have experienced bereavement, relationship break-up or be losing their house, or they may have had difficulty with addiction. All those things can compound loneliness and a sense of social dislocation and isolation.

We need to meet people where they are. We need to be the person who, if necessary, cajoles a person into doing something that they might not otherwise do. It is so easy to get into a funk with things and to not be prepared to get ourselves back in gear. There are many organisations out there that provide a jump-start for people who are in a bit of a downward spiral. We need to give them the security and opportunity to do that.

We have heard a lot about the cuts to councils: In Glasgow, £1 of every £10 has been cut, which reduces capacity to do the types of things that we are talking about. There is an issue. We recognise the need for those services and for the opportunity for cost avoidance. Provision of those services saves us all money in the long run, however, whether that is in the national health service, where people may present in far worse circumstances, or elsewhere. Too often, however, our decision making is driven by reactionary accountancy at the end of the financial year. Activities are seen as being a bit “naff”, perhaps, and as soft and expendable—as something that can be cut in order to fund services that are seen as being more crucial. The irony is, of course, that in doing so, we simply load more and more pressure on to acute services.

As the member for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn mentioned, a good example is palliative care. We cannot fully staff palliative care beds in Glasgow right now, yet that end-of-life care is critical. We need to provide people with an opportunity to die with dignity, and we need to enable people to support their relatives at that critical moment at the end of life. We might not want to talk about that, but it is crucial.

We also need to provide people with the means to get themselves back on their feet after they have given their all to care for their relatives. Too often, we simply assume that people will pull themselves together and get on with it, but we need to do so much more to support them.

I could go on for hours, recapping everybody's comments in the debate. If I have not mentioned any key points, I apologise. The debate has been moving and informative, and I thank everyone who has contributed. I am happy to say that Labour will support both the Government motion and the amendment from the other party.

16:38

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** As has been said, the debate has been helpful, and it has presented us with the opportunity to discuss the impact that loneliness and isolation have on different groups across the whole of society. It has been really powerful to hear the various messages coming from different colleagues.

For many of us, a specific issue has been the impact on young people, and on elderly citizens, during the pandemic. The statistics that we have heard today have shocked me to the core. The idea that loneliness can increase the risk of death by 26 per cent is massive. We should all take account of what is—and I welcome the minister saying this—a public health crisis around loneliness, which we need to work to address.

When I was first elected in Edinburgh, I was shocked to learn that the city is classed as one of the loneliest places to live in the UK. Changing Britain research found that 33 per cent of my fellow Edinburgh citizens do not feel that they are involved in our community and do not feel part of it. Interestingly, here in the Holyrood community—the people who look at us as we come into this building—87 per cent of people said that they do not feel part of the community and are socially isolated, so we have a problem around this building. That is something that I have worked to address since I was elected.

Many members have raised good examples of local charities and organisations that are trying to turn the problem around, and by the sounds of things the minister will have a lot of visits coming out of the debate. I will highlight two organisations. Vintage Vibes provides a Christmas card-writing service, and it got me involved in writing cards. I was shocked that some people who live in Scotland will not receive any Christmas cards. Vintage Vibes tries to correct that by asking people who are otherwise strangers to write to individuals. Last year, after the pandemic, it started doing a Christmas dinner event to bring people together.

A lot of good work is going on, but it often comes down to where events will be hosted and how they will be taken forward. One issue that has been discussed in the debate is how we take capacity forward. The Eric Liddell Community centre in the south of the city is a real community hub. It supports more than 500 unpaid carers, 2,000 people use the community hub each month, and 117 volunteers help to deliver those services. It is a wonderful community facility, but we need more of that, and we need more capacity to be built.

That brings me to one of my pet projects, which members who have served with me on committees will know that I never stop pushing, which is the school estate. For some reason, we still have the situation where, when the school bell goes, that is it. We need to consider how our school estate could be utilised by many groups that want to move into that space and use it to support people. In many rural communities, that might be the only potential facility that could be used. As strategies are developed and funding

comes forward, I hope that ministers will consider that.

We have heard complaints about council cuts in the debate. Sometimes the key thing is the extra time for janitors to be able to keep schools open, which are often the first cuts that are made. We need to consider that issue. Jeremy Balfour talked about fostering community, and day centres and church halls are key to that.

Christine Grahame mentioned feeling disconnected. I have met many constituents since the pandemic who have told me a similar story. Some have told me that they have not gone back to their lives, even though they feel confident enough to do so. In the past, they would have attended libraries and different groups, but they have not reconnected with their old lives. We need to consider that.

It is clear that something good is going on in the north of Glasgow, with all the rattling and rapping that seems to be going on. There is something in that. We need to develop the opportunity for older citizens to reconnect with the groups that they have stopped attending.

We need to focus on many areas of society. It was mentioned that college and university support workers are a key group. I have always said to the Scottish Government that I want to see it press ahead with general practice link workers, and I welcome the recruitment that has gone on around that. I have met many of them in the most deprived communities here in Edinburgh. One thing that struck me is the work that they have to undertake to build capacity. They have had to go out and establish walking groups, book clubs and gardening and growing groups, which can take capacity away from their work. The debate needs to consider how those workers do that and how they get funding for that. Small grants are often key to achieving such work.

In 2018, ahead of the Government strategy, Scottish Conservatives published our strategy to help tackle loneliness. I congratulate Annie Wells on her consistent work and campaigning on the issue, and on the publication of the loneliness action plan. It is clear that small grants are still a problem and need to be addressed. Christine Grahame and Bob Doris touched on that. I raised with the minister the issue of the Scottish Government's £10 million commitment. I hope that it has not gone down to £6 million, and I hope that the Government will take that away and look at it again, because the third sector and local organisations that I know have not applied for or looked at that £3.8 million.

I also think that the UK Government has a role to play, with UK levelling up funding potentially being part of the discussion. Let us try to take

forward the funding opportunity, as it is really important, especially when we consider the pressures on delivering many of those local services.

**Bob Doris:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Miles Briggs:** Is there any time to take an intervention, Deputy Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There is a little time.

**Bob Doris:** I will be brief. You mentioned small grants—

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

**Bob Doris:** I am sorry; the member mentioned small grants and funding opportunities. During other debates in the chamber, we have spoken about social prescribing. Is there an opportunity for link workers and general practitioners to use small grants that they have to signpost people towards organisations in our communities that do such a good job, such as bowling clubs and other clubs?

**Miles Briggs:** I absolutely agree with that. A key aspect is that, although we do not need to look towards this, there is a preventative spend issue for our health service as well. GPs often tell me that many people come to see them consistently about loneliness issues. If there is an opportunity to fund services and get people reconnected, that will make a huge difference for our public services and ensuring that people lead fulfilling lives.

Stuart McMillan made the most important speech in the debate. I hope that the minister will meet others who have been working on an aspect that he raised. Bereavement counselling and support groups are invaluable, and I congratulate Ben Kane on the work and campaigning that he has done. I have long advocated the inclusion of bereavement in the school curriculum. Establishing support groups in schools is an easy win in looking at the work that is going on in schools. I hope that the Scottish Government will work on that across portfolios, and I am sure that the minister will find that she works on that a lot. There is an opportunity to make a difference there, and I hope that it will be taken forward.

There is also an opportunity for young carers who have similar asks in relation to support needs. Some good work has been done on that recently. I hope that that is taken forward.

I think that the minister mentioned social media at the beginning of the debate. I have long been concerned about social media. When I was first elected, I organised a summit with Twitter and Facebook. The conclusion that we drew was that young people need to switch off social media and

get away from it—many politicians would probably agree with that, too. One of the key messages is that we have to look at where people are investing too much of their lives in social media and get back to resilience building. Sadly, we have not seen that in the generation of today.

On older citizens, one of the biggest mistakes that was made related to the Royal Voluntary Service and changes to meals on wheels from a daily hot meal service to the delivery of frozen meals once a week. Often, it was not the frozen meals that people wanted; it was a personal connection with another human coming into their home once a day. I hope that we can look at that issue again. That service was expensive to deliver, but it is important that we do that.

To conclude, a lot of good opportunities are coming out of the debate. We will support the amendments. I hope that this is the start of a conversation about how we can really tackle loneliness across our country.

16:48

**Emma Roddick:** I thank everyone who has attended this debate for their insightful and interesting contributions. I think that we have struck a good balance between discussing the challenging issues that we are here to discuss and sharing good news and best practice. I suspect that some organisations that have been mentioned might look at the *Official Report* for some help with their future funding applications.

Two colleagues wondered aloud in their contributions whether I might be being kept very busy, and I can confirm that that is indeed the case. They will be aware that I am no stranger to travelling, so I will be delighted to see at first hand the difference that our support is making at local level, whether that is in Aberdeen, Dumfries, Vintage Vibes or Glasgow—especially if I can get one of those sausage rolls.

It is clear that everyone in the chamber is familiar with social isolation or loneliness through personal experience, or because it has touched the lives of family, neighbours or constituents. Social isolation and loneliness are not new problems, but they are problems that can be difficult to own up to and to overcome.

Many members have mentioned excellent examples of work that is going on throughout Scotland. I enjoyed hearing about the knitting and nattering in Paul O’Kane’s region and about how much the informal chats that that has facilitated have meant to people who make use of the service.

I appreciated Stuart McMillan’s contribution, backed by Miles Briggs, on bereaved children and

young people. Although that is a topic that the Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise is leading on, Mr McMillan will be aware what a personal matter that is to me. I grew up grieving, having lost my dad when I was four and my mam when I was 23, so he will not be surprised to learn that I am aware of the issues that he raised, and very glad to hear of the work that is being done in Inverclyde. I know what an isolating experience it can be to be bereaved as a child, and I would love to hear more about it from him, or perhaps his constituent Ben, at a later time.

I was also glad to hear Emma Harper talk about the work of Change Mental Health, which is an organisation that I am very familiar with. Loneliness and social isolation are very much tied in with mental health and wellbeing. That has come through clearly in the debate.

Miles Briggs was right to talk about social media. I agree that, although we need to tackle and overcome digital exclusion, some people may go too far the other way and spend a lot of time on social media, which reinforces the feeling of loneliness.

I want to pick up on the comments of Bob Doris and others, who rightly pointed out that we need funding to be provided at a very local level if it is to be effective in communities. I can tell them that we are prioritising community organisations. The majority of the social isolation and loneliness fund will be paid to smaller community organisations that work at a local level. Being a Highlands and Islands MSP, I recognise the difficulties that were pointed out by Paul O’Kane and Emma Harper. Those small community organisations might include local men’s sheds, such as the ones that Christine Grahame rightly lauded earlier.

I absolutely value the work that befriending organisations such as Aberdeen Linking Lives, which was mentioned by Jackie Dunbar, do in communities. I know what a difference a friendly chat makes. As I listened to Jackie Dunbar’s contribution, I remembered how chatty some patients were during my time at the Scottish Ambulance Service. It was like the experience of third sector volunteers and workers that Annie Wells described—it was very obvious that their conversation with me was the only one that a patient had had for days and possibly weeks. I would ask them if they were able to get out to the ambulance at the roadside, and they would gush a long response and tell me all about the birds in the garden and what had been on the radio that morning. They were desperate to chat, but whether they would have called a befriending service if I had given them the number is a different story. Maybe they felt the shame that Maggie Chapman talked about, or they did not

want their family to worry. Maybe they did not even want to admit to themselves that they were lonely. It is so important that we continue to talk about social isolation and loneliness, and that we tackle the stigma, and enable people to open up to one another and reach out for help when they need it.

The application process for our new three-year social isolation and loneliness fund closed at the end of last week and the applications are currently being assessed. Funding for successful projects will begin later this summer. I am very much looking forward to seeing that work going forward, in tandem with our new delivery plan, and I look forward to seeing the impact that that work will have.

I want to talk for a minute about poverty. Ruth Maguire was right to focus on the stress of poverty and the lack of opportunity for people who spend so much of their time trying to navigate impossible personal budgeting. Carol Mochan said that deprivation was missing from the motion. All I can say is that I am sorry that she did not write the Labour amendment, because I would have been very happy to accept that change. I hope that she knows that it is missing from the motion but not from our action.

We know that poverty is a key driver of poor mental health and that those people who are already struggling with poor mental health and money worries are likely to be among the hardest hit by the current cost of living crisis. As I mentioned earlier, that is linked to social isolation. People are forced to choose between social activities and paying their bills, but that is not really a choice at all, and there is a real danger that the problems associated with social isolation and loneliness will increase further as a result. Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm is one of three critical and interdependent missions for this Government, alongside our focus on the economy and strengthening public services. We recognise the pressure on household budgets, which is why, last year and this, we have allocated almost £3 billion to support policies that tackle poverty and protect people, as far as possible, during the on-going cost of living crisis.

As well as through the game-changing Scottish child payment, we support families in a variety of ways, including through free childcare and free bus travel for under-22s. We offer free school meals to all pupils in primaries 1 to 5 and in special schools, and we have tripled our fuel insecurity fund to £30 million in the year ahead.

We recognise the incredible contribution that Scotland's unpaid carers make to our communities, as well as the pressures that many carers are under. Our national carers strategy sets out a cross-Government approach to carers'

issues, including social isolation and loneliness. A whole chapter is dedicated to carers' social and financial inclusion, which encompasses social security, financial support services, employment and actions to help to mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis. We will continue to use all the powers and resources that are available to us to provide immediate support to families and to tackle the underlying causes of poverty.

**Paul Sweeney:** The minister makes a very important point about poverty and social exclusion and isolation. Would she agree that the community housing association movement, particularly in Scotland, shows great strength in relation to building community wealth, because such associations hold assets locally, give local control and create that rich tapestry of activity that can engage the community on an otherwise barren landscape?

**Emma Roddick:** Absolutely. I was just about to mention Emma Harper, who talked about the work that is going on in her region with housing associations and how they are taking on that extra role and responsibility in building communities as well as homes.

Emma Harper, Christine Grahame, Ruth Maguire and others were right to point out that it is only with the full economic and fiscal powers of an independent nation that ministers will be able to use all the levers that other Governments have to tackle inequalities.

We are giving careful consideration to what further measures we can introduce to reduce poverty as far as that is possible within our powers, and the First Minister will convene an anti-poverty summit tomorrow, which will help to guide future action.

Last month, I contributed to the debate on a wellbeing economy, in which I reminded colleagues that a successful country means so much more than having a high gross domestic product. A wellbeing economy means delivering conditions for people to thrive and delivering fairly so that everyone benefits. Personal wellbeing, including indicators around loneliness and social support, is a key part of that.

Another important consideration for a wellbeing economy is place. Place has a noticeable effect on people's experiences of social isolation and loneliness. The extent to which people interact is heavily determined by their lived environment. Do we all live in neighbourhoods where it is easy to bump into folk for a chat? No.

The results of the most recent Scottish household survey were published last week. Some of those results clearly indicate that there is room for improvement. For example, only 62 per cent of people agree that there are places to socialise and

meet new people in their neighbourhood. We have to do what we can to improve that situation. However, 88 per cent agreed that people in their neighbourhood are kind to one another, and 89 per cent agreed that, if they were alone and needed help, they could rely on someone to help them.

As Marie McNair pointed out, we saw a glimpse of that community spirit in action throughout the pandemic. If we are to really tackle social isolation and loneliness, we need to retain that now and in the future. It is only by everyone—individuals, communities, the third, public and private sectors, and local and national Government—taking a share of the responsibility that we will really be able to make an impact and create lasting change for the people of Scotland. I am committed to playing my part in taking forward that important work, and I am heartened to see that others across the chamber feel the same way.

## Standing Order Rule Changes

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-08720, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on standing order rule changes. I call him to speak to and move the motion.

16:58

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It will be a pleasure to move the motion in my name. I thank Bob Doris, who seconded the motion as deputy convener of the SPPA Committee.

The motion deals with something that this Parliament has not had to deal with in its past: the death of a monarch. The changes relate to the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the forthcoming coronation of King Charles III. Minor changes are required to our standing orders, principally to remove references to “Her Majesty” and to replace them with “His Majesty”.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee’s 9th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Standing Order Rule changes - minor amendments (SP Paper 352), and agrees that the rule changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 4 May 2023.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The question on the motion will be put at decision time, to which we now come.

## Decision Time

16:59

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** There are four questions as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08758.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08758, in the name of Emma Roddick, on tackling social isolation and loneliness, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

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

16:59

*Meeting suspended.*

17:02

*On resuming—*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the division on amendment S6M-08758.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart.

The vote is closed.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Smyth. I will ensure that that is recorded.

**The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to log in, but I would have voted no.

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

### For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)

Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond 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)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08758.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, is: For 50, Against 67, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-08758.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08758, in the name of Emma Roddick, on tackling social isolation and loneliness, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

#### For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)

Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond 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)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)

MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-08758.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 52, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The third question is, that motion S6M-08758, in the name of Emma Roddick, on tackling social isolation and loneliness, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any age or stage of life, but that not everyone is affected equally; acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic meant that more people experienced social isolation, and that this was disproportionately felt by disabled people, younger people and single-person households; recognises the action taken by the Scottish Government since its strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness was published in 2018, including working with young families that are facing adversity, stigma and exclusion, supporting disabled people, carers and grassroots projects to ensure that communities can make a difference on their own terms; believes that preventative action is vital to ensure that the negative mental health consequences are addressed; welcomes the investment that the Scottish Government is making through the three-year, £3.8 million Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund, which will create opportunities for people to connect with one another in Scotland’s communities; commends the work of organisations and communities to tackle this issue, and recognises that tackling this public health issue is a collective responsibility

and requires a shared commitment across the public, private and third sectors.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-08720, in the name of Martin Whitfield, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on standing order rule changes, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee’s 9th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Standing Order Rule changes - minor amendments (SP Paper 352), and agrees that the rule changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 4 May 2023.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time. There will be a brief pause before we move to members’ business.

## Highly Protected Marine Areas

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-08651, in the name of Beatrice Wishart, on highly protected marine areas. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the importance of Scotland's fishing and aquaculture industries to coastal and island communities such as Shetland, as well as the wider Scottish economy; notes that the Scottish Government consultation on Highly Protected Marine Areas, a policy that forms part of the Bute House Agreement, closed on 17 April 2023; further notes that there are different views on Highly Protected Marine Areas and the contribution that they can make to protecting the marine environment; understands that many, including the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, have concerns about these areas and the impact that they will have on the fishing and aquaculture industries, as well as other activity of importance to coastal and island communities and the wider economy; notes the view that work should be done to ensure that all stakeholders are fully engaged with the process and that local community perspectives are taken into account; further notes stakeholders' reported suggestions that scientific studies and pilot schemes should be considered and evaluated before any Highly Protected Marine Areas are formally designated; notes the view that this work should be carried out as soon as feasible and that any findings from studies or pilot schemes should be shared with all relevant stakeholders, and further notes the view that any work that directly affects coastal and island communities should always be undertaken in partnership with them to ensure that livelihoods are protected.

17:09

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I thank those members who signed the motion that allowed the debate to be brought to the chamber.

HPMAs are "a blunt instrument". Those are not my words but those of Shetland's only Green councillor. It is no exaggeration to say that the proposals for highly protected marine areas have struck fear and anxiety into coastal and island communities. Communication from the Scottish Government about its proposals has been poor and, had the Government engaged meaningfully with communities before now, it is possible that some of those concerns could have been alleviated.

A great many constituents have been in contact with me highlighting the potential impact on their livelihoods, and stakeholders across Scotland have raised concerns about the HPMA proposals. The three island-group councils have all come out in opposition to the plans, which once again raises questions over the degree to which Scottish Government policy is island proofed.

Around a third of Shetland's economy depends on fishing and aquaculture. People in the supply chain, such as hauliers and marine engineers, rely on those businesses. Around three quarters of all Scotland's mussels are produced in Shetland. Just last week, Salmon Scotland was promoting its global product at the seafood expo in Barcelona. All that could be seriously damaged by the HPMA proposals.

The HPMA policy appears to be out of step with the Scottish Government's efforts in promoting Scotland's food and drink sector around the world and with the strategy in ambition 2030. One producer said:

"The HPMA proposals are already doing damage to our business as we can no longer plan."

I ask the Scottish Government to reflect on the damage that the proposals are already doing to the fishing and aquaculture sectors. Without plans, it will be difficult for businesses to expand and take advantage of opportunities.

My constituent goes on to say:

"The proposals could lead to our company being put out of business."

Businesses fear closure and job losses, with a wider negative impact on the seafood supply chain. Those losses would have a devastating outcome for coastal and island communities. We cannot leave communities on the scrap heap, which has happened in previous decades.

It is important that the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change are addressed. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is clear that we cannot wait. The need to address the climate emergency and protect our vulnerable coastal and island communities is not in doubt, but the response should be led by proportional and evidenced-based policy, not imposed by a top-down approach.

Effective local management and decision making have already been demonstrated in my constituency through the Shetland Islands Regulated Fishery (Scotland) Order 1999, which has been in place for more than 20 years. Efforts have been made to protect our seas through Scotland's existing marine protected areas network, which was established in partnership with stakeholders. Each MPA is designed to protect vulnerable habitats, is based on evidence and includes restrictions where certain activities are permitted. That approach enables conservation and sustainable use to coexist.

If the Scottish Government put more money into investment and research, it could find out what conservation measures work best where. It would be interesting to know what the Scottish

Government has learned from those networks and what can be developed. HPMA's could close an arbitrary 10 per cent of the seas to all but leisure activities by 2026.

A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Fishing has been a tradition for centuries for coastal and island communities. It is time to stop implying that fishermen do not care about our seas. The fishing sector relies on sustainable catches and it benefits from healthy seas. Who better understands our seas and how fragile they are than our fishermen, who want to ensure that there is a future for the next generation?

On proportionality, I point out that the fishing sector already faces spatial squeeze with increasing at-sea infrastructure, such as platforms, renewables, offshore wind farms and cables, as well as the network of existing marine protected areas.

HPMA's could have the cumulative impact of closing off 50 per cent of Scotland's waters to fishing by 2050. When we consider that one third of all United Kingdom fish is caught within 50 miles of Shetland, that becomes extremely concerning. The concern is heightened when we consider that the consultation assumes that the designation of HPMA's beyond 12 nautical miles will be subject to the prior transfer of relevant powers by the UK Government to the Scottish ministers. If that is not agreed—which is a possibility—it is unclear whether the 10 per cent requirement will need to be made up of inshore waters alone.

We need a holistic approach to our seas to support all the interested stakeholders and sectors, which should include considering how the future conservation of our seas should work. The Scottish Government should rethink the policy now.

17:14

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing this debate to the chamber today and giving us all the opportunity to speak on the issues.

I represent a number of coastal communities across the Banffshire and Buchan coast. In recent weeks, a number of my constituents have contacted me about this issue, and I have held meetings with a range of stakeholders, including fisheries, to gauge their thoughts. It is clear to me that there are significant concerns among stakeholders of the blue economy about highly protected marine areas.

I welcome the First Minister's recent commitment to not impose on any community a policy to which it is vehemently opposed. Last week, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero

and Just Transition to echo that commitment. In response to my question, she told me:

"I am happy to reiterate the First Minister's commitment. I firmly believe that you do not impose policies in communities".—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2023; c 4.]

I am grateful for her reassurance, although we need clarity on how those communities will be defined and how we will gauge their vehement opposition.

We need that clarity urgently. Only today, we heard about delays in the purchasing of vessels as a result of the lack of certainty. We must avoid the ambiguity and uncertainty that the Tory pursuit of Brexit has already saddled our blue economy with. Many lives and livelihoods across our country, particularly in the north-east, depend upon fisheries and the meaningful contribution that they make to the culture and economy of Scotland.

In the past few years, fishers have had to battle with the cumulative impact of the pandemic, Brexit and post-Brexit immigration issues. Earlier today, one fisher in my constituency told me:

"Brexit has been damaging to the industry with all of the additional administrative costs. And it is as prevalent today as it was in 2021. HPMA's cannot be introduced without the support of local communities because that's where the damage would be caused. We're being driven by an urban agenda with little consideration on the impact of our rural communities and way of life."

That fisher is by no means alone. This morning, the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust told me that it is

"concerned that the current programme has been developed without bringing in areas that are guaranteed for creelers, and others for the mobile sector in economically advantageous areas where mobile gear has a lower impact."

It said:

"we think setting the environment against the economy misunderstands the economic basis for a strong and growing fishing industry—we can either fail on both fronts or bring in the kind of spatial planning which will let us succeed on both."

If we are to be successful in our efforts to tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis and restore marine habitats, we have to take the key stakeholders of the blue economy with us, and that requires a just transition.

We have to do more than just listen to fishers—we have to act on their concerns. From recent interactions with my constituents, it is clear that they feel that that is not what happens. Although I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to having fully comprehensive negotiations, I must reiterate the point that they must be led by lived experience and must not resemble a top-down approach. I have always been an advocate for lived experience shaping policy, but an honest and forthright exchange of views requires trust.

Fishers across the Banffshire and Buchan coast have put their trust in me and I do not take it for granted. The coastal communities across my constituency depend on fisheries, and I will continue to stand up for those communities.

I again thank Beatrice Wishart for this welcome opportunity and I will also welcome any further cross-party discussions on how we can best work together for our coastal communities. On that note, I look forward to seeing many of my colleagues join the forthcoming cross-party group on fisheries and coastal communities that I am in the process of setting up.

17:18

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Marine ecosystems worldwide store and cycle an estimated 93 per cent of the earth's CO<sub>2</sub>. Sea grass sequestration of carbon is 35 times faster than that of the rainforest, and it also provides a fantastic renewable food source that must be managed properly if we are to maintain food security. However, the poor launch of the Scottish Government's HPMA consultation has highlighted the need to look in more detail at our blue economy with respect to a just transition. We needed direct consultation with communities and to allow those communities their say. It is obvious that coastal communities and Scottish industries within the blue economy feel left behind and that the Scottish Government is not delivering on its promise of a just transition.

It is disappointing that the Scottish Government does not take a more direct approach when consulting communities on policies that would directly impact their livelihoods and viability, and it is easy to see that an online consultation with online workshops was a poor choice for that engagement.

Instead of bringing parties together, the Scottish Government has managed to pit non-governmental organisations and fishing and coastal communities against one another. Industry, NGOs and community groups have called for better spatial management plans to take advantage of local historical knowledge, and to better balance industry with the need for conservation and nature-based solutions. Many of those stakeholders cite inadequate funding, unclear objectives and a lack of data as key barriers to the proper implementation of marine spatial planning.

Much of the Scottish Government's current marine policy is, I think, driven by Scottish Green Party ideology and misleading international comparators, rather than by science-based

evidence. The Scottish Government has admitted as much in response to portfolio questions, stating that it does not have the data to validate its policy choice. Rather, it has policies that are based on

"how best ... we can develop policy in the absence of science and data".—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2023; c 4.]

Similarly, "Scotland's Marine Assessment 2020" explicitly stated that

"There are insufficient data to allow detailed assessment".

That is no way to approach such important legislation that could have such a detrimental impact on communities that are reliant on a robust and sustainable blue economy. Those communities are being offered Scottish Government guesswork. Proposing HPMA's with very little evidence on their impact in temperate waters is not just ridiculous—it is hugely irresponsible.

Our fishermen must be part of the solution to the dual nature and climate crises, but only if we create the policy context for them to participate. Our fishing sector and our coastal communities have unique local knowledge, passed down over generations, that is invaluable to the formation of policy. For example, the Clyde Fishermen's Association has been in operation since 1934; the association, like many local fishers, understands its role in ensuring the long-term viability of the industry. The CFA has, for instance, advocated for a weekend fishing ban in its local area and engaged proactively with Marine Scotland in the formation of the Clyde MPAs to support healthy fishing stocks. The association's practical knowledge is instrumental to its advances in gear selectivity on significantly reduced bycatch. We must draw on an extensive knowledge base from across the industry. The people who best understand the sustainability of our seas are those who gain their livelihoods from them, as they have been doing for decades.

Furthermore, there is a body of evidence to suggest that investment in the seaweed sector can help us to achieve our net zero goals and improve our marine habitats. That is similar to Scotland's forestry sector and its approach to tree cultivation to lock in carbon as we proceed with other projects. During their cultivation, the farms can also produce a temporary habitat that has been shown to act comparably with wild nursery habitats.

Special consideration must be given to the spatial squeeze on our marine environment. It is important to note that there is scope to grow seaweed alongside existing industries such as salmon and shellfish farming, integrating multitrophic aquaculture and even renewable energy installations. In some cases, the presence of seaweed may improve environmental quality by

reducing the negative impacts of traditional fish farming practices, thereby helping to maintain and grow fish stocks.

The Scottish Government seems to be intent on pursuing an ideological policy without considering the ecosystem and climate solutions as a whole, and it is doing so with no meaningful data or research. That is why there has been such pushback and alarm from our fishing and coastal communities against the Scottish Government's proposals on HPMA. There is a lack of any clear scientific basis for the proposals, and a significant lack of any relevant data pertaining to soft-bed ecosystems.

Comparing Scotland's inshore coastal waters to tropical waters such as the Great Barrier Reef is ridiculous. The Scottish Government must halt its current direction of travel and its plans for HMPAs, and work with coastal and fishing communities, NGOs and academia to collate the appropriate data to deliver a comprehensive, cohesive and effective policy—[*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The member is bringing his remarks to a close.

**Brian Whittle:** Not to do so would mean that the Scottish Government was turning its back on those communities.

17:24

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing this important members' business debate to the chamber. Over the course of the consultation period for highly protected marine areas, the level of fear across my constituency about what the proposals might mean for our islands has grown, although some recent remarks from both the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition and the First Minister have certainly served to reassure them about the Government's intentions.

Following the consultation paper, individual island communities have had serious concerns that any designation around their own coastline would effectively end all forms of fishing and aquaculture for them overnight. Although it is important to note that only 10 per cent of Scotland's seas would be affected by the proposals, the difficulty is that no indication has yet been given of which areas are to be affected. Every community, therefore, currently fears the worst. There is time to address those fears if we act, as I believe that the Government is willing to do.

However, I have to be direct: I have never known my constituency to be apparently so unanimously opposed to any single policy as this one in all my time serving as their MSP. That

opposition is not only from those who are involved in the fishing industry—literally everyone locally who has spoken or written to me on the issue has expressed total opposition to the proposals as they stand.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member give way?

**Alasdair Allan:** No—I will make progress, as there is very little time.

Even on recent primary school visits, HPMA have been the first thing that many pupils have wanted to ask me about.

My own consultation response details many of the concerns that constituents have expressed to me about the potential ramifications of the proposals locally, and so I shall not attempt to cover those in detail in the little time that I have available.

The key question is this: in the case of a local HPMA designation, what would that mean economically to the coastal communities that are so affected? On the west coast, many fishing vessels are too small to be able, realistically, to work further afield. Even if they did so, creelers would face the task of re-establishing grounds in which to work, and fish processing would be unlikely to have a future in any community where fishing and aquaculture had, potentially, effectively come to an end.

If the measures are implemented, they would, I believe, disproportionately punish low-impact and more sustainable forms of fishing. As sites are not due to be selected for another two years, I am afraid that the issue will be hanging over each and every coastal community between now and when those decisions are taken.

Fishers and others who rely on the sea to make their living fully recognise the need to tackle biodiversity loss, and that loss is certainly real, but nobody with whom I have spoken in the islands believes that a blunt approach is the best way to go. I question how any such approach would, in the end, be compatible with the Scottish Government's commendable drive to tackle rural depopulation, as well as with the overall aims and commitments that are set out in "The National Islands Plan".

When officials finish processing the responses to the HPMA consultation, they will—I believe, although I cannot prove it—find that islanders from all walks of life and all political persuasions are, in the Western Isles in any case, fairly united in their opposition to the proposals as they currently stand.

I know that the First Minister gets that, as does the cabinet secretary, and I am very grateful for their commitment that HPMA will not be imposed on communities that do not want them. We all

know that the consultation responses will show anger and opposition, but they will also show our coastal communities' passion and positive ideas for growth and sustainability in the islands. We can have that conversation, with the starting point being the Government's welcome commitment not to impose HPMA's on communities that view them as an existential threat.

17:28

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I, too, thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the debate to the chamber. This issue has caused great consternation in fishing communities. The Scottish Government has told them that their future is at stake, and it expects them to take that quietly.

Fishing communities have harvested the seas for generations. It is their living, and it is not in their interests to harm their livelihoods. However, the Scottish Government, with the arrogance of imperial masters, tells them that it knows best—it knows the seas better than people who have fished them all their lives and who depend on their knowledge of the sea for their very survival. It is little wonder, then, that they are angry and they are writing protest songs, and that they will not simply accept that.

I want to bust the myth that those imperial masters promulgate—that, left unchecked, our fishers will destroy the marine environment. Fishing communities actually want to nurture and protect the seas—it is life or death to them. They are more motivated to do that than any pen-pushing pseudo-environmentalist sitting behind a desk in Edinburgh.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):** I understand deeply the member's points, but I want to question how what she is saying reconciles with the fact that she was elected on a manifesto commitment of 20 per cent of seas being highly protected marine areas, which is double what the Scottish Government is currently working through.

**Rhoda Grant:** That gets to the nub of the matter. This is not about protecting the marine areas—it is about how we protect them. That is done not from the top down but from the bottom up, with those who want to protect them as much as we do. That is my point. It is those who fish the seas who are more motivated to protect the seas than anybody else.

I will give an example of that. When I was first elected to this Parliament, I represented the community on Loch Torridon, which is the area where I was brought up. The community badly wanted the loch closed to mobile gear boats, and it took persuasion to make that happen. There

were meetings and there was negativity—it was close to impossible. That community was looking to preserve its income, fishery and livelihoods.

It took a long time, but the request was eventually granted. It was not easily obtained, but the results were positive—so positive, in fact, that the area became a honey pot for static gear boats, which threatened the good work that had been put in place. Again, the community asked for the powers to manage the fishing effort, and again it was rebuffed. It was the same top-down approach that we are seeing now.

The Scottish Government is condescendingly telling communities how they need to work and how to manage their seas. It is simply wrong. This is the same Scottish Government that, when it reduced quotas in the North Sea, encouraged boats to fish the Minch and Hoover up the prawn quota. The prawn quota was finished in six months, putting the very survival of those fishing communities in the balance. It was the Scottish Government that did that, not the fishers in those communities.

Those same communities want the Scottish Government to look at what they are doing. The Scottish Government cannot take the moral high ground over them. It has to stop.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The member will remember that, in 2016, this Government was elected on the principle of bringing in an inshore fisheries bill, which it fundamentally failed to do. Does the member believe that, had the Government introduced that bill, it would not have had this knee-jerk reaction without consulting anyone and it could have gone through the proper process, which it was supposed to have started more than seven years ago?

**Rhoda Grant:** Absolutely.

Managing our seas has to be devolved to local communities. They depend on the fisheries for their very survival and they need the fisheries to continue for future generations. Therefore, we must help, support and empower them to protect their seas. I urge the Scottish Government to do just that.

17:33

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** I warmly thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the debate and the opportunity to speak in it to the chamber, and I congratulate her on her excellent contribution. I have enjoyed listening to all members who have spoken thus far.

I have spent 49 years campaigning in various capacities to support and provide succour to our fishermen and fishing communities throughout

Scotland. I started off as a schoolboy campaigning for our mother in 1974 when she successfully won the Moray and Nairn seat from Gordon Campbell. She thought that she had the fishing community on her side during the campaign. It was a cold count, so the votes were not counted until the Friday, but she went on the election night programme and was interviewed by the anchor man of the election results in London. At midnight, after the votes had been counted elsewhere but not in Moray, he asked her: "Well, Mrs Ewing, how have you done in Moray and Nairn?" She said: "I won." When he then said, "How can you possibly know? The votes have not been counted yet", she said, "Because the boats came in." At that point, the BBC executive producer was completely mystified; he did not understand. Postal votes were not a thing then, and the fishermen had to come in. They disrupted their fishing effort to cast their vote for Winnie to fight for them, precisely because the fishing community had lost confidence in the Conservatives under Ted Heath. My fear is that it is now losing confidence in the party that I have served for almost 50 years and the party of our Scottish Government.

When I had the privilege of serving as the member of the Scottish Parliament for Lochaber for eight years—it is now in Kate Forbes's capable hands—I got to know the fishermen in Mallaig and Arisaig. I came to understand and appreciate what they do. They produce food for our table and are hard-working, great characters; many are God-fearing, too, and they make a huge contribution to Scotland.

Over the years, members of our fishing communities have gone on to form the backbone of the merchant navy and, in the 1970s and 1980s, they went to work offshore in our oil and gas industry, because they were already familiar with the perils of working on the cruel sea. They put their lives at risk for us then, and they still do so now. They deserve our respect—they deserve our thanks. However, what have they got in this consultation document? The only mention of fishermen is when it says that what they do is "destructive". What an incredible act of provocation that is!

I have a list of questions about the consultation document. Some have been asked already. Why did the Government not sit down with fishermen at the beginning and work with them on local management to learn what they do? After all, no one is going to be more interested than fishermen in preserving stocks for the future and for their families coming behind them. No one knows more about it than they do. No one can convince me that an academic working at a university at a typewriter knows more than a fisherman working the sea.

Where do we go from here? I have already urged the minister to do something, and I know that she has rejected me, but this issue will haunt the Scottish Government. It will not go away. The document that I am holding is not a consultation document—it is a notice of execution. Together with the inshore cap and the priority marine features, it is putting the fear of God into our fishermen. The collective impact means that, as Dr Allan has already said, the anger is palpable. In 49 years, I have not come across anything like it.

The minister should withdraw the consultation document and apologise. She should go around the coast to most of the fishing ports, as I have tried to do in my time, and then she should go back to the drawing board and work with the fishing communities.

In the meantime, I have three suggestions about what to do with the consultation document. First, it could be put in the burgeoning recycled policy unit along with the alcohol advertising ban and the deposit return scheme. Secondly, it might be preferable to use it as a firelighter. Thirdly—and in doing this, I think I am summing up the views of the people whom I work for and have valued and cherished for almost 50 years—it should be torn up, as I am now doing. That is what the people of Scotland who have great affection for our fishermen want to happen. It is what should happen and what I believe will happen at one stage or another.

17:38

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I join other members in thanking my colleague Beatrice Wishart not just for bringing this evening's debate but for the tenacity that she has shown in articulating many of the concerns that we have heard this evening on behalf of her Shetland constituency.

I have always been a great fan of members' business debates. I have participated in many and, in recent times, have had the privilege of chairing a good many, too. They are often underestimated. Anybody tuning into this evening's debate will be left in no doubt whatsoever about the powerful message that these debates often send.

We have heard from each speaker about the response to the proposals to HPMAAs, and we have been hearing the same from coastal and island communities right around Scotland. Alasdair Allan is absolutely right about the reaction in his constituency, and it is very much echoed in my own constituency. There is anger and confusion but, equally, there is a determination and absolute resolution to see off the proposals for very good reasons that I will come on to.

Karen Adam was also right to point out that the proposals are already having an impact, due to the uncertainty that they have created. Similarly, Brian Whittle was right to say that, in a sense, they have made it far more difficult to come to a resolution at the end, because emotions are running so high and the faith and confidence of our island and coastal communities has been so undermined.

**Brian Whittle:** Does Mr McArthur also agree that the uncertainty that the proposals are causing is impacting the ability to recruit into the sector?

**Liam McArthur:** I very much agree. I think that that was the point that Karen Adam made. Whether it is in relation to coming into the sector or people seeking to buy new vessels, that uncertainty cannot be anything other than bad and damaging. We have a combination of the blunt and arbitrary nature of the proposals, with the 10 per cent on the one hand—which, as Alasdair Allan reflected, has everybody suspecting that they might be part of—and the deadline of 2026 on the other, which, given what the Government is seeking to achieve here, is a ridiculously short timeframe. It seems entirely arbitrary and based on when the next election falls.

The timeframe is driven by the fact that the whole commitment emerges from a Bute house agreement that rides roughshod over the development of policy that has been in place over many years. The fisheries strategy from 2019 will have been an iterative process through engagement with the sector and stakeholders and through the development of evidence. What has happened in the equivalent of smoke-filled rooms in Bute house is something that is wholly arbitrary. The evidential base is just not there.

For years, the message from Government has been about local management, local control and local engagement. In my Orkney constituency, we are seeing fishers who absolutely recognise that their sector is reliant on a healthy ecosystem and a healthy marine environment. That is why they have been working with research academics and environmental groups on a range of conservation initiatives over recent years. Therefore, to have this top-down approach imposed upon them has left them absolutely baffled.

There are a few minor bright spots; the assurance from the First Minister, repeated by the cabinet secretary, that none of the proposals will be imposed on communities is welcome. However, there is no definition of what a community is or what level of opposition will be required.

I welcome Màiri McAllan's willingness to engage with MSPs across the Parliament, and I welcome the meetings that she held with us earlier today. I do not want to breach any confidences from that meeting, but I am absolutely sure that she will

have been left in no doubt about the strength of cross-party feelings on this issue.

Let us not mistake the opposition that we are seeing as an unwillingness to engage on what will genuinely safeguard the future of our fishing sector, our aquaculture sector and all those who rely on our marine environment through having it protected. However, let us not be in any doubt, either, that the Government will be able to find a way of railroading the proposals through on the basis of the Bute house agreement, because, otherwise, it will not have the numbers in Parliament.

I look forward to the remainder of this debate, and I look forward to participating in tomorrow's. I do not think that we can give the issue enough focus at the moment, and I thank Beatrice Wishart for giving us the opportunity this evening to reflect on concerns.

17:43

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I, too, thank Beatrice Wishart for securing the debate. I will start by supporting some of what she has said in her motion.

We all know, and we all agree, that fishing is hugely important to Scotland's coastal communities, including those across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. I also agree that any decision should be taken on the basis of robust evidence and an assessment of its impact, and that stakeholders must be fully involved in the process.

In March, after nearly 20 years of discussion, 193 countries agreed to a new high seas treaty, which will protect 30 per cent of the ocean by 2030. The UK Government also recently announced the creation of three highly protected marine areas in English waters, one of which is on the English side of the Solway Firth.

It is internationally accepted that the world needs to do more to look after the marine environment, and there is cross-party support for HPMA's across the UK. However, the process by which they are achieved must be carefully managed and people's livelihoods—and, indeed, the way of life in many of our coastal communities—must be considered and even protected. Any change must be made with full consultation with those communities.

A vast amount of work needs to be done before any location is decided on. Acceptable socioeconomic impact should be a key indicator of whether a successful outcome can be achieved. As things stand—and based on the feedback that has been provided to me—the policy agreement seems a bit unclear about the degree to which

designations in the Scottish inshore region would contribute towards the overall 10 per cent target that applies to inshore and offshore regions.

Galloway is home to many inshore fishers, who fish in the Solway and the Irish Sea and beyond. Scotland's inshore waters extend from the coast out to 12 nautical miles, and fishing activity is concentrated within 6 nautical miles of the coast. There are more than 2,000 active Scottish fishing vessels, three quarters of which fish primarily in inshore waters. That inshore fleet is diverse and includes trawlers, creelers, netters, dredgers and divers, and we should absolutely thank them all for putting food on our tables. The sector contributes £284 million to Scotland's economy and provides employment for many people in our rural communities. I also appreciate Karen Adam's point about the importance of the blue economy.

The Galloway Static Gear Inshore Fishermen's Association, the Clyde Fishermen's Association and other bodies that represent fishing interests have contacted me as an MSP for South Scotland, a region that has coastal waters on both sides, and have asked me to convey their concerns. On behalf of my constituents, I want to ask whether the 10 per cent target for HPMA's, which is perceived as being arbitrary, can be removed and, instead, a focus on acceptable socioeconomic impact can be considered.

They also want to know whether the exclusion from HPMA's of current inshore waters, such as those in the Solway and the Irish Sea, can be considered, and whether clarity can be provided on the evidence base for restricting water sports, including swimming and kayaking, in HPMA's. That is an important issue for folk in the Loch Ryan area. I also ask the cabinet secretary for a commitment that, before any HPMA is established, our static and mobile gear fishing communities will be properly consulted and their concerns addressed.

The purpose of HPMA's, in so far as they align with Scotland's nature conservation strategy, is reasonable, and the principle of taking a whole-site approach in targeted areas would, we hope, achieve positive biodiversity outcomes. *[Interruption.]* I cannot give way to members—I think that I am in the final 10 seconds of my speech. With the implementation of such a programme of work, there must be appropriate recognition of the drastic step change that it will represent for designations in the marine space and the existing users and coastal communities that will be affected.

Positive biodiversity aspirations are important, as are actions to support them. I know that any actions that are taken will be well considered by the cabinet secretary, to ensure that outcomes are successful and just.

I will conclude there, as I am conscious of the time. The target for protecting these areas must consider all waters, not just those for which the Scottish Government currently has delegated authority. The integration of critical socioeconomic considerations and thorough community engagement must be embedded at an early point in the process.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Due to the number of members who still wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Beatrice Wishart to move such a motion.

*Motion moved,*

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

*Motion agreed to.*

17:49

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I thank my colleague Beatrice Wishart for securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss the subject of HPMA's.

Scotland is an island nation, and our marine waters are our last great commons, but they are under threat from decades of damage. It is commendable that the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation allocates limited fishing licences for local shellfish, but 80 per cent of Shetland's sea floor is in "poor condition" as a result of towed, bottom-contacting fishing.

Scotland as a whole is failing in its legal duty to maintain our seas to good environmental status. Disturbance of the seabed is widespread and total fish landings across Scotland are decreasing. Living seabed habitats—such as flame shell beds—that provide spawning and nursery grounds for fish have suffered catastrophic decline. That threatens not only fish, seabirds and marine mammals, but us humans.

**Brian Whittle:** What species are in danger of extinction, and is that verified by neutral science, by any chance?

**Edward Mountain:** Does that include crofters?

**Ariane Burgess:** I apologise to Brian Whittle. I was being distracted by somebody else.

Presiding Officer,

"This is a crucial next step to aid marine ecosystem recovery in our waters and I'm delighted to see my recommendations become a reality today. Not only will the first of these Highly Protected Marine Areas protect important species and habitats, but they will propel the UK forward in our mission to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030."

That was said by the Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs, Lord Benyon—a Tory—on the HPMAs for England. [*Interruption.*] I will continue, because I need to use the time.

If we do not take action, fish stocks will continue to suffer, making it harder and harder to earn a living as a fisher. In addition, losing the flood defences that are provided by healthy coastal habitats would cost billions.

Shetland's fisheries are faring better than most, but other coastal communities are realising that the collapse of fish stocks—not an increase in protection—is what threatens coastal economies.

It is time for communities to step up and demand change. In the coming months, coastal and island communities can continue to shape the ocean recovery network of our highly protected marine areas. The cabinet secretary will hold meetings and workshops. Marine Scotland assured me that coastal communities will be central when they

“get together in a room with maps and ... draw the thing out in a very collective manner”.

There will be a second public consultation on locations, and anyone will be able to submit proposals for sites.

We should go further. We need a process for communities to meaningfully input into wider spatial plans for their inshore waters, which could include HPMAs as part of a package of measures that works for each community.

It is about that whole package. Fishing is indispensable, but it makes up just 6 per cent of marine economic value and 7 per cent of marine employment. Our coastal economies are a rich tapestry. They include recreation, hospitality, tourism, shipping and the increasingly growing sector of nature restoration. Many of those will benefit from HPMAs, as in Arran, where the Lamlash bay no-take zone has increased both tourism and lobster catches near the HPMAs—and where, we also hear, the general ecosystem is flourishing.

Lamlash bay is demonstrating multifaceted benefits from high protection. It should be recognised and funded as a formal pilot. However, we can also draw on ample international evidence, including benefits for fishers outside HPMAs in California, Florida, New Zealand and the Mediterranean, where the fishers asked for them to be brought in.

HPMAs have piqued public interest in marine management. We should seize the opportunity to catalyse a process of community wealth building all along our coastlines.

Through careful co-design and management with our coastal communities, we can create world-famous HPMAs, where visitors and residents alike enjoy the beautiful, nature-rich waters, from which the benefits literally spill over for local fishers and the ecosystems on which we all depend.

17:53

**Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch)**

**(SNP):** I cannot think of a more important issue on which to give my first speech from the back benches since 2018. I am delighted to be back. However, I am not delighted about the substance of the debate because, given that it is about conservation, my warning is stark: if the proposals go ahead as planned, the rarest species in our coastal areas and islands will soon be people.

The figures back that up. National Records of Scotland is clear that all our coastal areas will have a double-digit reduction in population between 2018 and 2044. We are talking about the Western Isles, Argyll and Bute, and Inverclyde. It is people who are at greatest risk, through depopulation. Despite that bleak outlook, there are signs of recovery, and that recovery is driven in many areas by fishing.

Let us look at Tiree, where fishing supports 20 full-time jobs, which, in turn, support 25 per cent of the children under the age of eight on the island. Every one of those children are in the Gaelic-medium unit. Language, heritage and culture drive tourism, but if we sever the lifeline with fishing, we will undermine the wider economy.

My position in the leadership contest was that I would scrap HPMAs completely if elected. I did not win, and my job now is to represent my constituents and to navigate a way forward. The seafood sector's statement, which I believe is to be issued tomorrow, offers a way forward: either to drop the proposals or to find a clear consensus—which requires fishermen's voices to be part of the discussion—on balancing protections in the marine environment and safeguarding tens of thousands of jobs.

I was hugely heartened by the First Minister's comments—and, indeed, by those of Màiri McAllan, who has been exceptional at engaging—that no communities will see HPMAs imposed on them against their will. The difficulty, of course, is that I have not come across a single community that wants HPMAs. Therefore, the challenge will be finding anywhere to impose them.

I have not taken interventions, as I wanted to use the last minute of my comments to quote the words of a fisherman. That is because this is not about taking politicians' words but about listening directly to those people. I want to quote Donald

Francis MacNeil, who made his singing debut last month with Skipinnish with the song “The Clearances Again”.

I will not sing it, but it can be heard sung online. He sings:

“Donald Francis MacNeil is my name,  
I’m a fisherman through to the bone.  
I have lived by the creel and the wave  
To provide for a family and home.  
Generations before me have followed  
The toil and the call of the seas  
But the soul will be torn from our future  
And the heart from the Hebrides ...

My people, my language, my Island  
And the rights that our forefathers won  
To remain on the soil of our homeland  
By the sweep of a pen will be gone—  
A wrecking ball through our existence;  
Tradition and culture condemned  
At the hands of the arrogant stranger—  
The Clearances over again.

But we’ll join with the kin of our coastline  
From Ness to the Holy Isle.  
Faceless grey suits from the cities,  
They will not play games with our lives.  
My song marks a fight for survival  
A Mayday call we cry.  
We will stand for the rights of our children.  
We will not let our islands die.”

May that be the rallying call for this Parliament.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I now call on the cabinet secretary to respond to the debate.

17:58

**The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):** I thank Beatrice Wishart for lodging the motion. I also thank her and other members for their contributions today, and those colleagues who joined me in the round-table session that I held earlier.

I acknowledge the emotion that has been so clear in exchanges today and outside the chamber up until this point. In response, I commit that I will be balanced and measured and that I will take the matter exceptionally seriously.

Before I move to the substance of the Scottish Government’s position, I categorically remind members that we are at the very beginning of the development of the issue, that I have very deliberately consulted early and widely in the process, and that I am currently in the position of considering thousands of responses to the consultation that we set. I am committed to closely considering the views that have been expressed as I decide the way forward. Noting the uncertainty that a number of members have mentioned, I commit to doing that as soon as I can and to updating members.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** Can the cabinet secretary give members a sense of how long it will take to read the responses to the consultation? How many responses did the Government receive, and how long might it take to get through them?

**Màiri McAllan:** In an interview that I gave earlier, I noted that we have had thousands of responses. I am still working out how many of them are duplicates and how many were generated via campaigns, but we are looking at about 4,000 responses just now. I cannot put a timescale on exactly how long it will take to meaningfully get through them, but I commit to doing that as soon as I can.

I say to everybody who has been concerned by the proposals that I care and empathise. As an MSP who represents a rural area, I feel deeply connected to the land in the same way as island and coastal communities feel connected to the land, coast and sea. I am listening, which is exactly what the consultation exercise is about.

**Liam McArthur:** As someone who is working on a member’s bill to which there have been 14,000 responses, I feel the cabinet secretary’s pain and wish her good speed in getting through the consultation responses. However, in my speech, I made the point that the way in which the consultation has gone down in coastal and island communities is likely to make the process of reaching agreement more difficult. Can the cabinet secretary advise members of anything that will allow her to rebuild trust and confidence in the process? Fundamentally, there is a lack of confidence at the moment.

**Màiri McAllan:** I accept that there were different ways in which one could have approached the consultation on an issue that I understood would elicit a lot of different views. I could have done what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs did—I do not criticise it for this—by taking a top-down pilot approach, but I felt that consulting as widely as I could on the principles of the proposals right at the beginning of the process, rather than at the end point, was the best approach. I accept that that might have created a vacuum into which some mistruths have entered, with concern being allowed to grow.

In relation to how we address that, I am here today, I will meet MSPs, I have committed to meeting coastal communities, and I will closely consider the consultation responses. In essence, I will gather as much information as I can on the views on how the proposals should be taken forward, and I commit to acting on that as much as I can.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

**Màiri McAllan:** I will take a final intervention; I will then need to make some progress.

**Brian Whittle:** I am very grateful to the cabinet secretary for taking so many interventions.

How can the Scottish Government consider HPMAs when it has not yet assessed the effectiveness of MPAs? Surely we must gather that information first before we can move on.

**Màiri McAllan:** We have a statutory process for assessing the development of MPAs, and our consultation recommends that HPMAs follow a similar statutory cycle of monitoring.

That brings me to the point that the IPCC is clear that we are in a climate and nature emergency. The most recent assessment of the state of marine areas in Scotland and the rest of the UK demonstrated that we are failing on, I think, 11 out of 15 indicators of good environmental status. That is all happening against a backdrop of our knowing that our oceans store about 25 per cent of the carbon dioxide that is emitted by humans and 90 per cent of the heat from human-caused climate change. Recent research shows that none of us can deny that, although we need oceans to help us to maintain equilibrium in the natural world, the seas are reaching their capacity to assist us in that because of the impact of humans. If we do not protect our seas, they will not be able to protect us. That is a fundamental truth.

Another fundamental truth is that the actions that we take in response to that science and to the emergency must be carefully considered, fair and just—and, in this case, they must be developed hand in hand with people who will be affected by them. That is exactly what I am seeking to do.

The idea that our economy and our environment are not in opposition to each other but are, instead, mutually inclusive is at the core of our blue economy vision. We recognise that economic prosperity and the wellbeing of our people are underpinned by nature and are not external to it. The people who understand that fact more than anyone are those who live in our coastal and island communities, as they are socially, economically and culturally linked to our seas. That is why it is so important to me that they have been involved to date and that they will continue to be involved.

I wanted to take as many interventions as I could. However, I am conscious of the time, so I will conclude.

Many important points have been raised in the debate. We all recognise the importance of Scotland's coastal and island communities and the industries that support them. We recognise the importance and the indispensable value of working

with those communities as we develop our policy. At the same time, we must all recognise the threat that our environment is under.

Every MSP in the chamber was elected on a manifesto that committed to the protection of our environment. My colleagues in the Labour Party committed to turning 20 per cent of Scotland's seas into highly protected marine areas, and the Conservatives committed to piloting highly protected marine areas, so there is agreement that marine protection is required. My job, which I take very seriously, is to ensure that we achieve those aims while working hand in hand with the people who will be impacted by them, and I commit to doing that.

*Meeting closed at 18:06.*

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